Nine Warning Signs of Unmanaged Organizations

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A Diagnostic Guide for When Leaders Need the Survey, the Twin,

and the Unmanaged Methodology

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Most organizations don’t collapse suddenly.

They drift.

Not because their leaders lack intelligence or ambition, but because unmanaged patterns slowly accumulate inside their management system. These patterns remain unseen for years — until performance erodes, tensions rise, collaboration falters, or strategy fails to take hold.

The problem is not leadership failure per se.

The problem is *unmanaged management*.

In the book *Unmanaged*, we describe nine attributes that distinguish mastery from muddling through. But there is an equally important question:

What does unmanaged actually look like in practice?

How do you know when your organization is drifting into accidental, fragmented, exploitative, or detached routines?
This article offers a practical checklist — a mirror leaders can hold up to their organization. If these patterns appear, they signal unmanaged states strong enough to justify the Global Executive Survey, an Organization Twin diagnosis, and the methodology of the Journey to Mastery.

These tools do not fix the problems —

they surface them.

And surfacing is the precondition to transforming.

1. Mechanistic (vs. human)

The unmanaged organization treats people as replaceable instruments rather than contributors.

Signs you're in an unmanaged state

- Employees follow rules even when they make no sense.
- Performance is measured in tasks completed, not value contributed.
- People hide problems rather than raise them.
- Decisions ignore human judgment in favor of rigid procedures.
- Workload expectations exceed human capacity.
- Conversations revolve around compliance, not learning.
- Motivation declines while reporting increases.

When mechanistic patterns dominate, organizational energy depletes.

This is a strong trigger for a survey to reveal whether human capabilities are blocked — and where.

2. Fragmented (vs. holistic)

Unmanaged organizations operate in pieces. Everyone optimizes locally; no one sees the whole.

Signs you're in an unmanaged state

- Strategy is unclear or interpreted differently across units.
- Initiatives overlap, conflict, or compete for resources.
- Each function pursues its own priorities.
- No shared mental model of the organization exists.
- Cross-functional collaboration depends on interpersonal goodwill instead of system design.

- Teams fix symptoms but miss root causes.

Fragmentation is often invisible from inside.

An Organization Twin makes it visible — often shockingly so.

3. Accidental (vs. systemic)

In unmanaged settings, management is not designed — it simply happens.

Signs you're in an unmanaged state

- Roles and responsibilities are unclear or outdated.
- Processes emerge through habit rather than intention.
- Policies exist "because they always have."
- Decisions depend on personalities, not rules.
- Meetings have no clear purpose or cycles.
- The management system has never been reviewed as a whole.

Accidental management is the norm in many organizations — until performance suffers.

The Twin reveals how much of your management system is accidental rather than designed.

4. Ordinary (vs. unique)

Unmanaged organizations copy what others do — often just because it seems safer than thinking for themselves.

Signs you're in an unmanaged state

- "Best practices" are adopted without examining fit or context.
- New frameworks or models are implemented because competitors use them.
- Consultants define solutions instead of the leadership team.
- Benchmarking replaces diagnostic inquiry.

- Management rituals feel generic, not distinctive.
- Employees say: “This feels like every other company.”

Ordinary management destroys competitive advantage.

The Global Executive Survey helps leaders rediscover what makes them unique — and what doesn’t.

5. Disjointed (vs. integrated)

Unmanaged organizations rely on coordination instead of coherence.

Signs you’re in an unmanaged state

- Too many meetings to align decisions.
- Decisions escalate because nobody owns the end-to-end outcome.
- KPIs between units conflict or create tension.
- Teams feel overworked but underproductive.
- Initiatives stall due to unclear dependencies.
- Strategy exists, but execution stumbles.

Disjointedness is not a collaboration issue —

it is a management design issue that a Twin can map and clarify.

6. Concentrated (vs. distributed)

Unmanaged organizations centralize decisions, information, and authority.

Signs you’re in an unmanaged state

- Too many approvals required for even simple decisions.
- Leaders at the top act as bottlenecks without realizing it.
- Talented people cannot act without permission.
- Escalations are frequent.
- Teams wait instead of deciding.
- Front-line insight is ignored in favor of hierarchy.

Concentration suffocates adaptability.

The Twin shows where decision rights are misaligned with knowledge — the root cause of slow response.

7. Random (vs. diagnostic)

Random management is decision-making without insight — the pure definition of unmanaged.

Signs you're in an unmanaged state

- Leaders rely on gut feeling more often than data.
- Opinions carry more weight than evidence.
- Solutions treat symptoms, not causes.
- Initiatives are launched without diagnostics.
- Teams jump from problem to problem without learning.
- Debates are emotional rather than informed.

Randomness is the most common unmanaged pattern.

The Survey provides the diagnostic clarity leaders need before taking action.

8. Exploitative (vs. regenerative)

Unmanaged organizations extract performance faster than they build capability.

Signs you're in an unmanaged state

- Chronic overload and burnout signals.
- Pressure replaces development.
- High turnover among capable people.
- Continuous firefighting leaves no time for learning.
- Teams deliver results but become weaker doing so.
- "Just push harder" becomes the default strategy.

Exploitative patterns are easy to deny — until people start leaving.

A Twin makes energy flows visible and shows where renewal is

missing.

9. Detached (vs. interactive)

Detached leaders manage from distance, dashboards, and assumptions.

Signs you're in an unmanaged state

- Leaders rely on filtered reports rather than direct engagement.
- Meetings involve one-way presentations rather than dialogue.
- Feedback loops are slow, formal, or superficial.
- Issues are discovered too late.
- Teams feel unseen or unheard.
- Experiments are rare; everything is a project.

Detached management learns slowly — and reacts even slower.

Interactive dashboards in the Twin Cockpit bring leaders back into real-time contact with reality.

When These Patterns Appear, It's Time for Fact-Based Insight

Across all nine attributes, the presence of unmanaged practices is not a failure —

it is a signal.

A signal that the management system needs:

- diagnosis (Global Executive Survey),
- visualization and shared language (Organization Twin),
- and a guided method to redesign (Unmanaged methodology).

These tools do not serve to criticize leaders.

They serve to illuminate the system leaders have inherited, shaped, or tolerated — often without recognizing the

consequences.

The greatest risk is not unmanaged behavior.

The greatest risk is being unaware of it.

What Leaders Gain When They Identify These Practices Early

When leaders discover unmanaged practices through the survey and the twin, three things happen:

1. They see reality with clarity

The Twin reveals the structure behind the symptoms.

2. They gain a shared language

Leaders can finally discuss management issues without politics, defensiveness, or ambiguity.

3. They are empowered to choose

The Unmanaged methodology turns insights into small, deliberate improvements — the seeds of mastery.

Management mastery is not about perfection.

It is about visibility, intention, and learning.

A Final Reflection

Unmanaged practices are not moral flaws.

They are systemic patterns — patterns that grow automatically when no one pays attention to management itself.

This checklist helps leaders notice what they normally overlook.

And once you see unmanaged states, you can no longer unsee them.

The nine attributes provide the diagnostic map.

The Survey provides the evidence.

The Twin provides the mirror.

The methodology provides the path.

The rest is choice —

the choice to stop muddling through and start mastering

management.

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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