

Accidental managers: why people who are great at their job can fail when they get promoted

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Executive Summary

This article addresses the phenomenon of 'accidental managers' in the UK workplace — individuals promoted to managerial roles without formal training in leadership or people management. Drawing on a CMI-commissioned YouGov survey of 4,500 workers and managers, the author argues that the prevalence of such managers (82% of new managers in the UK) is a significant driver of employee disengagement, stress-related absence, and voluntary turnover. Key evidence presented includes findings that only one-third of workers with ineffective managers feel motivated, and half are considering leaving within 12 months. The article further notes that nearly one-third of UK workers have quit a job due to negative workplace culture, with 28% citing poor manager relationships. The author contends that emotional intelligence is a critical but unevenly trainable competency, and that organisations promote technically skilled employees without adequately assessing their people management capabilities. The piece concludes that HR teams, structured training programmes, and alternative career progression pathways for technically strong but people-management-unsuited employees are necessary components of addressing the UK's productivity and workplace wellbeing challenges.

Key Insights

1. 82% of new managers in the UK are classified as 'accidental managers' — promoted without formal management or leadership training, according to a CMI-commissioned YouGov survey of 4,500 workers and managers.
2. Among workers who reported having an ineffective manager, only one-third felt motivated to do a good job, and approximately half were considering leaving within the next 12 months.
3. Emotional intelligence is identified as a critical but inconsistently teachable managerial competency — the author distinguishes between those with natural interpersonal skills, those who can be trained, and those for whom training is unlikely to be effective.

Practical Takeaways

- Organisations that create alternative career progression pathways — offering increased pay and prestige without people management responsibilities — may reduce the pressure to promote technically skilled employees into roles they are ill-suited for.
- HR teams that maintain current manager performance data from employee surveys and monitor early indicators such as elevated labour turnover may be better positioned to identify ineffective managers before broader organisational damage occurs.

Critical Analysis

Strengths: The article is anchored by a specific, named survey (CMI/YouGov, n=4,500, June 2023) that lends empirical grounding to the core statistics on accidental managers, motivation, and turnover intent. The argument that technical excellence does not predict managerial effectiveness is well-established in management literature and the article reflects this credibly. **Limitations:** The author's claims about emotional intelligence being teachable 'to most but not all' are presented as personal belief ('I believe you can teach most people') rather than as evidence-based conclusions, which undermines their authority. No studies on emotional intelligence training efficacy are cited. The article does not engage with counterarguments — for instance, structural or organisational factors beyond individual manager competency that contribute to poor management outcomes. The prescriptive tone ('companies shouldn't appoint', 'HR should') conflicts with neutral analytical framing. **Biases:** The piece is published in The Conversation by an academic commentator, and while the CMI data is external, the framing strongly favours the CMI's institutional position on management training. The article may inadvertently amplify CMI's advocacy agenda for professionalising management in the UK.

Organizational Practice

The article describes UK organisations promoting high-performing technical employees into managerial roles without formal training or structured development plans. HR teams are described as using employee surveys and exit interviews to monitor manager effectiveness and labour turnover. Some organisations are noted as lacking alternative non-managerial career pathways that offer equivalent pay and prestige.

Strategic Implications

The data points to a systemic gap between technical performance as a promotion criterion and the interpersonal competencies required for effective people management. If 82% of new managers enter roles without formal training, performance management systems that rely on manager quality for execution — including feedback delivery, goal-setting, and engagement — face a structural credibility risk. The correlation between ineffective management and both disengagement and turnover intent suggests that PMS outcomes may be shaped as much by manager capability as by system design. The identification of emotional intelligence as a variable and partially trainable trait raises questions about how organisations screen and develop managers within formal PMS frameworks.

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