

Why Managers Fail

By Dr. Robert K. Smith

As an industrial psychologist and management consultant, I have used axiology—the science of how people think—to help remedy personnel problems for managers in manufacturing businesses. This science has enabled me to measure and identify three thinking biases common to managers and the problem-causing behaviors they produce. Managers who recognize these biases within themselves are able to develop strategies that prevent these problems from arising. Managers who are not aware of how their thinking biases skew their judgment often make and repeat costly mistakes.

1. Many managers assume their perspectives should apply to everyone.

We all have heard stories about great teachers who fail as school principals, and great sales people who wash out as sales managers. One of the most common thinking biases is that we assume that what we feel is good for us must be good for others, as well. Because most people in management are driven to excel, this bias translates into a belief that all good employees also want to continue to excel and be promoted.

One of my clients wanted to promote a highly productive salesperson to a management position. He believed that all good employees desired advancement just as he had. But this salesperson loved her job and did not want to manage other people. Fortunately, her manager knew his own bias toward advancement and listened as this salesperson explained that she would like to continue in sales. He listened to her and recommended to upper management that she stay in her sales role. If he had not understood how he was biased, the company would probably have lost an outstanding salesperson and gained a mediocre manager.

In order to be an effective manager, one must listen to others and think beyond his or her personal motivations.

2. Most managers underestimate the impact their words and actions have on others.

Another very common problem, seen in more than 70 percent of workplace situations, results from managers misunderstanding how significant their actions are upon their employees. They do not see the importance of what they say, how they say it, and what they do. They wrongly think that every employee should be independent, self-starting, not need encouragement or motivation, and be able to ignore their manager's foibles and inappropriate actions.

A large manufacturing company in the West had incorrectly forecast production schedules. A seasoned vice president noticed one supervisor working extra hard to meet production demands. The vice president sent a hand-written note to that supervisor stating how proud she was of her exceptional work and noting how the company would not have met its deadline if she had not stepped up to the challenge. This vice president understood how important her praise was to her employees. The supervisor was so thrilled with the letter that she framed it and invited all of her

extended family to a party to celebrate the recognition she had received.

Successful executives understand the importance of their roles and use their status and power to encourage, support, and give positive energy to their employees to make good things happen.

3. Many managers avoid situations they don't know how to fix.

Most managers like to fix problems. They often derive their sense of worth from being able to come up with a solution. But they also hate not being able to fix a problem. One case I worked on involved a female employee of a large manufacturing company. She had complained to her supervisor that the vice president's younger brother, a fellow employee in the plant, was harassing her. When the supervisor told the vice president, the vice president said the woman was being overly sensitive and that she needed to toughen up. This was not the first time his brother had been accused of something like this. In previous situations, the younger brother would get hostile and correct his behavior for only a couple of weeks. The vice president did not see any way to resolve the problem, so he chose to avoid getting involved hoping it would resolve itself.

In this case the harassment continued and the female employee complained to a lawyer. Although the woman had never sued anyone before, she decided to file suit against the company, the younger brother, and the vice president. When I talked with this woman, I learned that she really did not want to file suit and did not want to be a problem. But she was very angry because she had been ignored and personally wronged.

Effective managers also want problems to go away but, unlike ineffective managers, they take responsibility for providing and maintaining the safety and direction for their employees. They face problems head on, addressing legal issues with legal attention, morale issues with appropriate management attention, and personnel issues with empathy and compassion.

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