

COPING WITH INCOMPETENCE

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The problems of subordinates having to cope with incompetent managers is the subject of Rao's discussion in this paper; in which he concludes that if incompetence is an aberration, there is immense sense in seeking a strategy of optimisation and subsequent migration to better spots of work within the organisation. He adds, however, if an organisation has low norms of efficiency it makes better sense to seek separation and take up more challenging assignments elsewhere. The interregnum would entail the risk of intellectual decay unless subordinates take effective steps to understand and cope with managerial incompetence that puts fetters on their performance.

Performance of organisations and career growth of personnel are explicitly linked to the competence of personnel constituting the organisation. Several management experts, however, established through incisive, even if irreverent, analysis that there could be the very real risk of managers reaching their levels of incompetence.

Piquant situations develop in organisations when competent and professionally qualified personnel have to work under relatively incompetent and professionally ignorant managers. These situations cannot be wholly avoided. Organisations find it difficult to remove all the managerial deadwood or isolate the incompetent

managers without assigning responsibilities. Nor can the capable subordinates seek immediate change either within or outside the organization. Despite such a situation, therefore, one has to be conscious of the need to contribute effectively to organizational performance, if one has to aspire for long-term career growth.

Defining Incompetence

Incompetence is determined relatively and usually with reference to the larger organisation-wide norms of efficiency and the more specific divisional demands of professional knowledge, experience and grasp.

Essentially, a manager may be considered incompetent when he fails to lend a firm direction to his divisional activities and pales into intellectual insignificance when compared to his subordinates.

Why incompetent managers exist

Prima facie, it appears an oddity that incompetent managers should exist at all in organisations, as the commonly understood organisational ethos emphasizes growth linked to proven results. But there are certain specific circumstances under which the incompetent may not only exist but also grow to positions of responsibility.

Some such conditions are:

- (1) Irrespective of the degree of performance orientation, a weakness to accommodate persons who totally, unquestioningly and unabashedly support plans of superiors is shared across most organisations.
- (2) As organisations grow and diversify the skill profile that is intrinsically demanded will

CENSUS OF POPULATION 1981

TABLE 6 POPULATION 10 - 29 YEARS BY SCHOOL ATTENDANCE, EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT, AGE AND SEX

AGE	S E X				A N D					A G E				
	TOTAL	15 - 19	20 - 24	25 - 29	TOTAL	10 - 14	15 - 19	20 - 24	25 - 29	TOTAL	10 - 14	15 - 19	20 - 24	25 - 29
10 - 14	690248	1607534	1509787	1273381	3069987	863911	815199	753338	637547	3010969	826344	792336	756461	635030
	109106	124932	109533	91643	188206	50193	57967	45353	34713	246999	58912	66981	64179	56927
	78632	54663	42414	34609	115046	44475	29813	22904	17860	95268	34158	24843	19515	16752
	233364	110793	107995	90772	292985	125258	59838	59039	48853	249940	108109	50959	48959	41918
	097336	449687	440177	401866	1225454	562239	240592	221860	200763	1163607	535100	209093	218320	201103
	155726	520118	359520	286267	685743	74010	267544	190779	153407	635890	81720	252575	168741	132861
	2163	199560	233165	188678	302282	1153	93816	113710	93607	321278	1011	105740	119455	95067
	357	88250	107338	94030	132976	152	39458	48238	45545	156583	204	48786	59102	48485
	-	35668	61141	36919	62451	-	15343	28822	18285	71279	-	20329	32314	18631
	-	11578	32961	20441	29841	-	4786	15193	9859	35140	-	6796	17769	10580
	-	338	3195	5622	5374	-	216	1800	3353	3579	-	122	1390	2067
	-	50	2979	14242	9441	-	40	1575	7826	7831	-	10	1405	6416
	-	19	190	802	659	-	9	146	503	350	-	10	93	297
13580	11881	9197	7702	19118	6429	5788	3914	2982	23237	7145	6092	5277	4724	

need continuous change and refinement. Functional capabilities of manager's become obsolete unless they are continuously exposed to well conceived training and job rotation programmes which are tailored to future requirements.

- (3) Even otherwise, as organisations grow, it becomes difficult to ensure uniformly high standards of management calibre at all levels. Relative incompetence is tolerated in the interests of adequately manning the structure.
- (4) Managerial turnover is a factor that effects an organisation's stability, irrespective of the quality of the organisation. For example, top class organisations which enjoy a reputation as good training grounds inevitably lose high calibre managers due to predation by other organisations. Companies which do not offer career challenges would, in any case, face turnover of competent personnel.
- (5) In an environment of managerial turnover, life-time stay, in itself, works out as a great qualification, though in a dubious sense. Even in performance-conscious companies incompetence is offset to an extent by seniority considerations in deciding promotability. 'Status Quo' organisation will, in any case, be happier with life-time mediocrity.
- (6) Unless organisations are very innovative and extremely conscious of costs and productivity, organisational systems and operations often place a high degree of premium on routineness. This encourages, and tends to institutionalise incompetence in management systems.

Crux of the problem

Incompetent managers either fail to recognise the competence and worth of subordinates or feel insecure as a result of recognition of subordinates' capabilities. In the former case, employees are often frustrated as they will have to do routine, meaningless jobs and let their

faculties rust. In the latter case, there could be overt or covert moves by the managers to stifle their subordinates' creative capabilities and to keep them away from the organisational mainstream. This naturally, gives rise to friction in interpersonal relations and could culminate in reaching non-cooperation or open hostility in day-to-day work.

The ultimate casualty in both the events is organisational efficiency and performance. There cannot be two opinions that managements as well as employees have to work towards eliminating the deleterious effects of managerial incompetence. But to the extent that incompetence within the ranks is allowed by the management either deliberately or ignorantly, the problem of managerial incompetence is internal and intrinsic to the management. In this sense, the employees are externally inducted into a defective system.

The strategy for dealing with incompetence depending on the nature of incompetence in managers is discussed below.

TYPES OF MANAGERIAL INCOMPETENCY

(1) Benign incompetence

Managers in this category recognise their incompetence and tend to be realistic enough to encourage competence in their subordinates. They believe that they will gain, rather than lose, if their subordinates effectively contribute to organisational goals. For subordinates under such managers, the frustrations are that their boss is incapable of defining new areas of contribution, and even if they generate and implement new ideas, they are not still in the limelight due to managerial barriers. Despite this, this is the most acceptable and least harmful of all the incompetence situations.

(2) Adaptive incompetence

Managers in this category too have very little to contribute on their own to organisational performance. But they use their subordinates' ideas as inputs to their thought process and adopt subordinates' work as their own after making some cosmetic changes. These managers make every effort to identify only

themselves with divisional performance on the premise that this would strengthen their position in the organisation.

The problem with this situation is that while the organisation takes their contribution seriously at face value and involves them in all the important deliberations, they lack the deliberative process.

Subordinates, though deriving a mild satisfaction of working for the organisation, will be frustrated because they are kept out of focus. Moreover, they lose the continuity of action in whatever work they do as the manager neither involves them in the deliberative process nor communicates the results of the process effectively.

(3) Servile incompetence

Managers in this category recognise their incompetence but cover it up with open servility towards positions of power and by opportunistic links with capable subordinates or peers. A maintenance manager, for example could play second fiddle to production manager and totally desist from questioning the misuse of machinery. Capable staff under him who are in a position to point out methods of control would not be supported and even would be exposed to the wrath of production staff.

Servile incompetence will also be manifest through close links with heads of related functions so that they bail him out of his difficulties. At its worst, it can also involve servile aggrandising of one or two capable subordinates so that they have a modicum of knowledge of the affairs.

(4) Insecure incompetence

Most incompetent managers feel insecure. This feeling of insecurity increases as they perceive that their subordinates are more competent than they are. They also believe that the competence of their subordinates is bound to get shown up if the activities of the department are kept at a high ke. The more insecure among the incompetent managers perceive that they will soon be castaways in the organisation in such a situation.

As a defensive reaction, such managers adopt a very low profile, being content to do the very least that the organisation expects from them.

Subordinates under such managers would be highly frustrated with the circumscribed nature of work and near total denial of opportunity to perform.

(5) Hostile incompetence

Managers in this category pose the most serious threat to organisational performance as well as individual growth. They exhibit very little appreciation of overall organisational interest and view the capabilities of subordinates as threats to their positions. What differentiates this class from insecure competence is that these managers try to bring down the subordinates also to their level of incompetence. They not only discourage subordinates from performing, but also openly criticise any acts of initiative and positive thinking. Such will be their persistent discouragement that subordinates would, in due course, be losing their ability to think and act creatively.

Such managers not only prevent their subordinates from interacting meaningfully with others, but do not hesitate to speak disparagingly of their subordinates. Growth of such managers is sustained, in spite of the incompetence, due to a willingness in manipulative politics and a strong survival instinct that throws overboard all decent norms of organisational behaviour. Working under such managers would be the most damaging factor for the career of subordinates. It could even be ethically revolting.

The above 5 types of incompetence are certainly not exclusive to each other. Despite dominant characteristics conforming to one of the above types may also exist. The problem of course, will be so much worse due to that!

Overcoming managerial incompetence:

There is often a fatalistic streak in competent subordinates having to work under relatively incompetent managers. The problems often cannot be resolved quickly or easily. But as the stake is greater for subordinates, it is they who need to take positive action to overcome the constraints

imposed by managerial incompetence. It would be risky and harmful to attempt flouting of organisational discipline to solve this problem. The following approach and strategy should help in a more enduring solution to the difficult issue.

First, subordinates should give the benefit of doubt to the manager and try to keep him fully informed of the potentialities and functions of the department he heads. Apparently this should be done in a suave manner without overtly sounding to be highly knowledgeable. The rationale for this cautious approach is that where the manager is not in professional touch with the function, it takes time to get a grasp of the activities. Functioning of the professional advantage would only harden attitudes at the stage of preliminary contact.

Secondly, when the contours of incompetence begin to take shape subordinates should explore the possibility of educating the manager. He may be told politely but firmly that the problems in the functional area need a particular kind of professional approach. Illustration of alternative routes of action to functional problems would help.

By the time the second step is executed the nature of incompetence of the manager would manifest itself clearly enabling the subordinates to formulate appropriate further strategies. When managers are benignly incompetent, the first two exploratory steps are adequate to develop a working rapport. But in other classes of incompetence reaction of managers would not be conducive to effective performance by subordinates.

It is possible in such cases to choose a Strategy of optimisation. This rests on the promise that the productivity standards of an incompetent manager are usually lax. It would be possible for a subordinate working under such a manager to fulfil the requirements of his boss and yet carry out other assignments which would earn him high visibility in the organisation. Such a strategy would mean that the subordinate should establish his personality independent of both

his function and his boss. This strategy, however, is likely to lead to further friction in a situation of hostile incompetence.

Hostile incompetence cannot normally be faced in the usual work relationships. A strategy to overcome this is essential. The strategy should however, be in continuation of the approach of optimising and retaining the high visibility outlined earlier. However, when the hostile manager confronts the subordinate on his extra-departmental assignments the subordinate should not buckle under pressure. The competent subordinate should adopt a strategy of upholding organisational interests and establishing a nexus between work assignments and organisational performance duly backed by a readiness to pursue an independent line of action in order to establish unequivocally his intellectual and professional independence.

Conclusion

Incompetence in managers adversely affects the organisation's performance and individual career growth. While certain types of incompetence can be adjusted with, a few others can seriously spoil the development process of subordinates. It is possible to optimise or overcome managerial incompetence with appropriate strategies. But the final decision on continuing under an incompetent manager has to be taken in relation to overall organisational norms.

If incompetence is an aberration, there is immense sense in seeking a strategy of optimisation and subsequent migration to better spots of work within the organisation. If however, an organisation has low norms of efficiency it makes better sense to seek separation and take up more challenging assignments elsewhere. The interregnum would entail the risk of intellectual decay unless subordinates take effective steps to understand and cope with the managerial incompetence that puts fetters on their performance. The framework developed in this paper is aimed at just that.

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