

The making of tomorrow's managers

Being a part of the training and skill enhancement industry, no amount of probing can ever decipher all the reasons that account for poor managers. You can unearth several reasons why some people are poorer at managing things than other people and you will find that foremost among them is an individual's personality and background. There are reasons that run concurrently such as an environment that dissuades managers from being effective or atrophy at work due to multiple reasons. However, it would be safe to say that good governance or good management are chiefly a part of your own individual style and personality although some part of being a good manager can also be learnt with practice. Let us decipher the code here. It will take us back to the childhood of the manager. Good managers are first created at home.

A very controversial book dealing with the contentious issue of parenting styles was published in 2011. That book was ***Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*** by Amy Chua. This book opened a controversial debate about child rearing. In a self-mocking and self-deprecating way, the author wove a thread from her strict Chinese upbringing to that of her own parenting style while raising her two daughters. She was pushed to excellence by parents who scoffed at any display of poor responsibility or accountability. She talks about how she had herself verbally pilloried her own daughter till the child learnt a piano piece to perfection. She says that in the course of this episode, she told her daughter to "stop being lazy, cowardly, self-indulgent and pathetic". Now, I'm not condemning or condoning Amy Chua's style of raising kids but let's look at the words Chua uses; Lazy, Cowardly, Self-Indulgent and Pathetic. This could well be a microcosm of symptoms of a failed manager! Let's look at how we become lazy. Most managers do not start out being lazy but end up becoming it. As we climb the ladder of professional success, we lose some of the gumption we had initially brought to our jobs. We get better appraisals, more head count is assigned to us, CXO's start noticing us and we start losing our edge in the maelstrom of figures, reports, ppt's deadlines team evaluations etc. Laziness in this context is not about becoming slower or not wanting to work but rather about an intellectual laziness that creeps into managers where they start sitting more on the fence because that way no one gets hurt. They find themselves more and more in open-ended professional scenarios where often, the parting shot is a hazy "let's get it done". Who will do "it"? How will "it" get done? What resources will be available to get "it" done? By when will "it" get done? These questions are all left open-ended. Where is the accountability? Who has accepted it? Who has taken the responsibility without being asked? These are the defining moments of this scenario. Any number of us who've worked in an office can recall such moments of ambiguity. Infants and toddlers are never lazy but as we get older, for some of us, it becomes easier to give in because the collateral damage does not seem enormous.

When you look at infants and toddlers, they display intrepid behavior. They are unmindful of fear. That is because they have not yet built a motor or muscle memory that teaches them to identify sources of harm that will ultimately lead them to be fearful. I remember my little sister crawling on all fours, unplugging the electrical socket of the refrigerator and proceeding to stick her fingers into the socket. Luckily my mother saw her in the nick of time and gave her a resounding smack on her bottom. I don't

believe my sister has been *that* close to socket ever since! It is good to have some amount fear, it teaches you to look at downsides without pessimism. Fear isn't some visceral negativity but rather a forewarning of a potential downside. Now, imagine that you're so grown up that you've forgotten your natural fearless nature but rely only on your acquired muscle memory nature. This is when you stand the risk of crossing the line from fear to cowardice. If you become an intellectual coward, you will never be able to side with what is right and you will spend disproportionate amounts of time in balancing the apple carts at work. You will shy away from taking a stand because that will mean that you are for something and, by inference, against something else. Children say the silliest of things because they do not fear repercussion. As adults and professionals, we are always looking for ways of *not saying* things as we believe they will tilt some balance of power somewhere. Have good fears not bad fears. Bad fears paralyze and make cowards out of people and cowardice should not be encouraged at a workplace. Too many people spend too much time at work trying not to do seemingly courageous things like asking pointed and direct questions or agreeing with a rival's point of view or pointing out game debilitating laggards! Have the courage to do what is considered insurmountable or too insignificant because thinking fearlessly is often the most basic of things that we have forgotten to do. It is our survival trick as a species but we've let it become relegated.

You should also try and stop indulging yourself more than is needed. We should all love ourselves but not at the cost of losing perspective. A professional journey is not a solo trip. It is a caravan. Collect people who respect you; who can disagree without being disagreeable and who can add strength to your weak points. Do not collect a posse of yes men and women. Too many managers and leaders seem to think that the larger number of people they have in their camp to raise the tempo of affirmation, the more their chances of climbing the ladder. This is a norm in places where business is and always will be conducted as usual. But if you want to be the organization that will wipe out rivals and create great value recall, you must stop treating yourselves with kid gloves. To rest on your laurels is never advisable. Let others tell you how valuable you are but once you've accomplished something, consider it history and move on. Parents of toddlers will tell you how soon their kids stop indulging in their favorite toys or games and quickly move onto the next. The attention span for self gratification is limited and therefore not habit forming at that stage. However, as we grow older, we fall behind in the program.

Being Lazy, Cowardly and Self-Indulgent are interlinked. If you are intellectually lazy, you are likely to indulge yourself more than indulging diverse ideas or thoughts. If you are intellectually self indulgent, then you are likely to be an intellectual coward. If you are intellectually cowardly, you are susceptible to ignoring the very things that demand demonstrable action that'll make you stand out in a crowd. Let us all learn something from our children!