The unmanaged state

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Read Blog 1 of 3 on why we need better management for a better future.

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Much of management today feels like guessing in the dark. We dress it up with overused buzzwords, dashboards, and KPIs—but behind the curtain, many organizations are still “muddling through” using management techniques developed in the industrial 20th century. Decisions are reactive rather than proactive. Strategies are stuck in the past. And leaders? Too often, executives become overwhelmed by firefighting instead of shaping the future. More often than not, they chase the next big thing—currently AI—instead of simply managing better.

This is the unmanaged state.

It’s not chaos but it’s not mastery either. ‘Unmanaged’ becomes the default mode most organizations operate in, especially when facing uncertainty or complexity. It is a state where management is taken for granted because the generally accepted principles were pounded into executives at universities worldwide. This provides cover to poor leaders where leadership relies more on personal heroics than systemic thinking and where performance is driven by organizational inertia rather than insight and innovation.

But here’s the good news. There’s another way.

What Does “Unmanaged” Really Mean?

When we use the term “unmanaged,” we don’t mean “anarchy” or “no rules.” We mean *the absence of effective management*. It is about applying systems and structures that no longer fit the

disruptive world of the 21st century. Management techniques designed for an industrial age of predictability now struggle to adapt in a fast-paced, interconnected, digital economy.

In unmanaged organizations, you'll find:

- Leaders overwhelmed with complexity, but lacking the tools to deal with it.
- Teams siloed by functions or hierarchy, missing the bigger picture.
- Decisions made by gut instinct, not data or insight.
- Culture shaped by inertia rather than intention.

Now imagine a different kind of organization. One where decisions are made with clarity. Where organizational learning is constant and where performance is driven by purpose, not pressure.

That's what we mean by mastery in management.

"Muddling Through" Is Not a Strategy

Let's not blame leaders. Most are doing their best within outdated systems inherited from the 1900s. They are told to "be agile," "think digital," and "transform" but they're rarely given a clear map or modern tools to work with. They inherit decades-old models that reward short-term wins over long-term growth.

So, what happens? We get the illusion of control. Leaders check boxes, roll out initiatives, and attend leadership trainings but the core of how the organization *actually works* remains untouched. And when something breaks (which it often does), the response is to work harder, not smarter.

This cycle of working harder instead of thinking differently is the essence of muddling through.

Why We Need Better Management

If we want better organizations, we need better management. Not more management. Not tighter control. Better.

Management is the invisible infrastructure of an organization. It is how we coordinate work, create value, learn, and adapt. When it's broken—or simply outdated—no amount of leadership charisma

can compensate.

Better management is not about control. It’s about clarity, coherence, and capability.

When we get these attributes right, the results are transformative:

- Teams become self-driven instead of micromanaged.
- Strategy becomes a dynamic living process, not a PowerPoint deck.
- Learning becomes natural, not a forced initiative.
- Innovation emerges from collaboration, not luck.

That is the future we should be aiming for. A future where management is no longer the problem but a competitive advantage.

The Turning Point: From Management as Maintenance to Management as Mastery

Traditional management techniques were designed to maintain stability, keep costs low, reduce variation, optimize output. It worked great in factories. But today, organizations need to evolve, adapt, and learn in real time.

Mastery in management is the shift from *maintenance* to *movement*. It means:

- Seeing management as a craft, not a checklist.
- Designing systems that grow and adapt with the organization.
- Enabling leaders to lead with awareness, not just authority.

And here’s the exciting part. Mastery in management isn’t just for tech startups or elite innovators. It’s for any organization ready to move beyond muddling through to make management a competitive advantage.

Many mid-sized European companies are already leading the way.

Their success doesn’t come from following trends, it comes from rethinking management itself. Increasingly, large enterprises and public sector organizations are beginning to follow suit.

The Inner Game of Management

One of the breakthroughs that makes this shift possible is applying the Inner Game to management. Originally developed by Timothy Gallwey for sports and personal performance, the Inner Game is about focusing attention, awareness, and trust.

In the context of management, the *Inner Game* means helping leaders see what they couldn’t see before. It’s less about teaching new skills and more about unlearning habits that no longer serve their purpose.

When leaders learn to focus attention on what really matters, they make better decisions. They stop reacting and start reflecting. And that’s where transition toward mastery begins.

From Muddling to Mastery: What’s Next?

Over the next two blogs, we will explore how to move from muddling through to mastery.

In Blog 2, we’ll dive into the *nine features of mastery in management*; the principles that define high-performing, future-ready organizations. These include being diagnostic, systemic, human, and regenerative, among others.

Then in Blog 3, we’ll take you through the *journey to mastery*: how real organizations transform their management through assessment, adoption, adaptation, evolution, and ultimately, perfection. We’ll also show how a powerful new tool—Organization Twins— that is helping leaders identify and confront blind spots and redesign how their organizations truly work.

If you’re a leader who senses, there’s a better way or if you’re tired of pretending the old ways still work, this series is for you because the unmanaged state is a choice and better management is within reach.

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About Management Insights

Founded by Lukas Michel, Management Insights draws on more than 25 years of research and practice to help people understand how their organizations work. The Organization Twin brings organizational patterns into view for reflection, dialogue, and informed choice.

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