THE CONFERENCE BOARD

review

a magazine of ideas and opinion

Can We Turn Back
The Rising Tide of
Incompetence?

September/October 2006

Can We Turn Back The Rising Tide of Incompetence?

By Matthew Budman

You know who they are. And if you *don't* know, be assured that everyone else does.

They're the incompetents. And they're everyone's greatest frustration: *This department would run so well if it weren't for that guy*. In almost any division, department, office, there's a weak link—someone who has to be worked around, someone everyone knows never to involve in key projects, someone who makes everyone's life a little more difficult, someone who holds back the rest of the group.

His identity is no secret to anyone except himself. And yet no one knows what to do with him—sure, he can't be trusted with anything important, but his people seem to be getting things done without him, and he hasn't done anything worthy of being fired outright . . . so he stays. And everyone will continue to work around him, keep him out of the loop to whatever extent possible, and complain about the company's willingness to coddle incompetents.

HR performance literature focuses on motivation, on risks and rewards, on carrots and sticks. The implication is unstated but clear: that every one of your people, from top to bottom, is perfectly capable of performing up to standards but simply doesn't, for whatever reason—lack of financial incentive, team spirit, adequate training, or close supervision. But it's a simple fact: *Not everyone can do the job*.

I'm not talking about people who actively undermine the organization's daily functioning—who steal office supplies in bulk, who distract co-workers with religious proselytizing, who run online bookie joints at lunchtime, who expense call girls while on business trips. I mean people who just can't do what you hired them to do.

It's been thirty-six years since Laurence J. Peter introduced the Peter Principle: "In a hierarchy every employee tends to rise to his level of incompetence." That is, workers keep getting promoted until their new job demands more than they can give, and then they stay in that job pretty much forever. After a few cycles, any organization will be managed, therefore, entirely by people who are at least somewhat incompetent.

But surely this is a cynical view, right? Not *everyone* is an incompetent. Certainly *you*, dear reader, are no incompetent. But neither would you argue with a straight face that you know of no incompetents in your organization, or even in your orbit of responsibility. And it's a problem that's only getting worse, as companies ask people who are already swamped to take on more and more.

We haven't seen a visible wave of ineptitude threatening to drown the daily functioning of our organizations. Nor are we likely to. But the tide is slowly rising, and we need to start thinking about moving to higher ground.

Incompetence, Defined

What do we mean when we say someone is an incompetent? Try this definition: *An incompetent is someone who is defined by his mistakes*.

To explain: Everyone makes the occasional error or bad decision or lapse in judgment. Most of them go unnoticed. But at some point, failure becomes the norm and even that person's defining characteristic. It may be the accumulation of dozens of projects done just a little below standard; it may be a lone catastrophe that devastates one's public image in an afternoon. Either way, when others begin to define you as *the guy who screws up*, you're an incompetent.

This characterization, though, relies on perception—on other people's views—to define whether one is in fact an incompetent. So we can define incompetence itself as, simply, *the inability to do the job*.

And it's not hard to find, whether or not you're looking for it. As Laurence Peter's co-author, Raymond Hull, rants in *The Peter Principle*'s introduction: "Everywhere I see incompetence rampant, incompetence triumphant." In business, there's incompetence that produces muttering, groans, pointed glances at wristwatches, and hands clapped over disbelieving eyes, from the guy in the accounting department who misfiles every important invoice to the mutual-fund manager who consistently buys high and sells low. There's the ineptitude that you don't necessarily see happening but whose evidence is obvious, from the marketing initiative that backfires to the break-room coffee dispenser that never gets fixed. And there's the incompetence so grand that it makes the newspapers, from the massive accounting fraud overlooked by auditors to the disastrous corporate merger approved without due diligence.

Corporate incompetence takes many forms. A front-line worker may lack basic skills that are intrinsic to success in his job: writing, computer, manual dexterity, friendliness. A manager—likely promoted from a lower-level position at which she was competent—may lack any of the above plus a host of other abilities and characteristics that become ever more annoying to those below and above: being frustratingly distant or an insufferable micromanager, utterly disorganized, incapable of running meetings efficiently, or an inveterate procrastinator. An incompetent supervisor with key responsibilities can wreak havoc with glitch-filled presentations, tardy budget filings, wrongly assigned credit or blame, and blown opportunities.

Mike Judge's 1999 film *Office Space* became a cult smash by depicting everyday workplace ineptitude, epitomized by a thirty-year veteran's increasingly wretched attempts to explain the nature of his job—as a liaison between customers and software engineers, because "engineers are not good at dealing with customers." No, he concedes, he doesn't speak with customers—"my secretary does that." And no, he doesn't physically bring the specifications to the engineers. Finally, the nonplussed consultant asks the open-ended question, "What would you say you *do* here?" The worker's flustered answer: "I already told you: I deal with the god-

Matthew Budman is managing editor of The Conference Board Review.

Robert Neubecker

damn customers so the engineers don't have to! I have *people* skills! I am *good* at dealing with *people*! Can't you understand that? What the hell is *wrong* with you people?"

At senior levels, the issue isn't so much skills or bad interpersonal management—though an executive may lack those in abundance—as judgment. Executives live and die by the quality of their decisions, how clearly they foresee outcomes, how profitably their gambles pay off. It doesn't take many lost bets before observers begin wondering whether the executive *can* win bets.

To cite an obvious, recent example: No one ever accused Hewlett-Packard CEO Carly Fiorina of incompetence based on a lack of smarts or telegenics—it was her decision-making abilities that came under fire. During the 2001 stock-price slump, a BBC News profile of Fiorina noted that she "has been portrayed as at best dangerously unlucky, at worst incompetent"—but that the announcement of HP's forthcoming Compaq takeover might make her "due for a bounce." Well . . . not so much. Wall Street weighed in as soon as the deal was done, and Fiorina's judgment became Topic A. "I think Carly Fiorina is one of the most incompetent executives to run a Fortune 500 company in years," one retired CFO told *The San Francisco Chronicle*. And five years later, critics far outnumber supporters. As one blogger cried recently, "How could someone so incompetent get hired as CEO of a major corporation?"

Unfair? Sure. If a couple of tech trends had swung slightly differently, or if a handful of key players had bought into the merger enthusiastically, the HP-Compaq deal might not have soured, and Fiorina's reputation might have remained intact or even soared. There'd surely still be grumbling here and there about stock prices and corporate cultures, but it wouldn't be common opinion that *she can't do the job*.

But those are the rules, and Fiorina surely knew them: Foreseeing shifts and making the best possible long-term decisions was her job, the merger's perceived failure was evidence that she had failed at

Multitasking can turn almost anyone into a forgetful blunderer.

her job, and it was but a small step for people to define her as a failure.

We Have Met the Incompetent and He Is Us

Again, if people come to define you by your mistakes, you're de facto an incompetent. But as New York University psychologist and marketing professor Justin Kruger notes, "Nobody is incompetent in *everything*." No one rises to the C-suite level without demonstrating proficiency at any number of fundamental skills. It's safe to say that most of us are not bad at a multitude of things.

There's a converse, though: Just as no one is bad at everything, no one is good at everything, and eventually, according to the Peter Principle, many or even most people will end up in positions for which we're congenitally unsuited and unsuitable. As HR consultant Bill Catlette comments, "All of us, at some things, at some point in our lives, are incompetent—maybe at work, maybe at home."

Are we more incompetent today than in the past? In general, probably, even on basic knowledge. You've seen the newspaper articles about students who can't answer essential questions of grammar, geography, or pretty much anything else, right? Keep in mind that most adults can't answer those questions either—and that there's a lot more to know than there used to be.

Quizzes aside, there's no reason to think that people today are fundamen-

tally less capable than their forebears, but more is demanded of white-collar workers every day—less in terms of the sheer amount of work than of different *types* of work. The working world is increasingly complex, and many of us regularly take on more responsibility for more things. This is the inevitable result of improved technology—for instance, powerful word-processing software on every PC—and of organizational delayering. Departments and business units have ever-broader mandates, expanding into global issues, but fewer warm bodies, meaning that every time there's a new project or initiative or team, the necessary commitment of time and energy gets added to someone's already-long to-do list.

We're all expected to do a bit of everything, from drafting error-free memos (no more secretarial pool) to taking on more committee assignments (fewer senior people to go around) to filing invoices online (fewer administrative assistants) to directly supervising more people (fewer middle managers). The more things for which we're responsible, the more we have to prioritize and, all too often, let things slide. And everything that slides may create delays and glitches and troubles for someone else in the next office or department—which is how companywide reputations for incompetence are born.

Plus, there's the issue of multitasking, which can turn almost anyone into a forgetful blunderer. Research over the last five years proves, pretty definitively, that every time you toggle between tasks—say, studying a spreadsheet and checking e-mail—you lose time and focus. The problem is exacerbated as the tasks increase in complexity, and the more responsibilities you take on, the more you have to toggle between them, and the more opportunities you have to misunderstand a memo or misfile a report or misdirect an e-mail. Not to mention everyday distractions that technology has brought. Few of us have the strength of character to ignore our incessantly arriving e-mail and constantly updated websites. Sure, your new Gen-Y hires accept even more distractions, from instant messaging (that

little window hovering in the corner of their PC monitor) to streaming online radio, cell-phone texting, and YouTube video clips. But people at every level and of every generation are at least occasionally overwhelmed.

In short, then, today's working world creates incompetents. And the situation will only worsen: Departments are so lean that there's little or no redundancy when it comes to all those tasks and deadlines and software programs—and all that paperwork. There are few people to whom to delegate, and not enough hours in the week to train them.

Do They *Know* They're Incompetent?

Of course, it's not only the modern workplace that creates incompetence—the Principle holds that the hierarchy itself, through promotions, transforms capable workers into shaky bosses. In addition, incompetence begets incompetence: Managers with poor judgment hand out assignments to the wrong people, delegate tasks to those who can't handle them, and force others out of their zones of responsibility.

And despite the increasing popularity of workplace personality testing, as described in James Krohe's cover story last issue, companies keep putting the wrong people in charge. Just think of all the books you've seen about dealing with toxic bosses, and consider that each of those toxic bosses was, at some point, promoted to that position of responsibility. (Is it possible that *you* might have promoted one or two? No, of course not.) Some people are simply never going to be good managers, no matter how many daylong seminars endured and Ken Blanchard books skimmed.

British writer and comic Ricky Gervais redefined the bad boss with his 2001 sitcom *The Office*, in which his office-manager protagonist, David Brent, distracts his staff with inappropriate jokes, undermines a visiting customer-service trainer, and offers his supervisor a litany of excuses and lies. As Gervais told BBC News Online,

though, some viewers couldn't recognize themselves in the character: "I remember when we were telling [BBC head of comedy] Jon Plowman about David Brent's character four years ago. He said, 'But why would a man this incompetent keep his job?' and I said, 'Jon, go and take a look around this building.'"

It's an intrinsic part of David Brent's persona that he fancies himself a supremely effective manager, even as his direct reports stare at him incredulously and his boss regularly delivers closed-door dressing-downs. But in the real world, do incompetents know they're incompetent? Not according to Peter: "Many an employee never realizes that he has reached his level of incompetence. He keeps perpetually busy, never loses his expectation of further promotion, and so remains *happy* and *healthy*."

Research backs up the contention that incompetents are generally unaware of their ineptitude. "There are many domains in life—like, say, basketball—in which incompetence is obvious in ourselves or in others," Justin Kruger says. "But in other domains, people don't necessarily recognize it—not only in themselves but in others. In general, people

tend to overestimate their ability at least slightly, and in my studies, I have found that those who are incompetent in particular do not recognize that fact." Worse, incompetents are poor judges of ability in others as well as themselves—more bad news for an organization that has wrongly promoted a manager. (In a recent *Chronicle of Higher Education* article, Kruger's sometime co-author David Dunning, a Cornell professor of psychology, bemoans incompetents' overconfidence and counsels educators to counter the tendency through explicit and frequent self-testing and feedback.)

Catlette disagrees, insisting that incompetents are generally self-aware. "The majority of the time, they know," he says. "They know, and it's eating at them. They're like a deer in the headlights, afraid to do anything and afraid what'll happen if somebody finds out." But he acknowledges: "Then again, you've got folks who are legends in their own minds."

The Politics of Ineptitude

Today's most famous legend in his own mind, Michael D. Brown, continues to insist that his troubled tenure as commissioner of the International Arabian Horse

Association amply qualified him for his next job: director of the Federal Emergency Management Agency. That stubbornness has helped make his name synonymous with incompetence in America—a year after Hurricane Katrina, he remains the poster boy for those who have risen too far, too fast.

Brown had headed FEMA for two and a half years without incident and in obscurity, but in August 2005, as New Orleans drowned, he delivered a real-time, prime-time seminar in bad management: He failed to anticipate the problem, failed to act swiftly once the problem appeared, failed to heed on-the-ground reports, and then failed to acknowledge his errors, much less correct them. His TV interviews inspired more horrified laughter than confidence. When called on the carpet, he blamed his superiors, his subordinates, and his counterparts in other agencies; he explained that his failure to keep his boss in the loop was intentional—the bureaucracy "just bogged things down." Reporters, investigating how someone in so far over his head wound up in such a key post, learned that he had landed the job through political patronage—but had embellished his CV just in case. And he never accepted more than a smidgen of responsibility for any of these gaffes.

As the criticism rose along with the floodwaters, President Bush offered an on-air endorsement—"Brownie, you're doing a heck of a job"—that made Bush appear as out of touch as the crony he had appointed. And observers began wondering how many other appointees had been handed important jobs for which they were manifestly unqualified—or even whether the executive handing out the jobs was himself incompetent. Critics had long noted that Bush, "the CEO president," ran the country in a manner contrary to the way CEOs are supposed to run their companies—most troublingly, he surrounded himself with sycophants, asked no questions, and made firm decisions with little or no input from dissenters, sticking to those decisions regardless of how the playing field shifted. But after the Brown debacle, people of all po-

litical stripes began asking tougher questions about the Bush bubble: His Harvard MBA notwithstanding, how good a manager could he really be? Had the American people promoted a successful governor past his level of competence?

The questioning grew louder when, with denunciations of Brown still echoing, Bush nominated another underqualified friend, Harriet Miers, to the Supreme Court, bringing groans from all sides. *Washington Post* columnist George Will noted that "there is no evidence that she is among the leading lights of American jurisprudence, or that she possesses talents commensurate with the Supreme Court's tasks." The nomination was botched from the announcement until Miers' withdrawal from consideration: The White House failed to properly vet the candidate, failed to secure buy-in from any of its constituencies, failed to respond convincingly to criticism, and finally was forced to stage a humiliating retreat.

For the president's critics, the administration's aptitude became fair game. *The New Republic* ranked "the Bush administration's 15 worst hacks," and *New York Times* columnists Paul Krugman, Frank Rich, and Bob Herbert began lacing each of their essays with as many as three or four invocations of "incompetent." ("If incompetence were a criminal offense," Herbert wrote about Bush, "he'd be behind bars.") Democratic leaders began tossing "dangerous incompetence" into their talking points. Even some conservatives broke ranks and joined the chorus: National Review Online blogger John Conway offered, "Frankly, speaking of incompetence, I think this Administration is the most politically and substantively inept that the nation has had in over a quarter of a century."

The charge resonated with a public unhappy with the Iraq war's botched aftermath: Respondents in a March 2006 Pew Research Center poll, asked to come up with a single word to best describe the president, volunteered "incompetent" more than any other. Though it should be noted that eight months earlier, even before Katrina, "incompetent" already

placed second. Evidently, an awful lot of Americans had been wondering: *How'd he get elevated to that job, anyway?*

President Bush is hardly the first American political figure to run smack into the Peter Principle, to encounter trouble when upgrading from representing a state to representing a nation. One doesn't even have to remember all that far back: "For almost as long as I can remember," writes liberal essayist Mark Schmitt, "the presidency of Jimmy Carter has been the emblem of managerial incompetence in the White House." (Schmitt defends Carter's record, but detractors offer a long list of failures, from the Iranian hostage crisis and botched rescue to soaring 1970s inflation and interest rates.)

There's an even better recent example in the political arena: high-profile campaign strategist Bob Shrum, for whose services Democratic presidential candidates vie every four years. Since signing on as a speechwriter for George McGovern in 1972, Shrum has maintained an unbroken streak of eight—count 'em, eight—losing presidential campaigns. He's a well-regarded speechwriter and has been extraordinarily successful at getting U.S. senators elected, but the messages and strategies he crafts for statewide candidates haven't clicked at the national level. His job is to elect presidents, and his other achievements notwithstanding, he has been something less than a success at that job. The arguable conclusion: Every

four years, Shrum is promoted—whether by Michael Dukakis, Al Gore, or John Kerry—past his level of competence.

With regard to politicians themselves—at least those who win—it's no surprise that plenty of glib and personable people flame out upon being asked to broker consensus, master a wide range of topics, withstand close scrutiny, and offer genuine leadership. The leap from candidate to legislator—that is, from dynamic campaigner to someone who must govern—is a long one, and somewhere in the middle many a politician reaches his level of incompetence. The two roles require completely different capabilities.

And even though the government is hardly the typical hierarchy, there's an obvious parallel to the campaigning/governing divide: In both the corporate world and government, the skill set that gets you the job is quite different from the one that allows you to succeed at the job. Just think of those people skilled at "managing up," impressing the higher-ups, while garnering only scorn from those unlucky enough to be lower down in the ranks. The guy with the newscaster looks and sharp suit may practically have "upper management" stamped on his forehead, but it's his dingy counterpart—you know, the one with stains on his tie—who may be single-handedly keeping the division running. Every headhunter cautions against being taken in by a candidate's outward presentation, noting that even savvy executives are susceptible to people who put forward an impression of competence, even as they leave a trail of destruction in their path.

Office politics is a tricky game that some play by pitting one constituency against another, which furthers one person's career at the organization's expense. In a way, this argues in favor of 360-degree feedback—it's one way to determine whether a candidate for top management really is a uniter rather than a divider.

You Can't Just Fire Everyone

If the job isn't getting done, and there's nothing wrong with the position itself, there are two possibilities: The person can't do the job, or he *won't* do the job. That is, he may be incompetent—or simply lazy. If the latter, the problem can be solved by skillfully wielding the usual battery of carrots and sticks. If it's the former, another two possibilities: Either he can't do this particular job, or he can't do *any* job.

Peter distinguishes between ordinary incompetents, comprising the vast bulk of people in organizations, and "super-incompetents," whose mistakes are causing genuine difficulties and can't be worked around. He insists that displays of sheer ineptitude are rarely sufficient to spur supervisors into action—organizations tend to fire people only when they "disrupt the hierarchy."

These people are pretty much beyond help. But what about everyone else? Few companies have any history of purging—or disciplining, or training, or counseling—those barely keeping their heads above water. Companies lay off people when they absolutely have to, and certainly they fire people when it's called for. But the directive for layoffs typically comes from on high, and its targets are financial, not performance-based. Things have to get pretty unbearable before anyone makes a move. Firings are unpleasant

for everyone involved, and it's no wonder that it's the solution of last resort.

But even if tradition made it more acceptable, you can't just fire all these people, for a variety of reasons:

- They have spouses and children and mortgages, and managers are all too aware of the misery that will result from a permanent layoff.
- There's no guarantee that their replacements will be any more competent. As the Army is learning (see "Promoting the Unpromotable," page 48), the well of talent is hardly bottomless.
- You've probably failed to adequately document their underperformance, leaving a tempting opening for lawsuits.
- You're not 100 percent sure that it's them—and not their supervisors—who are the true incompetents.
- You'd risk tremendous embarrassment by letting go some of your most-often-promoted executives.
- They're not really doing that much harm—if they were, you would have fired them already.

So you're stuck with handling an organization riddled with incompetents, right? Well . . . not completely. You're

not entirely helpless. The problem, fundamentally, is that your people have ended up in the wrong positions. To *solve* the problem, therefore, you need to do a better job in ensuring that your people end up in the positions for which they're best suited.

Now, you already know this—hell, the most important part of a top executive's job is picking the right people for the right positions. That's why we subject candidates to lengthy interview processes and personality tests, why we put them through training sessions and reference checks. But to reiterate: *Every incompetent manager in America was promoted to that position.* If each promotion is something of a gamble, that's an awful lot of bad bets being made. So there's something basically wrong with the system—with the way we promote people, with a hierarchical culture based on promotions.

Stopping Incompetence Before It Starts

Again, the hierarchy *creates* incompetence. The Peter Principle functions because, as Peter puts it, any organization's hierarchy is based on self-preservation, and incompetence tends to maintain the status quo.

So change the hierarchy.

I'm not talking about a radical restructuring of organizational design. You don't have to scrap your org chart à la W.L. Gore & Associates, the no-hierarchy manufacturer that trumpets its "unique lattice organization." Just start considering how to separate promotions from rewards for high performance, how to alter the pattern of good people inexorably rising until they're no longer good people.

"We need to carefully re-examine how people get promoted in our organizations," says Catlette, co-author of *Contented Cows Give Better Milk.* "I don't have a problem with promotion from within. It's a good thing. It's a great thing. But we need to be mindful of the fact that oftentimes, moving to a new job involves a different skill set. If somebody has been around and performing competently for ten years, that's great—we should celebrate it, and they

ought to get preferential consideration for time-off choices and things like that. They should not, however, be automatically or even preferentially moved to a position requiring a different skill set. There is a reason why scrub nurses don't get promoted to neurosurgeon. That is especially the case with moving people into a leadership role. People ought not to be moved up simply because they've endured the organization for a long time and they're the last person standing."

Why do people want promotions in the first place? Obvious: People higher up in the organization get tangible benefits (higher pay, more perks, nicer office), psychic benefits (recognition of one's ability, others' deference), and the opportunity to take another step up in the future.

But there's no reason why companies can't offer at least some of those benefits without tying them to promotions.

True, there's not much precedent for paying workers more than managers, with notable exceptions in the professions and pro sports—a hotshot technology columnist may out-earn her editor, an economics professor may out-earn his department chair, and certainly Derek Jeter and Tom Brady out-earn Joe Torre and Bill Belichick. But in these cases, the "workers" offer measurable expertise and produce quantifiable achievements—they're hardly equivalent to a typical mid-level corporate staffer who deserves recognition but is questionable for a supervisory role.

So that's a sticking point, and not one easily resolved in a corporate culture in which office space is carefully allocated based on pay grade. But the question remains: In most companies, why should a star employee be eligible for a higher level of pay and perks of a manager only if she takes on the particular responsibilities of a supervisor?

We all know what happens all too often when a promotion opportunity leads to disaster. Take a classic Peter Principle example: The manager of a sales group departs, so the organization looks to the group itself to replace him. Fred, the top performer, gets tapped to supervise his former colleagues but turns out to be a

terrible manager. The overall result: The company has lost its best salesman, the sales group will suffer from poor management, and Fred—too incompetent for further promotion—will be forever stuck in a position for which he's unsuited, blocking others from making the leap he did.

"This happens *a lot*," Catlette says. "And it's a perfect example, because selling and leading a group of people who sell are two hugely different skill sets. We need to look for those competencies when we move people into leadership positions. Unfortunately, we often wind up making the person who's been asked to make the move miserable—as well as the people around him. And a lot of the time, deep down the person didn't want to make the move in the first place but didn't know how to say no."

After It's Too Late

Going forward, then, you can start rethinking how you handle promotions and, therefore, at least try to stem the spread of incompetence in your organization. But that doesn't do anything about the *current* state of the company. What do you do with all the people who have been promoted past their level of competence?

We all know what happens now. You work around them. You don't send them important projects, or those with tight deadlines. More than anything, you try to make them someone else's problem.

You try kicking them upstairs, so to speak, though everyone knows what those lateral moves mean—when someone is given a new position with vaguely defined responsibilities, no clear rank in the hierarchy, and, most important, no direct reports of any consequence. A kick upstairs also represents a failure on the part of not only the kickee but the kicker. And could the practice of kicking underperformers upstairs be any less efficient or any more counterproductive? Think of the message: *People who can't cut the mustard are rewarded with higher-up positions, doing less work for more pay.*

A truly cowardly organization, faced with an untenable situation, may go so far as to restructure the entire org chart in

order to eliminate a department, scattering the employees far and wide—and, not incidentally, letting go the incompetent supervisor whom no one had the guts to just fire.

But certainly one can understand why top management would resort to desperate solutions. At levels above the ability to, say, type, the common incompetence factor is that the problem, whatever it is, can't be solved with a pep talk, a daylong coaching seminar, an online training course, or an introductory how-to-manage-people workbook. It won't matter how many inspirational books get read or workplace simulations get completed. Gentle hints won't change the situation; neither will stern lectures. You can't incentivize people to develop sound judgment.

Is there anything to be done? "There is a lot we can—and should—be doing with people whose career has outrun their skills," Catlette says. "If you catch it early, before the person is stigmatized by the 'non-performer' brand, you've got a chance to work with them, get them the help they need, move them somewhere else, or let them leave with dignity."

The difficulty comes in our strong cultural resistance to moving people down in the ranks as easily as up. Catlette argues that the problem is largely one of perception and speed. "It hinges on being a whole lot quicker to realize that it's not working," he says. "Once the person is stigmatized by the internal perception that he's failing, it's too late to make a move. So we've got to do a much better job at assessing situations sooner. We might be able to move the person to another position, including back into the ranks of folks who they once supervised."

All this to say that if the organization typically tosses up-and-comers into the managerial waters to see whether they can swim, it needs to have a plan to fish them out if they can't.

What about the multitasking issue, the fact that so many of us are becoming less competent through being handed so many different responsibilities? How can a company alter the pattern?

Few would welcome a retrenchment to the assembly-line days of one task per person; however efficient in theory, the practice left little room for anything that makes work fulfilling. Diversifying job descriptions has empowered employees, given them opportunities to both expand their skills and showcase their capabilities, and made daily work lives far less repetitious and dull. But it forces people to take on tasks outside of their interests and abilities, and then you're stuck: In most organizations, it's a bit traumatic to remove a key assignment from someone's portfolio of responsibilities, especially since most departments have been stripped down to the extent that there's no one available to whom to assign those tasks.

So how to make sure that each person covers less ground, and covers it better? After all, e-mail is here to stay and dictation-taking secretaries are gone for good. PC software will continue to shift capabilities and tasks to individual workers and executives. If you're not currently logging last week's work hours into an HR intranet program every Monday morning, it's only a matter of time.

If there's a solution—apart from increasing staffs to restore a comfortable level of redundancy—it lies in making departments and work teams more fluid and flexible, so that responsibilities and workloads can be shifted more easily between people. You could even test a three- or four-month rotation schedule of particular tasks, to see who demonstrates aptitude without more or less permanently locking in job descriptions. You can try to change the culture to remove any stigma from experiments that don't work out.

With regard to time management and the perils of multitasking, education may help: If people realize just how much less productive their multitasking makes them—that they end up with less time for personal Web browsing as well as for work—they'll make a conscious effort to

Promoting the Unpromotable

At least in theory, the military has the ideal system of weeding out incompetents: Everyone has a rank, and that rank can be bumped down for poor performance or decision-making, without undue consideration of office politics. If someone is given authority who can't handle or doesn't deserve it, everyone finds out pretty quickly, and steps are taken to fix the problem.

Lately, though, the system has ceased to run so smoothly and efficiently. With a rising number of Army officers voluntarily leaving the service—decreasing supply just as demand is spiking—the organization is scrapping its traditional weeding-out process. Last year, according to Pentagon data reported in the *Los Angeles Times*, the Army promoted nearly every eligible captain to the rank of major, up from the traditional 70 or 80 percent to fully 97 percent. Is every one of those 97 percent up to the job? It seems unlikely, unless the caliber of officers has taken a startling leap in the last few years.

And there's no reason to think that today's soldiers—at any level in the ranks—are more able than those in the past. To meet its recruiting targets, the Army has begun accepting record numbers of people with bottom-of-the-class scores on aptitude tests or problems with alcohol or weight. Even more recruits with criminal records are entering the service: The *Chicago Sun-Times* discovered that the Army handed out twice as many "moral waivers" in 2005 than four years earlier—to would-be soldiers such as three-time convict Steven D. Green, currently facing trial for raping a 14-year-old Iraqi girl and murdering her family while an Army private.

Those recruits are sticking around longer, too. A *USA Today* analysis found that in May 2005, 18.1 percent of recruits washed out in their first six months; only a year later, the rate had fallen to 7.6 percent. "By retaining *these* soldiers," essayists and veterans Phillip Carter and Owen West write in *Slate*, "the Army lowers the quality of its force and places a heavy burden on commanders who have to take the poor performers into harm's way." This year, too, the Army has raised its maximum enlistment age from 35 to 42.

In May, investigative stories in Oregon and Connecticut newspapers detailed ethics-bending Army efforts to recruit and retain even mentally disabled and disturbed young men for service. It sounds harsh and overly pejorative to label as incompetent the likes of Jared Guinther, a Portland 18-year-old with autism whom the Army signed up in April to be a cavalry scout (and released two days after his tale hit the newspapers). But if a soldier can't do the job he was hired to do, that's exactly what he is—with potentially fatal consequences for both him and his unit.   —M.B.

---

focus on one task at a time. And really: Who of us *couldn't* use a quick time-management counseling session?

Eliminating the Cause?

Companies have existed, in some form, since ancient Rome, meaning that there's a very long tradition of workers striving ever upward, seeking more authority and responsibility and pay, accompanied by softer chairs in larger offices on higher floors. Indeed, that striving is largely responsible for the ambition and energy that has driven organizations throughout history—a struggle for power and survival, in both Darwinian and free-market senses. But within any given hierarchy, the result is inevitable: incompetence throughout the managerial ranks, and more on the way.

Reversing the situation altogether would require some fairly drastic rethinking of chains of command, job descriptions, and departmental structures. It would require a shift in the corporate culture, in thinking about achievement and position. And frankly, it's unrealistic to think that any established, traditional, org-charted organization will take the radical steps needed to make it happen.

But added flexibility would help, particularly changing the culture to make shifting of responsibilities more common and free of taint, allowing room for people to relinquish tasks that they can't handle and take on more of those that they can.

The pay issue is crucial in de-emphasizing promotions. Surveys show that workers aren't resentful of CEOs' exorbitant pay—in fact, Americans in general are surprisingly blasé about inequality—but that's partly because they aspire to that pinnacle. People hunger to be managers because they know that's the only path to the good life in corporate America . . . which is one reason why we have so many inept managers. This is yet another argument in favor of reducing the pay gap between management and non-management. If organizations can offer many of the rewards without necessarily the supervisory tasks—reducing the hunger to make an upward leap—and do a better job working with employees to match responsibilities with ability and ambition, they can go a long way toward eliminating not just incompetence but the *cause* of incompetence.

So think about it. The benefits of reducing incompetence in your organization are amorphous and even intangible, but they're real. Ineptitude will always be with us; no workplace, regardless of hiring practices or what the org chart looks like, will ever be staffed and managed entirely by capable people in the perfect positions, blazingly competent at each of their duties. It's inevitable.

But we don't have to create and maintain organizational structures and practices that actively *produce* incompetence. You may not be the incompetent—the one everyone works around, the one holding back everyone else—but wouldn't you prefer that no one else be either? 🖋