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Special Report

“The Accidental Manager”

Why Growing
Businesses Lose
Consistency
Somewhere Between
30 and 100 People,
and How One Shared
Leadership Standard
Restores It.

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Most Managers Were Never Appointed. They Were Inherited.

Very few growing businesses set out to build a management layer. It tends to assemble itself. The strongest engineer, the account manager who never lost a client, the person everyone already turned to when something went wrong: each of them, at some point, found themselves responsible for a team. The promotion was well deserved in every case. The preparation for it was, in most cases, absent.

This is the accidental manager, and there is nothing unusual about them. They are capable, committed and respected by the people around them, and they lead on instinct for the simple reason that nobody has ever shown them an alternative. In a business of 10 people this scarcely registers, since the owner is present in almost every conversation that matters. Somewhere beyond 30 people it begins to register a great deal. The owner is no longer in the room, and the experience of being led now depends almost entirely on which head of team happens to be doing the leading.

The pattern is so widespread that most owners have long since stopped noticing it. Asked how many of their managers have had any structured preparation for managing, the honest answer in an owner-led business of 70 people is usually 1 or 2. The remainder are doing their best with whatever was done to them earlier in their careers, which is a mixed inheritance at the best of times and a poor foundation for a business that intends to keep growing.

The Senior Team Understands It. The Wider Business Does Not Yet Live It.

Owners describe this stage of a company's life in strikingly similar terms. The business is 80% of the way there. The senior team understands the standard, the ambition and the way things are meant to be done. What is missing is the consistent experience of all that beneath them, where two teams sitting a few metres apart can be having entirely different experiences of the same company.

The natural instinct is to treat this as a communication problem and to answer it with more communication: a refreshed set of values, a new presentation. These rarely land as intended, and the reason is worth being precise about. The message was heard. It reaches people through their manager, and the manager has not been given any means of translating it into how a team is actually run from one Monday to the next.

The missing 20%, in other words, is seldom a gap in skill and almost never a gap in willingness. It is a gap in consistency. The same standard needs to be held by every head of team, on every occasion, rather than by the 2 or 3 who already do so by temperament.

Culture Is What a Business Ends Up With. A Standard Is What It Decides On.

Culture is the word most often reached for at this point, and it is a less useful tool than it appears. Culture is an outcome rather than an input. It is the accumulated residue of a thousand small decisions about who is promoted, what is tolerated and which conversations are had or avoided. It cannot be installed. It can only be shaped, indirectly, through the things that produce it.

A standard is a more practical instrument. It is a small set of specific commitments about how people are led in this business, written down, agreed by the people who will have to hold it, and applied regardless of which manager is involved. How objectives are set and revisited. How feedback is given, and how soon. What happens when someone is not delivering. How a decision taken by the leadership team reaches the people who must carry it out. It is not a poster on a wall. It is closer to an operating manual for leading a team, and it is short enough to be remembered.

The value of the distinction becomes apparent under pressure. When a business is calm, personality is generally sufficient. When it is growing quickly, hiring at speed and adjusting what it sells or to whom, personality fragments. The manager who is naturally good with people goes quiet under load. The one who is good with detail becomes a bottleneck.

Pressure of this kind exposes a lack of preparation, and the uncertainty it creates compounds the problem, as people look to a leader who has begun to doubt their own ability. A shared standard gives every head of team the same thing to return to when their own instincts are exhausted, and it gives the owner something to hold them to that is not merely a matter of opinion.

The Gap Is Consistency, Not Capability.

This matters since most attempts to address the accidental manager begin in the wrong place. They begin with training: a leadership course, a day away from the office, a model with a memorable acronym. Some of it is perfectly good. Very little of it survives contact with the following week, and the explanation is that it was designed to raise capability when capability was never the difficulty.

The difficulty is that 6 people with 6 different understandings of what leading a team involves are each doing it in their own way, and the business is quietly paying for the variance. Some teams receive clear objectives and others receive none. Some people hear about a problem on the day it arises and others discover it at their annual review. Some managers explain why a decision was taken, while others pass it down as an instruction. Every one of those managers may be entirely capable. The business still feels inconsistent to everyone inside it, and inconsistency is the thing good people most often leave over.

Addressing consistency is a different kind of work. It cannot be done alone, by one individual, not if the aim is a standard that holds without relying on any one person to carry it. It is done with the heads of team working together to produce something they have built rather than something they have been handed. And it is judged by a question the business can genuinely answer: whether the experience of being led here has become the same whichever team a person happens to sit in.

The Conversations Managers Avoid Tend to Define the Business.

Every accidental manager has a conversation they are not having. Someone on the team is coasting. Someone is exceptional and is quietly preparing to leave, since nobody has told them so and they can see the imbalance in standards around them. Someone was set an objective in January that has not been mentioned since. The manager is aware of all of this. They are waiting for the right moment, and the right moment is not a thing that exists.

These are not failures of character, and they are not resolved by building confidence. They are failures of rehearsal. A head of team who has never been shown how to open a difficult conversation, how to hold a position without becoming defensive, and how to close with something agreed, will avoid it in precisely the way anyone avoids a task they have never practised. Given a simple structure, and the chance to run it with a peer before running it in earnest, the avoidance largely disappears.

The business tends to notice the difference within weeks. Underperformance is addressed while it is still small. Good people hear that they are valued before they begin to look elsewhere. Objectives become living commitments rather than annual paperwork. None of this required a new manager. It required the existing one to be equipped for the part of the role that nobody described at the time of the promotion.

Carrying the Reasoning From the Boardroom to the Monday Meeting.

A particular kind of gap opens in a growing business between what the leadership team decides and what the wider organisation understands. A decision is made for sound reasons. It arrives with the teams as an instruction. The reasons remain upstairs. People comply, more or less, and quietly conclude that the company has stopped making sense, and they begin to lose sight of how what they do fits into the wider picture.

The senior team is usually unable to see this happening. From where they sit the reasoning was obvious, and they assumed it travelled with the decision. It did not. It passed through 6 heads of team, some of whom explained it well, some of whom conveyed it in a sentence, and one of whom disagreed with it and allowed that to show.

Carrying the reasoning is a habit rather than a talent, and it can be built into the way a business operates. A manager who leaves the leadership meeting knowing they will be expected to explain the decision to their own team, in their own words, within 2 working days, listens differently in that meeting. They ask the questions their team will ask. They test the reasoning where it is thin. The quality of the decision improves before it has left the room, and the organisation beneath it stops feeling like a place where things simply happen to people.

Under Pressure, People Return to Habit. The Habit Must Be Built First.

Anyone who has performed under genuine pressure will recognise the same truth. In the moment, one does not rise to the occasion. One falls to the level of one's preparation. A driver on a wet circuit at speed is not thinking about braking points. That decision was made weeks earlier, in practice, and the body is now simply executing it. Where the practice was not done, the decision is made late, and late is indistinguishable from wrong.

Leadership in a fast-growing business is a pressure environment in exactly this sense. Decisions arrive faster than the time available to consider them. A head of team with a difficult individual, a missed target and a new starter arriving on Monday does not have the capacity to reason from first principles about how they ought to lead. They will do what they have always done. The only question is whether what they have always done was designed or accidental.

This is why a standard has to be built before it is needed and rehearsed before it is tested. A leadership team that has agreed, in calm conditions and in advance, how it will handle underperformance, how it will set objectives and how it will explain its decisions, does not have to work any of this out under load. The habits are already in place. When the business meets its inevitable rough patch, the managers behave predictably, the teams feel the difference, and the owner discovers that the business can absorb pressure without routing every problem back through them.

Time to Lead Has to Be Protected, Not Assumed.

The accidental manager carries one further burden, and it is structural. They were promoted for doing the work, they are still measured on doing the work, and leading the team is something they are expected to accommodate around it. When the week tightens, leading is what gets set aside, since nobody notices for a fortnight and a customer notices the same day.

A business that wants consistent leadership has to make room for it, which means deciding explicitly what proportion of a head of team's week belongs to leading and then defending it. This is uncomfortable, since it means the manager delivers less of the work they were originally valued for. That is rather the point. A head of team who remains the best engineer on the team is a bottleneck with a title. The business needs them to become the reason the other engineers are improving, and that requires hours that will never appear on an invoice.

Writing the Standard. What a Leadership Team Can Achieve in Half a Day.

The practical version of all this is shorter than most owners expect. It does not require a programme, an away day or an outside facilitator to begin. It requires the heads of team in one room for half a day, 4 questions, and an understanding that they will leave with something written down.

The first question is where leadership is inconsistent at present. Not where it is poor, but where it varies. Each head of team describes how they set objectives, how they give feedback, and how they handle someone who is not delivering, and the answers go on the wall. The variance is the problem, and seeing it laid out is usually sufficient to make the case for addressing it.

The second question is what the business will commit to. Take the 3 or 4 areas where the variance does most damage and agree a specific behavioural commitment for each. Not a value, but a commitment. Every person on every team has objectives that were reviewed within the last month. Every piece of feedback that matters is given within a week. Every decision from the leadership meeting is explained to each team by its own head within 2 working days. Specific enough to be checked.

The third question is how each head of team will take the draft back to their own people and ask what is missing. The standard belongs to the managers who must hold it, but the teams who will live under it should be able to recognise themselves in it. This step takes a fortnight and produces a better document than the leadership team could have written alone.

The fourth question is how the business will know it is working. Before the half day, everyone in the business is asked 4 short questions. Whether they are clear on what is expected of them. Whether they hear about the things that matter in good time. Whether they are led in the same way whoever is managing them. Whether they are challenged and held to account. The answers are scored. The same 4 questions are asked again after 90 days. The movement in those figures is the only evidence that counts, and it is evidence the business has gathered for itself.

Where All This Leaves the Owner.

The owner of a business at this stage is usually carrying a quiet concern that the company has grown beyond the point where they can personally guarantee how it feels to work there. They are right, and that point was passed some time ago. The considered response is not to try to be present in more rooms. It is to ensure that the people who are in those rooms are leading to a single standard, built together, rehearsed before it is needed, and measured by the people it is intended to serve. None of this is glamorous, and none of it produces a launch or a moment. What it produces is a business in which the experience of being led is the same across every team, in which difficult conversations are had while they are still small, in which decisions travel with their reasons, and in which the managers who were promoted for being good at the job become, deliberately, good at leading the people who now do it.

That is the missing 20%. It was never a mystery. It was simply nobody's job, and now it is.

About us.

Shrine London provides private advisory and leadership development for owner-led businesses navigating growth, complexity and transition. Our work sits with leadership teams, boards and investors at the moments when the structure, standards and behaviours inside a business need to catch up with the story it takes to market.

Glenn Dobson leads the advisory practice following more than 30 years of building, scaling and selling companies across 22 countries, including a global brand acquired as part of a £35m group. Named CEO of the Year by CEO Monthly in 2021 and 2025, he continues to advise owners and senior teams on growth, control and composure through change.

Claire Johnson leads leadership development. A performance coach with an active motorsport racing licence who has coached world champions, she works with leadership teams on decision-making, consistency and performance under pressure, and is the author of *"The Winning Formula."*

Engagements are selective and fully confidential. Shrine London works quietly, embedding structure and stability into the moments that define an organisation's next chapter. Direct contact with Mr Dobson or Ms Johnson is available on request.

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