

10 signs of incompetent managers

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I came across a great piece about traits that incompetent managers share. Written by Margaret Heffernan for FastCompany.com, this no-nonsense piece cuts to the chase and is about as true a list as I've ever seen. Here are the traits of incompetent managers, according to Ms. Heffernan:

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 would 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.

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.

Allergy to deadlines: A deadline is a commitment. The manager who cannot set, and stick to deadlines, cannot honor 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.

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.



Toni Bowers is the Head Blogs Editor of TechRepublic. She has been in the publishing industry for 20 years, with concentration in IT-related topics. She has edited newsletters, books, and web sites pertaining to software, IT career, and IT management issues.

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You're dead right! chris@... | 08/07/09

The problem isn't only in the UK pwoodctfl@... | 08/07/09

It's about looking in a mirror james_crawford@... | 08/07/09

BiPolar Manager Menace65 | 08/07/09

We miss you Kenji... TechRepublic@... | 08/07/09

I love imcompetent managers douglasjohnledet@... | 08/07/09

Guilty as charged... MyopicOne | 08/07/09

The Peter Principle service@... | 08/07/09

The Peter Principle... rowdydave | 08/07/09

Over 40 years of experience prompts me to say that schamb_hrd@... | 08/07/09

I call that "Boss Management" lazybum | 08/07/09

I know people that fills ALL 10 requisites... casimiro.barreto@... | 08/07/09

Still there after 10 years popsadelaide | 08/07/09

Step across walwin | 08/07/09

Not sure about #10 dwdino | 08/05/09

I've heard that before, and said it a few times Forum Surfer | 08/05/09

This is true bsturgell@... | 08/05/09

Yeah, somebody put in bluntly in another forum post here Forum Surfer | 08/05/09

Thanks ZatoichiMaster | 08/07/09

Balance rowdydave | 08/07/09

True benjnunez@... | 08/07/09

Glib answer bratwizard@... | 08/07/09

Legacy wade.stoddard@... | 08/07/09

Profits for men RanEd | 08/07/09

Amen! drnsport@... | 08/07/09

Yeap, you abuse the employee you lose erh7771@... | 08/06/09

I have to agree with you on this one.... Darryl~ | 08/06/09

I hear ya brother Forum Surfer | 08/06/09

Again, I coldn't agree more... Darryl~ | 08/06/09

Well said. blarman | 08/07/09

I think 10 is only partially correct shodges119@... | 08/05/09

Agreed. Number 10 can be an org problem Douglas.Kirkland@... | 08/07/09

An org problem still leads back to bad management Forum Surfer | 08/07/09

Poor organization/planning Nil Po | 08/07/09

Correct: #10 is questionable w/o validation grappl | 08/06/09

Continually working ... shaungardiner220@... | 08/06/09

I agree.... Darryl~ | 08/06/09

Don't be too quick to judge pzimmerman@... | 08/06/09

"to escape a bad home life (or no home life)" Darryl~ | 08/06/09

Take a closer look pzimmerman@... | 08/06/09

I understand what you're saying...but,, Darryl~ | 08/06/09

I agree with what your saying except... Forum Surfer | 08/06/09

Re: Forum's Reply belbolbuk@... | 08/07/09

Not too harsh, still stand by my response Forum Surfer | 08/07/09

Re:Don't be too quick to judge belbolbuk@... | 08/07/09

I agree that something is wrong shodges119@... | 08/06/09

True enough richard.gardner@... | 08/07/09

definitely a problem mradventure | 08/07/09

Agreed tegrit2 | 08/06/09

But if the extra hours are required to Darryl~ | 08/06/09

short hours and... susana.c.fernandes@... | 08/07/09

Badge of honour GoodOh | 08/07/09

Wow, GoodOh! splait1 | 08/07/09

I agree - definitely not a very objective crowd! dv@... | 08/07/09

Not sure I agree with that! dv@... | 08/07/09

The necessary resources need to be there emilio.espinoza@... | 08/07/09

I agree with all of this and #10 haddesah@... | 08/07/09

Dont be to careful and beware of the micromanager LaCiguapa | 08/07/09

Avoid generalizations with long hours Rosemary Gredler | 08/07/09

Long hours should be the exception not the rule sean.murphy@... | 08/07/09

Agreed HvyHitR@... | 08/07/09

About #10 pwoodctfl@... | 08/07/09

RE: 10 signs of incompetent managers larry@... | 08/05/09

The problem is NickNielsen | 08/05/09

The Exec Train larry@... | 08/05/09

Aw, now I feel guilty toni.bowers@... | 08/05/09

Light at the end of the tunnel john.spenceley@... | 08/07/09

7 and 10 are dead on. JasonKB | 08/05/09

It's sad enduroktm300@... | 08/05/09

The activity = progress management style is overtly annoying erh7771@... | 08/06/09

Look at the CEO's tenure JasonKB | 08/06/09

That is so true!! ZatoichiMaster | 08/07/09

The Point Is Being Part of the Team Richard-HK | 08/07/09

Excuse my short reply.... Forum Surfer | 08/07/09

Commitment and loyalty are dead mate, they've Tony Hopkinson | 08/08/09

Ahem, Toni santeewelding@... | 08/05/09

11: Promoting Staff beyond their skill set delphi9_1971@... | 08/06/09

One way of getting rid of people a.barry@... | 08/06/09

It happens in the government arignote | 08/07/09

So true (nt) Darryl~ | 08/06/09

Promoting staff work@... | 08/07/09

Peter Principle sboverie@... | 08/07/09

About Point # 4. Love of procedure sarthurk@... | 08/06/09

Your situation may be true... Forum Surfer | 08/06/09

And rules are meant to be broke 🙄 (nt) Darryl~ | 08/06/09

Procedures as guidelines IT Generalist | 08/06/09

RE: 10 signs of incompetent managers ogar.em@... | 08/06/09

RE: 10 signs of incompetent managers tegrit2 | 08/06/09

So you have met my Boss! dsusysmgr | 08/06/09

What about... VikingCoder | 08/06/09

Sort of like the "I'm too busy to bother with you" type Darryl~ | 08/06/09

Agreed! VikingCoder | 08/06/09

But they'll find time for you.... mrmhead | 08/06/09

Oh my GAWD!!! Darryl~ | 08/06/09

RE: 10 signs of incompetent managers clixandru@... | 08/06/09

RE: 10 signs of incompetent managers markuseastman@... | 08/06/09

I'm disappointed more "managers" Darryl~ | 08/06/09

I mostly agree.. jtaylor0572@... | 08/07/09

Very good monican82@... | 08/07/09

Another one (Take all the Praise, or Blame) ryan101 | 08/06/09

I like to call them the "duck & dodge"... Darryl~ | 08/06/09

Managers are Similar to Babie's Diaper pankaj_rastogi17@... | 08/06/09

ryan 101... splait1 | 08/07/09

RE: 10 signs of incompetent managers wilmien@... | 08/06/09

RE: 10 signs of incompetent managers shirley_sutandhio@... | 08/07/09

RE: 10 signs of incompetent managers belbolbuk@... | 08/07/09

Hire People Better than Yourself Danny_Graham@... | 08/07/09

Bang on! splait1 | 08/07/09

One sign of incompetent writers... GrizzledGeezer | 08/07/09

not the words deICERAY | 08/07/09

snickering here . . . john.jelks@... | 08/07/09

Oh, there we have another one - Obnoxious Know-it-alls ed.hore@... | 08/07/09

LLLLLLOOOOOOLLLLLLL wade.stoddard@... | 08/07/09

Closer to sign number 2 arignote | 08/07/09

RE: 10 signs of incompetent managers jacob3273@... | 08/07/09

Right ON! wade.stoddard@... | 08/07/09

11th warning sign deICERAY | 08/07/09

HOGWASH wade.stoddard@... | 08/07/09

delCERAY - splait1 | 08/07/09

What ebir@... | 08/07/09

"grow up"? deICERAY | 08/08/09

What about poor communicators? wyvernarm@... | 08/07/09

Extension of secrecy alexri@... | 08/07/09

RE: 10 signs of incompetent managers mohit_gkp | 08/07/09

Question joeyzeenny@... | 08/07/09

I think the point darpoke | 08/07/09

It can certainly do that... splait1 | 08/07/09

Only if you choose not to listen to them. Tony Hopkinson | 08/08/09

Incompetent Managers gallopingghost@... | 08/07/09

These observations are true but not new e_caroline@... | 08/07/09

Prevarication, or deferred commitment? lunivore | 08/07/09

Prevarication or procrastination? murphym@... | 08/07/09

I disagree walkabout | 08/07/09

Too Much Generalization torin.smith@... | 08/07/09

One who does not agree read my comments keshav4000@... | 08/07/09

Missed an important one rikshaw@... | 08/07/09

RE: 10 signs of incompetent managers dbrown6@... | 08/07/09

Last sentence of point #1 ? lmarks@... | 08/07/09

RE: 10 signs of incompetent managers airbooster@... | 08/07/09

What's worse than this example jck | 08/07/09

I hear ya! Darryl~ | 08/07/09

I bet it did jck | 08/07/09

Do as I say, not as I do. b.lantz@... | 08/07/09

RE: 10 signs of incompetent managers Patrice Hudson | 08/07/09

RE: 10 signs of incompetent managers dba88 | 08/07/09

Here's some more to add to the list ZatoichiMaster | 08/07/09

More to add to the list mikesic | 08/07/09

Prevaricators? ZinZang Studio | 08/07/09

You missed the above post about that... Darryl~ | 08/07/09

Long Hours davidson.ian@... | 08/07/09

RE: 10 signs of incompetent managers tutuvide- | 08/07/09

Good list but dbecker@... | 08/07/09

Re: Don't forget the business owner managers josephrot | 08/07/09

#4 taken with grain of salt blarman | 08/07/09

I think I am gonna stick with the Tech part of these Forums shodges119@... | 08/07/09

Right On... AppDevGuyFromTX | 08/07/09

RE: 10 signs of incompetent managers Devonmcnulty@... | 08/07/09

RE: 10 signs of incompetent managers ramvem@... | 08/07/09

RE: 10 signs of incompetent managers Gis Bun | 08/07/09

Assuming single people have more time... dbecker@... | 08/07/09

Action bias esmith@... | 08/07/09

7. Inability to steal employees from former employer? go1d4 | 08/07/09

I don't agree with this one either arignote | 08/07/09

Subjective tbmay | 08/07/09

RE: 10 signs of incompetent managers heyscanman | 08/07/09

RE: 10 signs of incompetent managers cogana@... | 08/07/09

RE: 10 signs of incompetent managers walter.kirsch@... | 08/07/09

Take issue with #10 AppDevGuyFromTX | 08/07/09

RE: 10 signs of incompetent managers first_hell@... | 08/07/09

RE: 10 signs of incompetent managers dualee@... | 08/07/09

My, how modest of you, only 10! mikifinaz1@... | 08/07/09

Re: 10 signs of incompetent managers NEW mwill@... | 08/09/09

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