

"We've tipped over into idiocracy": when incompetents climb the ladder

In a world where indicators and appearances dominate, some managers seem increasingly disconnected from reality.

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In a world where indicators and appearances dominate, some managers seem increasingly disconnected from reality. © NicoElNino / Alamy Stock Photo / <https://www.alamy.com> / Alamy Stock

For the past six years, Pierre has been working as a developer in an IT company. He has mastered the tools, knows the procedures and identifies the weak points. He knows how his colleagues work, where things can go wrong, and when he needs to intervene. So, when the position of manager became available, his colleagues began to hope it would be him. He hadn't asked for anything. But he got caught up in the game. "With everything I'd invested - the time, the energy, this in-depth knowledge of the teams and customers - I thought it would come back to me in the end. That's what kept me going," he says.

A few weeks later, management explained that they had finally chosen another profile. Younger, more at ease with dashboards, scrolling slides and performance indicators. To justify her choice, she drew on the vocabulary of leadership, management training and mastery of reporting. Pierre said nothing. But he finds it hard to conceal his bitterness: "I realize that today, what counts is

no longer what you really know how to do, but how you tell it. You have to know how to put yourself on display, speak the novlangue, nod along even when everything goes wrong, and too bad if it doesn't make sense anymore."

Behind Pierre's story lies an inconvenient truth: in many companies, know-how is no longer enough. The old moral contract - we work well, we're recognized - no longer applies. Danièle Linhart, sociologist and director of research at the CNRS, speaks of a persistent illusion: "We continue to believe that the company values experience and knowledge of the trade. But what is now expected of a manager is no longer to know, but to adjust. Read the signs, adopt the right codes, blend in with the norm. And above all, don't ask the questions that bother you. Merit is no longer measured by competence, but by conformity. And so much the worse if, in the shadows, those who do the work, those who hold up the edifice, remain invisible.

Increasingly distant from operational work

Tristan has been communications manager at a Paris start-up for four years. He occupies one of those hybrid positions, at the frontier between the written word, images and digital technology. Writing, filming, editing, broadcasting: it's all done by two people. Until now, autonomy was the rule, but the arrival of a new manager has turned everything upside down. From now on, you have to be accountable. "This new boss has never written a press release, edited a video or opened a newsletter. He doesn't know what's involved, but he makes decisions. He sets deadlines. With confidence. As if he knows what we're doing and is interested.

A week after taking up his new post, the tone was set: fifteen pieces of content to be produced in four days. "For him, a LinkedIn publication [is something you dictate to ChatGPT between two meetings](#). It's posted and forgotten. Whereas we sell the opposite: a voice, an incarnation, time spent," sighs Tristan. But that time doesn't show up in the dashboards. And as is often the case, what isn't measured doesn't exist. The thirty-something tries not to make it personal. Besides, what he's denouncing isn't a man, but a logic. Not the rise to power of caricatured incompetents, but the rise of those who excel in the art of form.

As is often the case, it all started with recruitment. "The first time we met our new manager, he told us he'd come from an American tech company, and talked about growth, indicators and new methods. We didn't understand a word of it, but our management liked it." What the new boss hadn't anticipated was the price of his promises. Like so many others before him, he leaned where it was easiest: on his teams. I'm well aware that my manager is not responsible for this logic," continues Tristan. But this disconnection... it's mind-boggling! It wastes a considerable amount of time. If we really worked together, we'd be much

more productive. We wouldn't have to waste time explaining what we do, and what we can and can't achieve. Frankly, it doesn't make any sense now. We've tipped over into idiocracy!"

Individual performance indicators

One might think that the nonsense Tristan refers to is simply a regrettable drift in management. Overzealousness, perhaps. That would be reassuring. For sociologist Danièle Linhart, however, it's quite the opposite: "It's a thought-out organization that stands on its own contradictions. It's a mechanical process, the fruit of a slow slide that began over thirty years ago. Jean-Claude Delgènes, economist and founder of Technologia, traces the origins of this shift: "At the end of the 1990s, not only private companies, but also public services, adopted logics from the commercial sector: management by objectives, individualized assessment, results-oriented culture.

In recent years, three letters have come to dominate management committees: KPIs, for Key Performance Indicators. Three letters that sum up a career, cut through a team, assess involvement. They turn work into tables, effort into scores, commitment into metrics. Initially, they were conceived as tools, benchmarks to shed light on grey areas and guide decisions. Gradually, however, they took on a different role, becoming objectives in themselves, points of arrival rather than means. This is what Goodhart's Law sums up: "When a measure becomes an objective, it ceases to be a good measure." The formula is well known. It elicits a few nods - a brief glimmer of lucidity - and then we move on. The action plan is validated. The KPIs run their course.

The real problem is not so much the measurement itself, but the nature of the indicators," explains Alexandre Jost, president and founder of the Fabrique Spinoza, a think tank for citizen well-being. For the most part, they remain hopelessly individual. And yet, we live in a time when individualism - in the literary sense of the word - has taken hold in people's minds, and is breaking down collective intelligence." Merit is perceived as personal, success as a singular journey. In this vacuum, where the individual takes precedence over the group, doubt, intuition and trial and error - the essential elements that forge the human richness of management and that artificial intelligence will never replace - have gradually disappeared from the landscape.

It's against this backdrop that Danièle Linhart highlights another crucial point: to keep brains busy, companies have never been so restless. It spends its time changing software and job descriptions, redefining objectives and merging departments. Every month, a new method, a new promise, a new PowerPoint. We call it "agility". "But if you keep moving for the sake of moving, you forget why you're doing things in the first place," remarks Danièle Linhart. In this

constant whirlwind, where everyone is forced to adapt constantly, meaning slowly dissolves, without anyone really noticing. And for good reason: employees simply no longer have time to think.

The invisible weight of cognitive bias

But that's not all. While the obsession with indicators and constant change partly explain absurd promotions and casting errors, this mechanism conceals a deeper, often overlooked flaw: human bias. Even with the rise of digital technology, behind every evaluation grid, individuals are judging other individuals. We like to believe that our decisions are rational, but in reality, they are often based on an illusion of control.

To function, our brain spends its time sorting, filtering, associating and simplifying. It eliminates detours, erases nuances. Unbeknownst to us, it weaves shortcuts. [Cognitive biases](#) - those invisible mechanisms that help us make quick decisions - discreetly invite themselves into our professional judgments. Here are just a few of the most frequent examples: confirmation bias, which leads us to validate what we already believe; anchoring bias, which gives inordinate weight to the first piece of information we receive; negativity bias, which marks failures more deeply than successes. These are all invisible but powerful filters, which influence the way we evaluate a colleague, select a candidate, or even exclude someone from a promotion.

And then there's [the Dunning-Kruger effect](#). A phenomenon that often goes unnoticed, but whose effects are far-reaching. This mechanism whereby some people overestimate their skills, simply because they can't see what they're missing. A cruel paradox of our times: the less we know, the more competent we believe ourselves to be. In companies, those who assert themselves through their certainties are rewarded, while those who doubt and question remain on the sidelines. Blind trust is preferred to genuine competence. Instant answers to complex questions prevail. In the end, those who really know - the cautious, the humble, the lucid - fade into the background, invisible behind perfectly smoothed appearances.

Finally, perhaps the most insidious of all: the beetle syndrome. The tendency to trust what looks like you. Same degree, same codes, same meeting reflexes. We don't necessarily choose the best. We choose what we recognize. What reassures us. Pierre, without realizing it, is perhaps the silent victim of this. With equal skills, it's often a detail that tips the balance. "In France, the elite is brilliant, but strikingly homogeneous: the same origins, the same schools, the same circles," observes Jean-Claude Delgènes. Where other countries allow a variety of profiles to emerge - scientists, engineers, etc. - we remain faithful to a single mold - which also ends up excluding.

In a changing world, complexity calls for diversity. And by forgetting this, our system deprives itself of an essential part of what makes a collective rich. "This model relies neither on the quality of commitment, nor on the strength of shared intelligence," adds Danièle Linhart. It relies on availability, malleability and docile ambition. It doesn't seek to get the best out of individuals; it wants them to conform. It doesn't matter if they don't make sense, as long as they can be mobilized at any time, for any purpose.

93% disengagement rate

But how far can this system go? At a time when mental health, commitment and trust indicators are deteriorating, it's legitimate to ask: is it already too late? In March 2025, the Inspectorate General of Social Affairs (Igas) leaked a report that was unequivocal: France stands out in Europe for its highly hierarchical management style, with little inclination towards cooperation. And the findings are damning: French employees have one of the lowest levels of trust in their managers on the continent.

This situation is not without consequences. By steering without listening, by changing just for the sake of changing, we end up losing those who were previously responsible for achieving our objectives. Far from being a simple question of productivity, this dynamic has a direct impact on employee well-being. "In France, the workplace accident rate is one of the highest in Europe," points out Danièle Linhart. This figure is no accident: it reveals a system that prevents employees from getting involved in their work environment, shaping their jobs, or pointing out what's wrong.

The refusal to accept professionals as they are, beyond the image expected of them, is one of the driving forces behind disengagement. A report published in 2023 by Gallup reveals that, in France, only 7% of employees say they are truly committed to their work, representing a disengagement rate of 93%. This phenomenon is not limited to a lack of motivation, but is accompanied by growing psychological suffering. The Qualisocial-Ipsos 2024 barometer confirms this: 44% of employees claim to be in psychological distress.

Rethinking the model?

Faced with this situation, it becomes imperative to rethink the managerial model. "The first thing to do to break with this exhausting model is to recreate the collective," explains Danièle Linhart. Because innovation and organizational success are not nourished by isolation, but by exchange and sharing. There is no know-how without transmission, no intelligence without respectful confrontation of ideas.

There was a time in France when we used to say, "We don't have oil, but we have ideas. It embodied our ability to innovate, to think differently, to find solutions where others saw only obstacles. Today, "this strength has dissipated", observes Jean-Claude Delgènes. Excessive competitiveness has divided teams, crushing the spirit of collaboration under dehumanized productivity. Individuals are judged on external criteria, without taking the time to see the wealth of their experience or know-how. "To rethink the system, restore meaning to work and nurture innovation and creativity, and recreate spaces where talent can flourish, we first need to accept an inconvenient truth: very often, it's not the right people who occupy the right places in organizations," concludes Alexandre Jost.

And yet, in the face of this compelling truth, one question persists: is the company ready for self-criticism? Is it ready to let go of its performance indicators, to question its certainties, and to finally listen to those who, far from the conventional path, dare to ask these disturbing questions? Because it's by recognizing our shortcomings that change can really begin. And perhaps, then, those who have not yet taken power - those who take the time to reflect, those who don't always dare but who know deeply and dare to see further ahead - will become the architects of this reversal. Those who have not yet taken power, but who may well one day reinvent it.