

Expert Insights



Five Critical Management Derailers: Symptoms and Remedies

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The higher managers rise in an organization, the more likely they are to develop blind spots to the danger signs that indicate they're at a high risk of failing.

Are your managers on track to deliver?

Times of change present many challenges for organizations, particularly for front-line managers, whose people will be responsible for implementing the change. Pressure to perform is high, as are emotions, and everyone is expected to do more with less.

Ironically, the times when you need your managers to perform at their very best are the very times they are most likely to fail. The challenge of change is compounded by the fact that the higher managers rise in an organization, the more likely they are to develop blind spots that increase their risk of failure.

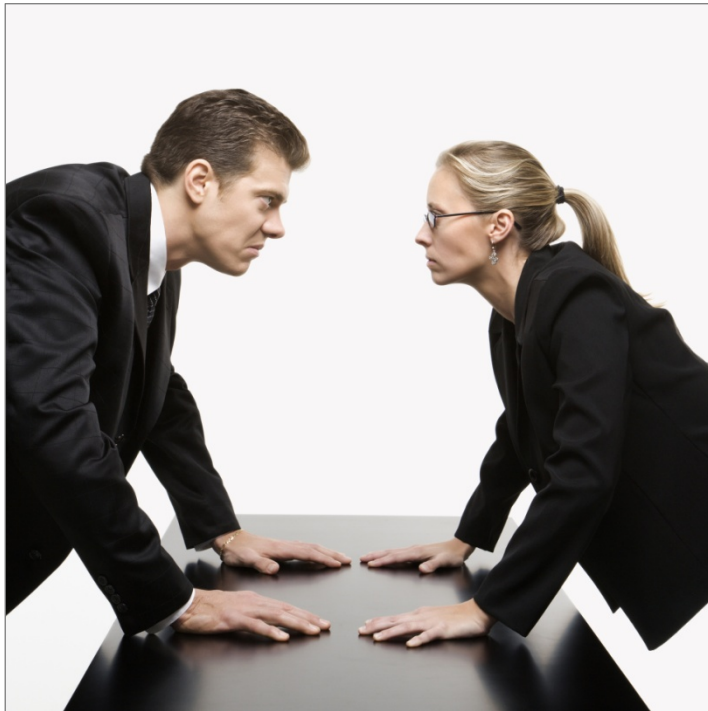
This got us thinking: Why do front-line managers fail and what can be done to avoid failure? We polled our experts to identify our top five most common management derailers. They are:

1. Poor interpersonal and communication skills
2. Inadequate leadership skills
3. Resistance to change
4. Inability to deliver expected results
5. Inability to see beyond their functional silo

This report elaborates on these five issues and offers some common sense advice for helping your managers avoid them.

Five Critical Management Derailers: Symptoms and Remedies

1. Poor interpersonal and communication skills



Symptoms of an “At Risk” manager

- Always seems to be feuding with someone or some group in the organization.
- Has a reputation for being authoritarian, cold, aloof, arrogant, or insensitive.
- Acts as a polarizing force within an organization. Other employees either love her or hate her.
- Avoids direct communication or contact with some or all co-workers.
- Delivers bad news through e-mail rather than through direct conversations.
- Exhibits a hostile attitude towards co-workers who share interdependent goals.
- Becomes the target of subtle or blatant sabotage efforts.

Remedies to prevent derailment and improve performance

1. Understand the true root cause of conflict. Does your manager have a personal or political problem with just one or two people, or does your manager have more significant issues with a number of different people? If the conflict stems from a small personal issue then mediate a resolution immediately rather than letting it fester. If it is more serious, then...
2. Understand the manager’s management style and motivation. Some people just aren’t cut out to be managers although they may be exceptional individual contributors. Other people just don’t want to be managers. And while some people may have what it takes to lead, they might not have the skills or experience to do the job. If your manager’s issue is the latter, you may be able to help him develop more easily than you can help someone who completely lacks the behaviors and interests that lead to success.
3. Help the manager understand his own management and communication style. In many situations managers simply don’t know what they don’t know. For example, if he comes across as insensitive or aloof, point out the behavior and help him improve. It is important for the manager to understand his natural management style and how it impacts others, both positively and negatively. The manager can’t be expected to improve if he never receives concrete feedback.

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2. Inadequate leadership skills



Symptoms of an “At Risk” manager

- Team consistently fails to achieve the expected goals, even after strong warnings.
- Key projects consistently end up over budget or behind schedule.
- Team members are disengaged. They miss meetings and deliver poor quality work.
- Team members are frustrated. They in-fight and lose focus on the big picture objectives.
- The manager does not address conflict and poor performance promptly and decisively.
- Team members quit. They complain of favoritism, inconsistency, and poor treatment.

Remedies to prevent derailment and improve performance

1. Clarify the team’s purpose and goals with the manager. We all know what it’s like to lose sight of the *forest for the trees*, and sometimes managers need to be reminded of what’s important and what isn’t. Then they need to communicate these priorities to their teams.
2. Help the manager understand his people. People have their own styles and preferences, and this influences how they best respond to their managers. When a manager understands his people, he can also be aware of potential conflict or “chemistry” issues between himself and other members of the team. Thus the manager can be more aware of and proactive in dealing with issues that may impact performance.
3. Help the manager understand his leadership style and motivation. Many of us have a number of key leadership qualities, but we still need feedback so that we can build on our strengths and fortify our weaknesses. And in some cases where it is clear that a manager really isn’t ready to lead, the discovery process can help identify other career options that are better suited to a manager’s style and abilities.
4. Provide feedback from multiple constituents. It is extremely valuable for managers to receive feedback from their supervisors, peers, and subordinates to illuminate developmental needs, misalignments and other issues that may be difficult to communicate openly under challenging circumstances.

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3. Resistant to change



*Going the way of the
Dodo bird?*

Symptoms of an “At Risk” manager

- Manager expresses frustration at the suggestion of change.
- Manager’s attitude and behavior signal skepticism.
- Manager’s attitude doesn’t change even when his concerns have been addressed.
- Manager is preoccupied with reminiscing about “what was” versus “what will be.”
- Manager continues to do things the same old way yet expects new results.
- Manager is uncomfortable with ambiguity and isn’t open to discovering better ways.
- Team members complain about mixed messages from leadership and their manager.

Remedies to prevent derailment and improve performance

1. Understand the manager’s appetite for change. People are “wired” differently, and this influences our appetite for risk and challenge. Some find change exciting and embrace it, while others find it threatening and reject it. A balance of both is healthy for an organization. Knowing how someone will respond to change helps you tailor your communication and get him on board.
2. Help the manager understand his natural aversion to change. If a manager has a natural tendency to resist change, then it is important to make him aware of this tendency. This will enable him to develop his own way of helping himself adapt to change. When possible, have him think through the process for you so that you can demonstrate how the change will benefit both the organization and the individual.
3. Ensure that the manager is focused on the new priorities. There are many ways to communicate change, but words are not enough. You need to translate this change into meaningful actions and goals for the manager, and then you need to inspect what you expect. Ask the manager and his people what they believe his priorities are, especially after a change event. This reveals disconnects and opportunities for realignment.

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4. Inability to deliver the expected results



Symptoms of an “At Risk” manager

- Results consistently below goal, especially those that are measurable.
- Manager blames others or makes excuses for their failure.
- Manager avoids discussions about setting, tracking and progressing toward goals.
- Manager spends too much time, energy and resources on low priority activity.
- Manager demonstrates a defeated or negative attitude.
- Team unaware of how they contribute to the manager’s or organization’s goals.

Remedies to prevent derailment and improve performance

1. Clarify expected results and goals. It is difficult to hit a target when the target is moving or you’re shooting through fog. Don’t take for granted that your managers have a clear understanding of the results they need to achieve and how they’re going to achieve them. When possible, go beyond the “what” to the “how,” and challenge the manager to translate goals into sub-goals and activities that their people must achieve.
2. Understand the manager. Not everyone is naturally goal oriented. For those who aren’t, the notion of setting, tracking, and achieving goals can be extremely intimidating. This is especially true of new managers in roles where measurement is difficult. If the manager fits either of these criteria then expect to spend more time coaching him so that he can achieve his goals. When possible, include him in the goal-setting process to get his buy-in.
3. Inspect what you expect. Once goals are clear and you have the manager’s buy-in, establish a process for tracking the most important goals. Use these goals to create a personal “dashboard” that helps the manager set his own priorities that drive results. Require the manager to update his goals weekly, and use his progress to facilitate a coaching discussion. Finally, check back with the manager on a periodic basis to ensure that his priorities are properly aligned.

Five Critical Management Derailers: Symptoms and Remedies

5. Inability to see beyond their functional silo



Symptoms of an “At Risk” manager

- Unwilling to communicate or collaborate with others outside of his unit.
- Makes decisions that benefit his unit, but clearly hurt the overall organization.
- Resists change that impacts him, but clearly benefits the organization.
- Hoards information that might benefit others outside of his unit.
- Co-workers complain that the manager is out of touch with the organization’s mission.

Remedies to prevent derailment and improve performance

1. Establish clarity. Don’t assume that the manager understands how he and his people fit in and interrelate with other units to achieve the organization’s greater mission. This should be spelled out explicitly, especially if the manager has spent little time outside of his functional unit.
2. Include the manager in at least one cross-functional team. Have the manager experience firsthand what it means to contribute to and depend on someone else to achieve a significant common objective. Ideally, he or she should work under an experienced team leader who can provide both coaching and a positive experience.
3. Establish at least one cross-functional goal for the manager. While similar to the previous point, this requires him to participate in an ongoing operation of the organization rather than a special project with a defined endpoint. In this situation, the managers who share the goal should report to someone higher up who can monitor progress, facilitate discussion, offer advice, and drive accountability.
4. Monitor the manager’s progress. This is more than just an annual performance review; it’s about holding the manager accountable, ensuring that he is aligned with the company’s priorities and changing his behavior. This is done by monitoring his progress and offering coaching and additional development. Input from multiple sources such as the manager’s managers, peers on cross-functional teams, and subordinates is valuable.

Summary: Five Management Derailers and Remedies for Prevention



1. Poor interpersonal and communication skills

- Understand the true root cause of conflict
- Understand the manager's natural style and motives
- Help the manager understand his natural communication style

2. Inadequate leadership skills

- Clarify the team's purpose and goals with the manager
- Help the manager understand his people
- Help the manager understand his leadership style and motivation
- Provide feedback from multiple constituents to the manager

3. Resistance to change

- Understand the manager's appetite for change
- Help the manager understand his natural aversion to change
- Ensure that the manager is focused on the new priorities

4. Inability to deliver expected results

- Clarify the expected results and goals
- Understand the manager's degree of goal orientation
- Inspect what you expect

5. Inability to see beyond their functional silo

- Clarify how the manager's role supports others in the organization
- Include the manager in at least one cross-functional team
- Establish at least one cross-functional goal for the manager
- Monitor the manager's developmental progress

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