

The seven habits of highly ineffective managers

Wise men learn by others' mistakes, fools by their own. So the sagacious will study this list, drawn up from talking to managers and directors across the industry, of the seven most common and most basic mistakes managers can make. None of it is rocket science, none of it complicated, but it could make a difference.

- **Be the master of just your office**

Let your PA book your calendar on a first come, first served basis so that you have meetings every half hour with your direct reports and vendors. After all, meetings are the viable alternative to work.

And don't venture out to spend the majority of your time with your customers and the front line of the business. Instead, delegate those activities to your staff.

According to Jack Philips, now a personnel director with a FTSE 100 company, his worst mistake was to allow his department to become too isolated. As the head of the department he needed to be the visible. The scale of the problem only came to light when there was a re-organisation of the office. "We had meetings about how isolated we had become, there were so many jokes about it not mattering. The general attitude was that 'personnel never talk to anyone anyway except when they sack them', it was then I realised there was a problem."

His solution: to fight hard for his department to remain in its place and to demand his staff have regular meetings with other departments.

- **Be strategic, not tactical**

Believe them when they say, "We need a change-agent to help lead business transformation."

Every business thinks they want to transform themselves, and it is hugely tempting for new hires to actually think they can change the world. The biggest mistake — especially in an operations department — is to dedicate all your time to leading strategic initiatives.

Certainly companies want to change, but they also want to make sure that the little stuff gets done as well.

- **Say yes to everything**

"Agreeable people agree", says 1892 Lockhart's Guide to Modern Manners. Well that may have been true when Victoria was on the throne, but whereas it might have been an acceptable strategy for advancement in a London salon, in business it is a recipe for trouble.

There is a practical limit on the number of investments, projects, programmes and plans that can be well managed and the amount of change a business can absorb.

Equally well there is a limit to what any one person — or as a manager any one department — can undertake.

Jurgen Breuer, a UK-based IT manager for a German software company took over from one manager who was moved sideways for just such a problem: "He was always keen to say yes to everything. He would commit the department to projects there was no way we could undertake. But he thought that saying 'yes' was the route to success."

Breuer says it is important to prioritise work and allocate time according to importance. Always keep some kind of reserve so that if something urgent does crop up, your department can deliver without stopping everything else it does.

- **Say no to everything**

Assume that you were hired to take tough stands, and eschew the other tactics for managing demand (strategy making, senior executive governance and investment management) as inefficient.

"In one company I worked for," says Philips, "there was this woman in charge of personnel. Her standard answer — no matter what you asked — was 'no'. If you wanted to hire people, fire people, give them more holiday, less holiday, even just to get a form off her."

In the end it becomes terribly wearisome, and in the end self-defeating. "In the end we would just go round her, either dealing with her superior, or her juniors. Eventually, although she had been at the company for ever, they made her redundant. She stonewalled her self out of her job."

- **Rely solely on your gut**

Use gut and instinct as your guide, and assume that your unwritten record of accomplishments will stand on its own as the political winds kick up dust in your direction.

This is management of the old school, the "they couldn't teach you this kind of thing."

Celia Craig was brought in by a firm of consultants to help sort out a medium-sized engineering firm based in Wales. The company has invested in ERP software without really considering the consequences.

"It was a mess," she said. "The man responsible for implementing it had done almost no research, no real evaluation of the long-term costs, no evaluation of the organisational effects. As a result the system they had chosen, although perfectly good, was not really the one they should have used."

Craig spent the best part of six months getting the system to work as it should.

"What was really annoying was that having struggled long and hard to get it to work, the director, who should have been sacked, just said 'I told you it would work'."

- **Subscribe to the big bang theory of development**

Almost the partner of the preceding rule, and certainly closely related. Ignore the mountains of research about the need for short cycle time of projects. Approach multiyear initiatives as a single project with a known destination. Assume that the business context and leadership will stay stable over the long term.

Says Breuer, "In Germany a great deal of emphasis is put on long-term planning, and not to assume that assumptions valid for the start of a project will be true at the end. A lot of time is spent testing the validity of assumptions.

"I don't see so much of that in the UK."

- **Allow poor-performing staff to affect your plans**

Says Craig "When re-engineering the company to get the ERP program to work, I had one suggestion that could have saved the company literally thousands of pounds a year.

"I put it to the director and he hummed, and erred, and kicked his feet, and in the end said no. It turned out there was some ancient retainer who he didn't think would be able to cope and they would rather wait until he had retired and then make the change.

"Now loyalty to your staff is a highly-commendable thing, but it has limits. They could have spent a few hundred pounds re-training this person, or even taken on a new person and still have been quids in. But they didn't."

That was a failure of management, allowing the weakest member of the team to dictate the performance of the entire team.