

CORPORATE TABOOS

*Leadership Failures We All See But No One Fixes*

**Issue #4**

# When Your Boss Is In Over Their Head

*— Incompetent Leaders in Critical Roles:  
Why It Happens, How to Survive It,  
and What Organizations Can Actually Do About It*

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*The newsletter for leaders who prefer honest diagnosis over comfortable denial.*

## The War Story

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The team had a name for the meetings. They called them 'the fog.'

Not out loud — not in any channel that could be screenshotted. But in the parking garage afterward, in the texts between the four senior members of the strategy team, in the carefully vague language of their retrospectives: the fog. The hour-long session with their director, Victor, that ended with everyone less clear on priorities than when they walked in. The decisions that got made, unmade, and re-made across successive meetings without ever quite resolving. The ambitious slide decks Victor produced for senior leadership that bore almost no resemblance to the operational realities the team was navigating.

Victor had been in the role for two years. He had a confident manner, a fluency with the vocabulary of strategy, and a genuine talent for presenting upward — the quarterly business reviews always went smoothly, at least from the outside. What he lacked was a working understanding of what his team actually did, the judgment to distinguish a real priority from a shiny one, and — most critically — any apparent awareness that these gaps existed.

The team compensated. They ran the actual work in a parallel, unofficial structure: Elena made the real resourcing decisions, James fielded the cross-functional relationships, and the two junior analysts had learned to wait for the post-meeting debrief with Elena before treating anything Victor said as a directive. It worked, after a fashion. It also meant that four talented people were spending 20% of their energy managing around their manager — energy that wasn't going into the work.

When Elena finally left for a competitor — citing 'opportunity for growth' in her exit interview and something more honest over drinks afterward — the unofficial structure collapsed. Victor's gaps, previously invisible to senior leadership, suddenly became impossible to paper over. The team's output dropped visibly. Two more departures followed within six months.

***An incompetent leader is rarely the only problem. The real problem is the system that kept them invisible — and the team that exhausted itself making that invisibility possible.***

## Name the Failure: The Emperor's Competence

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Every organization has a version of Victor. A leader who occupies a critical role and is, by any honest assessment, not equipped to do it well. They're not necessarily bad people — some are charming, some are hardworking, some genuinely believe they're performing adequately. What they share is a persistent gap between the demands of the role and their capacity to meet them, combined with a surrounding system that has chosen, for reasons we'll examine, to look the other way.

This is distinct from the struggling new manager we discussed in Issue #3 — someone recently promoted into an unfamiliar role who needs development and time. The incompetent leader in a critical role has typically been in place long enough that 'still finding their footing' is no longer a credible explanation. The gap isn't a ramp — it's the destination.

**What 'Incompetent' Actually Means Here**

We're not using the word loosely. Incompetence in this context means a sustained, observable inability to perform the core functions of the role: setting clear direction, making sound decisions with available information, developing and retaining talent, and delivering results through others. It does not mean 'someone I disagree with' or 'someone with a different style.' Style is a preference. Competence is a job requirement.

**Why It Persists: The Conspiracy of Comfort**

Incompetent leaders in critical roles don't persist because no one notices. They persist because every stakeholder in the system has a reason — usually a rational one — to avoid forcing the issue.

Stakeholder	Their Reason for Silence	The Hidden Cost They're Paying
Senior Leadership	Addressing it means admitting a hiring or promotion mistake. It means a difficult conversation, a restructuring, and a performance management process they'd rather not manage. Victor's QBRs look fine from the outside.	The organization underperforms in ways that are attributed to market conditions, strategy, or team capability — never to the leadership layer that connects them.
Peers and Cross-Functional Partners	Naming a peer's incompetence risks political fallout, damaged relationships, and being seen as territorial. 'Not my problem' is the path of least resistance.	Resources are misallocated, cross-functional work is harder than it should be, and their own teams absorb friction that better leadership would have absorbed.
The Direct Reports	Speaking up risks being labeled a problem employee, a malcontent, or someone who 'can't work with leadership.' The power differential is real. The career risk of naming it is real.	They compensate, burn out, and eventually leave — taking with them the institutional knowledge and capability that was holding the team together.
HR	Without documented performance issues — which require the incompetent leader's own manager to generate — HR has limited formal grounds to act. They may be aware but	Exit interview data accumulates. Engagement scores drop. The signals are there; the authority to act on them often isn't.

Stakeholder	Their Reason for Silence	The Hidden Cost They're Paying
	lack the organizational mandate to force the issue.	
The Leader Themselves	In many cases, the leader genuinely doesn't know. Their upward presentation is polished. The team's compensatory behavior makes their gaps invisible. Feedback systems in most organizations are too diffuse and too polite to deliver a clear signal.	They continue in a role they may not be suited for, developing neither self-awareness nor the skills the role requires. Their long-term career is harmed by staying, even if they can't see it.

The result is a self-reinforcing system. The direct reports compensate, making the problem invisible. Senior leadership doesn't see it, so they don't act. The leader continues. The direct reports burn out. The system resets when enough of them leave — but even then, the departure is usually attributed to something other than its actual cause.

## How to Recognize It: Signals That Cut Through the Fog

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Diagnosing leadership incompetence is harder than it sounds, precisely because the surrounding system has organized itself to obscure it. Here are the signals that tend to survive that obscurity:

Signal	What It Looks Like	Why It's Diagnostic
Directional fog	Meetings end without clear decisions. Priorities shift frequently without explanation. The team has learned to wait for a second or third directive before acting on the first.	Clarity of direction is a core management output. Its sustained absence is not a communication style — it's a capability gap.
Compensatory shadow structure	Informal leaders emerge below the official leader. Certain team members become de facto decision-makers, routers of information, or managers of the actual work.	Teams don't build shadow structures for fun. They build them because the official structure isn't functioning.
Attrition pattern	The team's strongest performers leave first and fastest. Exit interviews are vague or blame 'opportunity' — but the departure pattern clusters around a specific leader.	High performers have the most options and the lowest tolerance for poor leadership. Their exits are early warning signals, not random events.
Upward performance divergence	The leader presents well to senior leadership but has little credibility with their own team. What leadership sees	Presentation skill is not leadership competence. A wide gap between how a leader appears upward and

Signal	What It Looks Like	Why It's Diagnostic
	and what the team experiences are starkly different.	how they function downward is a structural red flag.
Decision avoidance or reversal	The leader consistently defers decisions, escalates decisions that are clearly within their authority, or reverses decisions at the first sign of resistance.	Decision-making under ambiguity and pressure is a primary management function. Chronic avoidance signals a gap in judgment or confidence that isn't closing.
Development vacuum	Nobody on the team is growing. Stretch assignments don't materialize. Feedback is vague or nonexistent. Team members have the same skills they had two years ago.	Developing direct reports is a core management responsibility. A team that isn't growing despite capable members is almost always a leadership problem, not a people problem.

## How to Survive It: A Field Guide for Direct Reports

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If you're reading this issue because you recognize your own situation in Victor's team, this section is for you. Working under an incompetent leader is genuinely difficult — it's not a problem you can think your way out of with the right attitude. But there are strategies that help, and strategies that make it worse.

### What Helps

- Manage your own clarity ruthlessly. When direction is foggy, send a follow-up email after every significant conversation: 'Just to confirm my understanding — the priority for this week is X, and the decision we made is Y. Let me know if I've got that wrong.' This creates a paper trail, forces implicit decisions to become explicit, and protects you when the story changes.
- Build your visibility laterally and upward. Don't let your career depend entirely on a leader who may not be able to advocate for you effectively. Develop relationships with cross-functional peers, attend broader company forums, and find mentors outside your direct chain. Your manager's limitations should not become your limitations.
- Protect your energy deliberately. Compensating for a leader's gaps is exhausting. Decide consciously which gaps you'll cover — the ones that protect the team's work and your own reputation — and which you'll let surface naturally. You cannot and should not absorb everything indefinitely.
- Document your own contributions independently. Keep a running log of what you've worked on, decided, and delivered. In an environment where credit is diffuse and attribution unclear, this record is your insurance policy for performance reviews and future opportunities.

- Find allies on the team. You are almost certainly not the only person experiencing what you're experiencing. A quiet, non-toxic solidarity with peers — shared clarity about what's actually happening, without spiraling into complaint culture — makes the situation survivable and keeps you grounded in reality.

## What Makes It Worse

- Becoming the team's therapist. Venting is natural and occasionally necessary. Building a team culture organized around processing how bad the leader is consumes energy, hardens cynicism, and makes it harder to do good work. Keep the venting finite.
- Waiting passively for the situation to change. Incompetent leaders in comfortable roles tend to stay until something forces change — a new senior leader, a business crisis, a wave of attrition. Waiting for that moment while your own career stagnates is a bad trade.
- Going around your manager recklessly. Escalating your manager's incompetence to their manager without a clear, factual, professionally framed case usually backfires. It reads as political, even when it's legitimate. If you do escalate, do it with specific behavioral examples, not frustration.
- Making the incompetence so invisible that it never gets addressed. This is the painful paradox: the better you compensate, the less pressure there is for the situation to change. There is no clean answer here — but it's worth knowing that sustained, excellent compensation is not neutral. It has a cost to you and it delays resolution.

### The Honest Question to Ask Yourself

Is this situation developing you or depleting you? Working under a difficult leader can, in limited doses, build resilience, self-reliance, and political savvy. But if the honest answer after twelve or eighteen months is that you are less capable, less confident, or less engaged than when you arrived — that is not a developmental experience. That is attrition in slow motion. The right response to that answer is a plan to leave, not a commitment to endure.

## What Organizations Can Actually Do About It

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Individual survival strategies help the people living with the problem. They don't fix the problem. Fixing it requires organizational mechanisms — structures and practices that make leadership incompetence harder to hide and easier to address without a crisis forcing the issue.

### 1. Make Skip-Level Conversations Routine, Not Emergency Measures

In most organizations, a skip-level conversation — meeting with your manager's manager — happens either as a perk for high performers or as a signal that something has gone badly wrong. Neither framing is useful. When skip-levels are routine for everyone, twice a year, they become a normal channel for senior leaders to take the temperature of teams they don't directly manage. The patterns that are invisible through a single layer of reporting become visible across a portfolio of teams.

The key is that these conversations must be genuinely safe — not reported back to the intermediate manager as 'your team said X.' Senior leaders who use skip-level information punitively destroy the mechanism immediately.

## **2. Use 360 Feedback With Teeth**

Most 360 feedback processes are exercises in diplomatic vagueness. Respondents know the answers will be shared, sanitize accordingly, and the resulting report tells the leader something between 'you're doing fine' and 'consider being more collaborative.' This is not useful.

Effective 360 feedback is anonymous in a way that is genuinely believed, asks specific behavioral questions rather than rating scales, is reviewed by someone above the leader being assessed, and has explicit consequences tied to patterns — not just 'development goals' that gather dust. When direct reports know their feedback actually reaches the right people and is taken seriously, they give it honestly.

## **3. Separate Upward Performance from Downward Effectiveness**

Victor's QBRs looked great. That's exactly the problem. Most leadership assessment is based heavily on upward performance — how well does this leader represent their team to senior leadership, manage their stakeholder relationships, and deliver in high-visibility forums. These are real skills. They are not sufficient.

Equally rigorous assessment of downward effectiveness — team retention, team development, team engagement, quality of direction, decision velocity — prevents the Victor scenario, where a leader who performs upward adequately becomes invisible as a leadership problem because the downward signals never reach anyone with authority.

## **4. Create Legitimate Escalation Paths That Aren't Career Suicide**

Direct reports know things about their leaders that senior leadership doesn't. The reason this information doesn't travel upward is that the path to carry it is too risky. Building a legitimate escalation mechanism — a confidential HR channel, a trusted ombudsperson function, or a structured engagement survey with follow-up — gives that information a route that doesn't require a direct report to put their career on the line to use it.

The mechanism only works if it demonstrably leads somewhere. If employees see concerns submitted and nothing happens, the path closes permanently.

## **5. Act Before the Crisis, Not Because of It**

The most common pattern: the incompetent leader stays in place until a business crisis, an attrition wave, or a new senior leader forces a reckoning. By then, the cost — in departed talent, missed opportunity, and team damage — has been compounding for years.

Organizations that take leadership effectiveness seriously set explicit standards for what 'performing in this role' means at every level, review those standards regularly, and are willing to make changes before external pressure forces them. This requires senior leaders who are

willing to treat the discomfort of a leadership correction as cheaper than the cost of continued delay — which it always is.

## Quick Reference: The Incompetent Leader Problem

The Signal	The Survival Move (Individual)	The Fix (Organizational)
Directional fog — unclear priorities, reversed decisions	Confirm all direction in writing after every meeting	Routine skip-levels surface what formal channels miss
Shadow structure — team workarounds replace official leadership	Decide consciously which gaps to cover; protect your energy	360 feedback with teeth, reviewed by the right people
Attrition pattern — best performers leave first	Build visibility outside your direct chain now	Separate upward performance assessment from downward effectiveness
Upward/downward divergence — great QBRs, foggy team	Document your own contributions independently	Create escalation paths that are genuinely safe to use
Development vacuum — team skills are flat	Find mentors and growth outside your immediate team	Act before the crisis; set explicit leadership standards at every level

## The Bottom Line

Victor is still at that company. The team that carried him for two years is mostly gone. A new group of people is being onboarded into a structure that will, gradually, teach them the same lessons Elena's team learned — that the official org chart and the actual power structure are different things, that clarity requires work that shouldn't be their job, and that at some point the calculation shifts from 'how do I succeed here' to 'is this somewhere I can succeed at all.'

The tragedy is not that Victor is a bad person. It's that the system around him — the silence of peers, the blindspot of senior leadership, the heroic compensation of his team, the absence of any mechanism that would have surfaced the problem while it was still correctable — made the outcome almost inevitable from the start.

Incompetence in leadership isn't rare. It's structurally produced and structurally protected. Fixing it isn't primarily about finding the courage to have a hard conversation with one person — though that matters. It's about building organizations where leadership effectiveness is visible, measurable, and consequential enough that the Victors of the world are identified early and developed or redirected before the people below them pay the full price of the delay.

***Your team will compensate for your gaps right up until the moment they don't. By then, the cost has already been paid — just not by you.***

#### **Coming Up in Issue #5**

Avoiding Difficult Conversations — The Real Reason Leaders Ghost Hard Conversations, and a Simple Script to Handle Them Like a Pro. We covered accountability briefly in Issue #1. Issue #5 goes deeper: the psychology of avoidance, the conversations leaders most commonly dodge (and why those specific conversations), and a concrete framework that makes the difficult conversation the path of least resistance.

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**Forward it to someone who needs it. You know who they are.**