

## Mistakes Leaders Unknowingly Make

**W**ithout even realizing it, most business leaders do and say things that send employers into a state where every decision they make is driven by fear. Christine Comaford reveals some of the subtle, yet damaging mistakes managers and supervisors make – and how EA professionals, in their role as management consultants, can help fix them.

Most business leaders understand that the old “command and control” method of management is dead, and that fear doesn’t motivate employees – quite the opposite, in fact. That’s why, for the most part, most people refrain from doing scary things.

Only the worst “bully bosses” make it a practice to scream at an employee, call him or her abusive names, or threaten to fire the worker the next time the coffee is too strong. And yet, according to Christine Comaford, even good leaders unintentionally strike fear in the hearts of their workforce.

More accurately, managers and supervisors strike this feeling into their brains – and the consequences are more dire than employers might realize.

“From time to time we all say or do things that spark unconscious fears in our employees,” says Comaford, author of the book *Smart Tribes, How Teams Become Brilliant Together*, Portfolio/Penguin, June 2013, \$26.95, [www.smarttribesbook.com](http://www.smarttribesbook.com). “The primitive ‘fight, flight, or freeze’ part of the brain takes control. When that happens, when people are stuck in what I call the Critter State, all they can focus on is their own survival.”

In other words, everything that makes people good employees – their ability to innovate, collaborate, and to logically think through problems – goes out the window. All decision

making is distilled down to one single question: *What course of action will keep me safest?*

### From ‘Critter State’ to ‘Smart State’

Obviously, employers need employees to be in control of their whole brain – especially the parts responsible for the emotional engagement and intelligent decision making that lead to high performance. Today’s economy demands it. That’s why Comaford’s business – which teaches leaders how to use the best tactics from neuroscience to get teams unstuck and shift them into their so-called “Smart State” – is booming.

“I regularly see clients who master these techniques and quickly see their revenues and profits increase by up to 200% annually,” she notes. “It just goes to show how pervasive fear in the workplace actually is – and how crippling it can be.”

Comaford’s clients confirm how successful her techniques are at getting clients out of their Critter States and into their Smart Smarts and how that translates into results.

“When I first met Christine, I knew we had to work together, but wasn’t sure what the return on investment in coaching could truly be,” says Sharon McDonald, CEO of Interim Furnishings. “Now I know what it is: I think bigger working with Christine – we will double (or greater) our revenue this year as a result of my increased ability to create new strategies, expand my vision, and see into my blind spots.”

“Christine helped me see it was time to bring on a seasoned COO, scale up my team, and bring them new resources,” she adds. “She helped me create accountability structures and communication for my team so everyone is aligned and charging forward. We’re rapidly growing the company in a safe and sane way while preserving and increasing the fun of our



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culture. In less than 120 days we closed the largest deal in our company's history using the strategy Christine and I created together. I know what's going to happen next – we'll exceed our sales quota. Again. This is now how we roll.”

So, how might managers be inadvertently holding back their teams and crippling their own cultures? What, exactly, are managers doing to send people into “Critter States”? As management consultants, how can EA professionals help? Comaford describes some subtle offenders:

❖ **Managers that “help out” their employees by giving them solutions.** Or, in Comaford's words, managers advocate when they *should* be inquiring. When they consistently tell people what to do instead of encouraging employees to figure things out on their own, managers develop a company full of “order takers” instead of innovators. By training them to always ask, they inadvertently create a workforce of employees who are perpetually “frozen” in their Critter State.

On the other hand, when managers engage employees in solving problems themselves, managers create a sense of safety and belonging, which Comaford says are among the things humans crave most. “Start inquiring and see what happens,” she suggests. “*Ask, ‘How would YOU attack the problem? What impact might your course of action have?’*” After you do this a few times with an employee, he or she will start expecting you to ask questions instead of just giving orders. Then, the employee will typically start coming to the boss with ideas, seeking feedback and validation. After a few of these sessions, a more confident employee will frequently (but still respectfully) come to the manager and say something like, “*I have a plan, here it is, speak now if you're not okay with it, otherwise I'm going to roll with it.*”

❖ **Managers' meetings that are heavy on sharing and point-proving, and light on promises and requests.** Why might a meeting scare employees? Because confusion and

uncertainty create fear, according to Comaford. Meetings that ramble and lack focus send people into the fight-flight-freeze of the Critter State. On the other hand, short, sweet, high-energy meetings with a clear agenda keep everyone in their Smart State.

The key is to understand the five types of communication:

- Information sharing;
- Sharing of oneself;
- Debating, decision making or point-proving;
- Requests; and
- Promises.

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The typical meeting is heavy on the first three types and light on the last two. Ideally, managers should focus on *only* enough information-sharing in order to solicit requests from parties who need something and promises from parties who will fill that need. “Tune up your communication and the result will be meetings that are efficient and effective, and that keep your team happy and humming along to greater accountability and execution,” Comaford says.

❖ **Managers that offer feedback to employees without first establishing rapport.** Because managers have authority over employees, they are often viewed with a certain amount of fear. It isn't that the manager is doing this on purpose – it's just the way a boss/subordinate relationship tends to work. This means that unless a manager can get employees to see him/her as more of a peer than just



someone “in power,” the manager won’t be able to offer proper influence because “the help” will be too busy ensuring their survival to accept feedback.

Comaford has a wealth of neuroscience tactics to help business leaders get inside their employees’ heads and truly establish rapport. The following are a few of them:

- ♦ **Use “what if” approaches.** When a manager uses this preface to a suggestion, he/she removes ego and reduces emotion. The boss is simply curious – not forcing a position, more of a scratching one’s head and pondering. This enables an employee to brainstorm more easily.

- ♦ **Say, “I need your help.”** When the dominant person uses this approach, he/she is asking the subordinate to step up and basically to “swap roles.” This is an especially effective phrase when a manager wants an employee to change his/her behavior or take on more responsibility.

- ♦ **Offer, “Would it be helpful if?”** When an employee is stuck in a Critter State and unable to move forward, the manager should offer a solution to help them see a possible course of action or positive outcome.

- ♦ **Managers that frame “change” the wrong way.** Almost all leaders want – probably *need* – their companies to change. It’s the only way one can achieve growth. Yet, as we all know, people inherently resist change. In fact, according to Rodger Bailey’s groundbreaking work, less than 3% of Americans tolerate change only if it is coached in a specific context. What does this mean? Essentially, it means that managers and other business leaders need to present “change” as merely an improvement to what is already being done. “Seriously, this is the best way to package a change message,” Comaford stresses. “And don’t use the C-word. Say ‘growth’ instead.

“By the way, resistance isn’t necessarily a bad thing,” she adds. “It’s just the first step on the organizational path. But once you clear the resistance hurdle – and it will go fairly quickly when you present change the way I described – you’re well on your way.”

- ♦ **Managers that focus too much on problems rather than on outcomes.** The issue, according to Comaford, lies in seeing *everything* as a problem, which causes anxiety, which leads to a reaction, which leads to another problem. “It’s a self-perpetuating cycle,” she says. “The solution is to switch the focus from problems to outcomes. Instead of asking, ‘What’s wrong?’ or ‘Why is this happening?’ the key is to ask questions such as, ‘What is it that we want?’ or ‘How can we get from step A to step B?’”

Becoming outcome-focused feels very different, Comaford explains. It’s empowering and energizing and fills staff members with confidence. It firmly places them in the Smart State, where possibility, choice, and innovation are abundant. Clients certify that being more outcome-focused works.

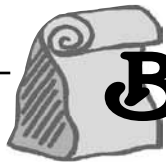
“I have more control over my schedule and more focus on truly ‘moving the needle,’” states Rick Thompson, VP of talent management with Rising Medical Solutions. “The best part is that several other members of our executive team are experiencing breakthroughs of their own. It’s great to share this journey with my peers. We’re developing leaders at all levels of the organization, and employees are seeing more potential for career growth.”

## Summary

After reading this article, did you recognize the business leaders among any of *your* corporate clients? If so, you’re not alone. The good news is that once you help your clients make these changes, they are likely to see dramatic improvements in their businesses.

“All leaders want to outperform, outsell and out-innovate the competition,” explains Comaford. “Most of us have teams that are quite capable of doing so. We just need to stop scaring the competence out of them.” ■

*Christine Comaford is a global thought leader who helps mid-sized and Fortune 1000 companies navigate growth and change. For more information on Christine or her methods, visit [www.christinecomaford.com](http://www.christinecomaford.com).*



## Critical Mistakes Made by Managers ...

The following are 10 critical mistakes made by managers when dealing with problem employees at work:

❖ *Mistake #1* – Failing to set clear expectations or to regularly enforce them;

❖ *Mistake #2* – Letting problems you're aware of fester before addressing them;

❖ *Mistake #3* – Failing to communicate with people about their problems;

❖ *Mistake #4* – Taking the matter (whatever it is) personally;

❖ *Mistake #5* – Playing “gotcha” with troublesome or difficult workers;

❖ *Mistake #6* – Waiting too long to get professional help, such as from an EAP;

❖ *Mistake #7* – Failing to recognize the importance of due process;

❖ *Mistake #8* – Unwillingness to see a problem through to resolution;

❖ *Mistake #9* – Managing employees too much– If employees know how to do the job, for the most part leave them free to do just that; and

❖ *Mistake #10* – Not managing employees enough – Even stellar employees need to be told they're valued and provided with periodic coaching. ■

## ... Signs of Employee Discontent

Working with management to resolve an underperforming employee can sometimes prove to be a fruitless task when the EA professional is called in too late in the game to be of real help.

The good news is; many disgruntled, overwhelmed, or unhappy workers show signs of their discontent. Making managers aware of these signs and working with them sooner, rather than later, can help a great deal. Employee behaviors to be on the lookout for include:

❖ The employee comes in later or leaves earlier than usual;

❖ The employee withdraws from extra projects;

❖ The employee exhibits declining performance, or does just enough to get by;

❖ The employee complains a lot;

❖ Co-workers complain about the individual;

❖ The employee makes wistful references about other companies;

❖ The employee makes nostalgic references to employees who have left; and

❖ The employee talks about feeling “burned out.” ■

*Sources: Harvard Business Review article, “Employee Retention: What Managers can Do” and Bob Gilson, a retired government labor and employee relations director; FedSmith (www.fedsmith.com).*