

## ● MANAGEMENT

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## Rise of the anti-manager

● Where have all the good managers gone? The Peter Principle has long been a fact of corporate life – the statistical inevitability that in any organisation there will always be a group of people who are promoted beyond their competence. But now the happenstance Peter Principle has become the Peter Prerequisite: somewhere along the line, incompetence has become a mandatory requirement for appointment to positions of responsibility, and that applies all the way up to mahogany row. It is difficult to fathom how this can be. Despite the fashion for psychometric testing, performance evaluations and myriad human resources systems, ill-advised appointments and poor management abound. Or should that be because of?

Anyone who has worked alongside a gifted, inspiring or just plain smart manager will know the unalloyed pleasure of being in the company of someone who "gets it". Their presence is always felt – for all the right reasons. They create a buzz of achievement and expectation. They instil confidence in the people around them. They possess a certain charisma, they're comfortable with who they are and they carry their authority with ease. They're capable of communicating with staff without the aid of a whiteboard or PowerPoint presentation, they're interested in the opinions of others, and they listen. Yes, they're ultimately responsible to higher forces in the corporate hierarchy and their role in life is not to be everyone's best friend – but they engender trust and confidence.

Do these managers really exist? They do, but they are an endangered species. Their place has been taken by the anti-manager: men and women who have no business being in charge of paper clips, let alone people. They range from dull, inept toads incapable of an original thought or spontaneous action, to poisonous psychopaths who wreak havoc in their workplaces. The anti-manager – the antithesis of everything a leader should be – has become a hallmark of the modern organisation.

Too many organisations no longer place a priority on management excellence. They have lost the ability, and the will, to identify, nurture and reward rising talent. The presence of unqualified and egregious managers saps what enthusiasm remains in over-worked, under-resourced workplaces. A recent survey by exit-interview specialist Exit Info concluded that bad managers are responsible for one in five resignations in Australia.

As the slowdown continues to bite, we can expect organisations to resort to mass retrenchments. Rather than taking an axe to already decimated workplaces as the key to turning around organisational under-performance, perhaps organisations should pay greater attention to the performance of their managers.



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## Burned and churned

● Indulging in a spot of vanity Googling, I found one of my recent columns, "Rise of the anti-manager", on the Dutch website Infoworld. Naturally, it was reprinted in Dutch – "De opkomst van de anti-manager". In that column I lamented the dismal state of management in Australia, and wondered if incompetence, dullness or a psychopathic disposition, or a combination of the three, were now considered prerequisites for elevation to management.

The Infoworld reprint prompted Amsterdam blogger, Rick van der Arend, aka CodEagle, to critique my column, happily in English. CodEagle believes being a manager no longer has the status and relevance it used to. "Actually, in my experience, a lot of them are just there as a sort of 'filter' or 'web' in between people getting actual work done and people with real decision-making power," he writes.

Authority, he posits, doesn't always come with a title.

"I have experienced people with the power to lead [and] most of them were 'invisible' leaders, not in a managerial position, [and] most of their colleagues [knew] instinctively who to go to for advice or support."

True enough, except that companies have flattened their organisations so savagely that these wells of corporate knowledge and wisdom are drying up faster than the Murray River – and it will get worse as the economic crisis deepens.

Instead, companies populate their management ranks with glorified gofers – and far from being a benign presence, they are wreaking havoc.

Closer to home, Marc Stigter, a Melbourne Business School management academic, also responded to my column. Stigter is completing a PhD at Lancaster University Management School in the United Kingdom and his damning research reveals that bad managers are responsible for up to four in five resignations. "An employee's line manager is by far the biggest contributing factor of disengagement and subsequent resignation," he writes.

Another correspondent recounts the experience of his wife who has just become a senior manager at one of the big-four banks.

"Every night I am entertained by her stories of the appalling people in higher places," he writes. "It seems the only people in higher positions are the ones who were politically skilful enough to find the back doors of promotion. Even scarier are the ones who have had so many sideways shifts out of departments, they are suddenly graded as 'specialists' because of their wide range of experience when in fact no one can work with them because they are so incompetent."

So much for Australian banks being hailed as models of corporate and prudential rectitude amid the chaos of the global banking crisis.



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