



## TEN HABITS OF INCOMPETENT MANAGERS

Three years ago, I joined the board of a company whose management, I soon recognized, was incompetent. I said so but I was a new board member and the management had a lot of old friends and allies on the board. I was listened to respectfully but nothing much happened.

Three years on, the board has recognized that the management is incompetent. The consequences of leaving them alone for three years now threatens to sink the company. We've fired one manager and hope to stay afloat long enough to replace the other. A few generous board members, with good memories, have acknowledged that we would not be in this pickle had I been listened to in the first place. But how did I know these managers were incompetent? I'm not a seer and, trust me, I'm not gloating. But I knew they were incompetent because I've hired and fired so many incompetent people myself. Every experienced entrepreneur has; you probably remember yours. So what hallmarks of incompetence have I learned to identify?

**Bias against action.** There are always plenty of reasons *not* to take a decision, reasons to wait for more information, more options, more opinions. But real leaders display a consistent bias for action. People who don't make mistakes generally don't make anything. Legendary ad man David Ogilvy argued that a good decision today is worth far more than a perfect decision next month. Beware prevaricators.

**Secrecy.** "We can't tell the staff," is something I hear managers say repeatedly. They defend this position with the argument that staff will be distracted, confused or simply unable to comprehend what is happening in the business. If you treat employees like children, they will behave that way – which means trouble. If you treat them like adults, they may just respond likewise. Very few matters in business must remain confidential and good managers can identify those easily. The lover of secrecy has trouble being honest and is afraid of letting peers have the information they need to challenge him. He'd rather defend his position than advance the mission. Secrets make companies political, anxious and full of distrust.

**Over-sensitivity.** "I know she's always late, but if I raise the subject, she'll be hurt." An inability to be direct and honest with staff is a critical warning sign. Can your manager see a problem, address it headlong and move on? If not, problems won't get resolved, they'll grow. When managers say staff is too sensitive, they are usually describing themselves. Wilting violets don't make great leaders. Weed them out. Interestingly, secrecy and over-sensitivity almost always travel together. They are a bias against honesty.

**Love of procedure.** Managers who cleave to the rule book, to points of order and who refer to colleagues by their titles have forgotten that rules and processes exist to expedite business, not ritualize it. Love of procedure often masks a fatal inability to prioritize – a tendency to polish the silver while the house is burning.

**Preference for weak candidates.** We interviewed three job candidates for a new position. One was clearly too junior, the other rubbed everyone up the wrong way and the third stood head and shoulders above the rest. Who did our manager want to hire? The junior. She felt threatened by the super-competent manager and hadn't the confidence to know that you must always hire people smarter than yourself.

**Focus on small tasks.** Another senior salesperson I hired always produced the most perfect charts, forecasts and spreadsheets. She was always on time, her data completely up-to-date. She would always volunteer for projects in which she had no core expertise – marketing plans, financial forecasts, meetings with bank managers, the office move. It was all displacement activity to hide the fact that she could not do her real job.

**Allergy to deadlines.** A deadline is a commitment. The manager who cannot set, and stick to deadlines, cannot honour commitments. A failure to set and meet deadlines also means that no one can ever feel a true sense of achievement. You can't celebrate milestones if there aren't any.

**Inability to hire former employees.** I hired a head of sales once with (apparently) a luminous reputation. But, as we staffed up, he never attracted any candidates from his old company. He'd worked in sales for twenty years – hadn't he mentored *anyone* who'd want to work with him again? Every good manager has alumni, eager to join the team again; if they don't, smell a rat.

**Addiction to consultants.** A common – but expensive – way to put off making decisions is to hire consultants who can recommend several alternatives. While they're figuring these out, managers don't have to do anything. And when the consultant's choices are presented, the ensuing debates can often absorb hours, days months. Meanwhile, your organization is poorer but it isn't any smarter. When the consultant leaves, he takes your money and his increased expertise out the door with him.

**Long hours.** In my experience, bad managers work very long hours. They think this is a brand of heroism but it is probably the single biggest hallmark of incompetence. To work effectively, you must prioritize and you must pace yourself. The manager who boasts of late nights, early mornings and no time off cannot manage himself so you'd better not let him manage anyone else.

Any one of these behaviours should sound a warning bell. More than two – sound the alarm!