

LEADERSHIP

How to Spot an Incompetent Leader

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If you want to understand why some companies have a toxic culture, underperform relative to their potential, and eventually collapse — look no further than the quality of their leadership teams. Whereas competent leaders cause high levels of trust, engagement, and productivity, incompetent ones result in anxious,

alienated workers who practice counterproductive work behaviors and spread toxicity throughout the firm. Consider that the economic impact of avoiding a toxic worker is two times higher than that of hiring a star performer.

Incompetent leaders are the main reason for low levels of employee engagement, and the prevalent high levels of passive job seeking and self-employment.

When I first made this point seven years ago, a large number of people wondered about the meaning of incompetence, especially in connection to leadership.

Whatever way you look at it, the essence of incompetent leadership is easy to define: it is a function of the detrimental effects a leader has on their subordinates, followers, or organization. Few traits are as central to the anatomy of incompetent leadership as arrogance. Contrary to popular belief, most people are overconfident rather than underconfident. Neither is it the case that we are better off when leaders have a great deal of confidence. Confidence (how good you *think* you are) is primarily beneficial when it is in sync with your competence (how good you *actually* are). However, a great deal of research has shown that people who are really bad at something rate their own skills as highly as people who are really good at something — mainly due to a lack of self-awareness.

This means that we cannot realistically rely on those in power to measure their own capabilities. But if this is true, who should be responsible for predicting, and ideally mitigating, incompetence in leaders?

In an ideal world, those vetting candidates for leadership roles — in both politics and the business world — would make an effort to detect the potential signals of incompetence. Culture, whether good or bad, is just the product of the values and behaviors of our leaders. It follows that the best way to create a positive one is to stop unethical people from rising to the top. This applies equally to both genders,

but for some reason we seem less preoccupied with combating incompetence in men than in women. Of course, from a fairness standpoint hiring managers could just make it easier for incompetent women to become leaders, but a much better alternative is to instead discriminate more widely against incompetent men, for they are currently overrepresented in such roles.

To start, those responsible for judging leadership candidates need to improve their ability to distinguish between confidence and competence. The one main advantage men have over women when it comes to being picked for these roles is our human tendency to equate hubris and arrogance to talent. Although it is true that all of us are generally overconfident, men tend to be more overconfident (and arrogant) than women. This is partly for biological reasons — gender differences in impulsivity, dominance, and aggressiveness appear in all cultures and from a very early age — but also for cultural reasons.

Overconfidence is the natural result of privilege. If the future of leadership were more meritocratic, and managers selected leaders on the basis of their talent and potential rather than Machiavellian self-promotion, reckless risk taking, or narcissistic delusions, we would not just end up with more women leaders, but also with better leaders. Many competent men are also overlooked for leadership roles because they don't match our flawed leadership archetypes — meaning, they are perceived as “not masculine enough,” or fail to display the very attributes that make leaders less effective.

The good news is that science has found a way to combat this problem. For some time now, we have had at our disposal scientifically valid assessments to predict and avoid managerial and leadership incompetence. Even simple tests that may initially seem innocuous or ineffective can predict whether someone is likely to be an incompetent leader. The underlying reason is that there are systematic

individual differences in how people present themselves, and these differences predict people's leadership style and competence. When you are able to put thousands of leaders through the same self-report questionnaires, and you link their responses to their leadership style, performance, and effectiveness, you can identify the key patterns of self-presentation that characterize good and bad leaders.

Consider the following questions, which are characteristic of science-based assessments used to evaluate leadership potential and match people to jobs. Hundreds of independent scientific studies have used such questions to predict the future competence levels of leaders. The process is really quite straightforward: you compare the responses of different leaders and correlate them to their levels of performance (i.e., how they impact their teams and organizations). To the degree that a question is useful to predict whether a leader will have positive or negative effects on their teams, it is retained and used to calculate a general competence coefficient (to take the actual assessment and find out your score, go here):

1. Do you have an exceptional talent for leadership?
2. Would most people want to be like you?
3. Do you rarely make mistakes at work?
4. Are you blessed with a natural charisma?
5. Are you able to achieve anything you want, just by putting your mind to it?
6. Do you have a special gift for playing office politics?
7. Are you destined to be successful?
8. Is it easier for you to fool people, than for people to fool you?
9. Are you just too talented to fake humility?

Why are such simple self-report assessments able to predict incompetent leadership? Because they can reliably measure arrogance and overconfidence. People with these tendencies, including narcissistic individuals, are typically uninterested in portraying themselves in humble ways. Consider this recent academic paper, based on 11 independent experiments, showing that you can spot narcissists with just one question: “Are you a narcissist?” The surprising findings here is not that an outright or transparent question is enough to identify narcissists, but that narcissists are (a) somewhat self-aware of their narcissisms, and (b) rather proud of it. In other words, people who love themselves disproportionately are often proud of their egos and more aware of their delusions than one may think.

The bad news is that, despite the availability of such tools, very few organizations are using them. The problem then, it seems, is not that we lack the means to spot incompetence, but that we more often choose to be seduced by it. This means we have only ourselves to blame for our self-destructive leadership choices. Perhaps it is time to stop paying lip service to humility and integrity, until we practice what we preach and pick leaders on the basis of these traits. Instead of promoting people on the basis of their charisma, overconfidence, and narcissism, we must put in charge people with actual competence, humility, and integrity. The issue is not that these traits are difficult to measure, but that we appear to not want them as much as we say.



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