

Who manages the managers?

**Description**

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I had just moved to Montreal from Toronto and took on a new job as a director at the Completion Center for business jets. We had just launched an organizational transformation and was feeling good about my prospects. I assembled a new team of managers for my area, some experienced, and some brand new. Everyone was filled with enthusiasm to kick off the organization.

I had a little bit of experience managing managers but not a ton. Most of it was very typical with little major conflicts or issues to resolve. So I was confident, but little did I know I was going face some really challenging conflicts.

One day shortly after year-end reviews were being conducted, a young procurement specialist stormed into my office, on a mission. The fire in her eyes told me my day was about to change. "I need to talk to you about my rating its totally unacceptable!" She had one of the new first-time managers, and he was already getting a bit of a reputation as a hard-ass. No one ever seemed to be good enough for him. The transformation put people into cross-functional teams, so the managers were leading people where they didn't have the technical knowledge. And for her, his comments in the review about her ability had no credibility because he came from a different technical background. She demanded I do something about it. My gut was telling me there was a problem with my manager.

Shit. Was it real or was it a disgruntled employee who just thought they were better than they were? Fortunately, she had data that showed she was performing very well. So I had to go talk to my manager. And this is where I failed.

I confronted him with the dispute, and he started to throw all kinds of things at me where she didn't meet his expectations, and he had admitted he had high expectations but that they were necessary to get the results the team needed. He spoke very rationally about it and I suddenly wasn't so sure of what I could do. I asked him to sit down with her and listen to her issues and discuss it again. I also worried if I changed the rating would it mean that anyone could come and appeal to me for changes to their review?

He comes back after and says he spoke to her and his rating stands, she didn't present him with anything that would make him change his mind and I decided to side with the manager. I gave him the benefit of the doubt. The next big mistake I made was not closing the loop with the employee and see if she was good with the feedback from him.

Eventually, that specialist quit and found a new job. And the rest of his team eventually came forward with more and more complaints about his style and finally I dealt with him and he moved on. But I never listened to my gut, and trusted the employee who had enough courage to go above her boss and ask for help.

I felt horrible about the end result, that the employee never felt listened to, and vowed to never repeat that mistake again.

## Listen to Your Gut

Where there's smoke there's fire. If you hear about the worrying behavior of a manager that reports to you then take it very seriously. Trusting your gut is a very difficult thing to do, especially if you hired or promoted that person, or are even friendly and trust how they support you. [Malcolm](#)

[Gladwell's book "Talking to Strangers"](#) presents an idea called "default to truth", a phenomenon that we humans trust people implicitly, even in the face of overwhelming evidence. I can say conclusively it's real from my own experience. I want to believe in the people I count on, and it takes a lot of evidence to really start thinking that there's something wrong. But that bias can be a trap when there is really something dysfunctional happening with one of your managers and employees.

In my example above, I continued to trust my manager even though there was compelling evidence that he treated people poorly. I did have reservations, I did have that gut feeling that something was off. But I didn't want to believe it, so I kept rationalizing and looking for contrary evidence.

Let's face it: people don't go above their managers every day. It takes something serious for someone to bring an issue above their managers. It's scary for them, they think (correctly sometimes) that there will be retribution for going around the manager. I'm sure some of you are thinking, "Those employees just want to stir shit and replace the manager because they don't like them". I believe in trusting that these people have the right intentions and really feel stuck because I am convinced that the vast majority are good and want to do the right thing.

Our guts give us clear signals, about whether something might be up. I don't use it exclusively to make decisions (I have a gut feeling that I need to exercise more, but I don't act on it) but it is a trigger for me to dig deeper and really find out what's happening with an open mind.

Don't ignore those instincts. Take action or your employees will. By walking out the door.

## Open your door



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Start opening your mind by opening your door. Allow anyone from your organization no matter how big it is to have access to you. Anyone in the company should be allowed to voice their opinions without any fear of retribution or negative consequence. I tell people all the time that if they think I'm full of shit to say it. Because I am, a lot. I'm human.

Having the most access to how people really think and feel about managers, decisions, policies etc, will make sure you have an organization that serves your people, so they in turn will produce the best results for the organization. One thing I've done is to use apps like [Slack](#) and give everyone in the company an account link to join and have open all-employee conversations online. Often someone will reach out to me individually to share some more sensitive thoughts or concerns.

You can do skip-level meetings. A skip level is where you meeting with the employees of your employees, usually without the manager in-between present. A word of warning though. Most employees hate them and think they are bullshit. I do them every once in a while and I do manage to get a few good pieces of critical information but for the most part, people are afraid to be totally honest.

Create skip level discussions where you ask open-ended questions and let them talk. I do this every once in a while to gauge if there are any red-flags. There are a few things to make sure you get this right, however.

- Create a trusting environment â€“ reassure everyone that things are said in confidence, and in the spirit of helping the organization be better. Honor your word and never, ever, ever use anything said against anyone. Ever.
- Ask open-ended questions. You need them talking, and building on each other.
  - *What is great about working here?*
  - *If you were me, what would you do differently?*
  - *What do you know about our Strategy/Vision?*
  - *What are you awesome at?*
  - *What really bugs you and wish you could fix?*
- Then shut your mouth. Resist any temptation you could have to jump in, add, correct, or otherwise exert your ego. Let them go, take furious notes, or have someone do it for you. If you start telling them what you think, or where they're wrong, then they won't open up completely.

Even then, you may not get all the truth. But you may get more of an indication of what's going on. You may hear some surprising opinions about the managers that report to you. Pay really close attention to body language. You will see where someone is uncomfortable or disagrees with another. Poke at it, and encourage honesty. Thank anyone who says anything brave.

I've had people tell me all kinds of things, like their manager never talks to them, they have said threatening things in anger, their manager is never on the floor with their people.

## Get involved



How often do you walk the floor? ok, now tell me the truth, not what you tell your boss. Whatever you said, it's not enough. There is no substitute for talking one on one to your people at all levels and positions in the company. No one has a monopoly on knowing what's going on. Walk up to conversations and just listen in. You will start to hear quiet complaints about people. You will start to see if your managers are respected or not. Which teams seem more dysfunctional than others?

Engaging every day with people and just talking is such an important way to stay connected to what's going on. The further removed you are from the working-level employee the more important it is. The level of bullshit from your direct reports is proportional to the number of layers between you and the people. This is [why](#) flat organizations are so much more effective in general than those with a lot of hierarchy.

In the end, it is so important to remember that all your value in your companies come from the employees that create, produce, support and deliver your product or service. When they are engaged and feel valued and listened to, then they will be massively more productive than if they feel like a mindless number in a big corporate machine.

The other great thing that happens when you walk the floor, is you teach by example to your managers what staying connected really looks like. They suddenly may feel like they aren't connecting enough if they see you there more than them. Peer pressure is a wonderful thing sometimes.

## Confront and correct

So now you have a good idea of what's happening, and it isn't good, what are you going to do about it? Maybe you've heard some rumors but aren't sure of the details. If you care at all about the health of your company you must confront it head-on. This is why you get paid the big bucks, my friend.

Sit your manager down and give plain facts about what you've heard. Be sure to protect identities if the employee is very concerned about it, but I would also encourage the employee to be open and up-front too. Open communication is essential, and you should work hard to encourage face to face conversations between the employees and the manager who is problematic. You will be surprised that most of the managers you confront will be unaware of the problem and ultimately thankful that you told

them about it.

If the manager can't agree with what is happening, then you need to escalate the feedback. It happens, some people are not ready to hear anything negative about it. Let's face it, none of us are really ecstatic to hear, "Hey, you suck at being a leader, and it's your job." Escalating the feedback is by gathering other inputs from employees on that team, peers and your own observations.

You could do a 360-survey but it really depends on the quality of the questions, the maturity of the people filling out the survey, and really won't always get to the heart of the problem. There are some interesting editorials out there about HR professionals experience using them (good one [here](#)).

This is where you can either really make a difference as a leader, or let this slide and become another one of those horrible bosses who do nothing about the underlying issues in company culture.

Don't give up on the problem. Be as persistent with getting your manager to accept the feedback and agree with it as you are in getting that last 3% of revenue to make your numbers and earn your bonus. Get your manager to hear it from their employees, and show examples. In the end, if you really need to, put a consequence in front of them like firing to make them take it seriously. When you get middle management reporting to you, nothing is more important than having them be good leaders themselves and own and transport the culture you are creating. If not, no matter how hard you try your company will become toxic.

If you do get that manager to listen, now you need to support them in learning and correcting their behavior. Be open with their team about what's happening. I find a really good practice once they realize their behaviour is unhelpful, is to have them acknowledge it to their team and ask for help. Nothing is as powerful in a team as the truth and a genuine ask for help. You have to be a really cold-hearted person after someone stands in front of a crowd and says, "I have a problem, and I could really use all your help in making it better." The best leaders have evolved out of moments like this when they lay bare all their insecurities and find that they gain respect from it.

Give them tools, training, books, coaching, and anything else that may help them understand themselves better. Most of these unhelpful behaviors ultimately come from insecurity, or fear on which they need focused help. Be generous with your time and energy to help when they do reach out.

## **Be ready to replace**

In the end your management team is an extension of you. You will be judged by the people you hire, support and promote. Do you want to be connected with you middle managers bullying, indifference, gossiping, absence, micromanagement? Work hard to support and correct, but sometimes it won't work. I had a manager once who readily accepted all the feedback they got (and it was a lot), but in the end they could not work fast enough to undo their underlying issue.

Your ultimate tool is replacement. It is never fun to make that choice and can be very uncomfortable if some people really do like that person, but for the benefit of the company overall and the respect of the most important people in the organization (the people who deliver for you every day) do the right thing for them.

It is essential. It's called holding your people accountable. Don't overlook the importance of managing your managers' leadership abilities. It's your culture and they are either a disciple building and supporting your company's vision or a destroyer of the environment.

**Category**

1. Uncategorized

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