The Erosion of Management –

How Accountability Became Optional

Procurement and Supply Chain Management Made Simple.

Foreword – Whatever Happened to Management?

Management has changed almost beyond recognition since 1945. The modern manager has access to instant communication, detailed performance data, professional Human Resources (HR) support, formal governance, sophisticated technology and increasingly Artificial Intelligence (AI). Earlier generations worked with far less information and considerably fewer protections for employees. Yet a difficult question remains: with so much more knowledge, structure, and support available, why can accountability sometimes feel less certain than in supposedly less sophisticated organisations?

The answer is not that Britain enjoyed a golden age of management. Post-war workplaces could be rigid, discriminatory, paternalistic and resistant to challenge. Hierarchy frequently protected poor senior decisions as effectively as it enforced discipline below. Nevertheless, authority and responsibility were often more visibly linked. Managers were expected to decide, direct, and answer for results, while operational failure in factories, transport, energy, or public services was usually hard to disguise behind presentation or process.

Prosperity then altered expectations. By 1959, real household disposable income was 22% higher than in 1950, while Harold Macmillan's observation that people had "never had it so good" captured a society becoming wealthier and less deferential. Over subsequent decades, employees gained stronger legal rights, greater voice and higher expectations of fairness. Those were essential advances, but organisations also had to learn how legitimate managerial authority should operate when obedience could no longer simply be assumed.

Successive decades added further layers. Industrial conflict challenged managerial authority in the 1970s; market reform and privatisation sharpened commercial accountability during the 1980s; governance, targets and professional functions expanded through the 1990s and 2000s. After the financial crash, managers were increasingly expected to deliver more with less while sustaining engagement, wellbeing and organisational trust. Each development addressed real weaknesses, yet each also created new ways for responsibility to become dispersed.

Modern evidence makes a simple decline narrative hard to sustain. Office for National Statistics (ONS) research found the average structured management score rose from 0.49 in 2020 to 0.55 in 2023, while 89% of surveyed businesses reported taking action to improve management quality. Management techniques have therefore not disappeared. The deeper concern is whether managers increasingly have systems without ownership, processes without judgement, and responsibility without the authority or willingness to impose consequences.

That is the central question: not whether managers should become tougher, but whether management should once again mean something definite. Good management should combine fairness with standards, employee voice with decision-making, psychological safety with challenge and compassion with accountability. Britain does not need to recreate the 1950s workplace. It needs to restore the principle that someone must ultimately own the outcome, explain the decision, and act when performance repeatedly falls short.

What Do We Mean by the Erosion of Management?

The erosion of management does not mean that managers in the United Kingdom (UK) have become less intelligent, less educated or less technically capable. Modern managers possess information, technology and support their post-war predecessors could scarcely imagine. The concern is narrower and weightier: whether organisations have gradually diluted the expectation that managers exercise judgement, confront poor performance, allocate responsibility and accept personal accountability for the results produced by the people and resources they control.

The distinction matters because structured management practices have not simply deteriorated. ONS found the average management-practice score among surveyed businesses rose from 0.49 in 2020 to 0.55 in 2023, on a scale running from zero to one. Larger businesses generally scored better than smaller ones. Yet the use of key performance indicators (KPIs) remained the weakest measured dimension, suggesting that process can improve without necessarily sharpening operational accountability.

Management can become more sophisticated while simultaneously becoming less decisive. An organisation may have competency frameworks, appraisal forms, employee surveys, dashboards, governance committees, and detailed policies, yet still tolerate missed deadlines, weak supervision, or repeated underperformance. The danger arises when management activity is mistaken for management effectiveness. Meetings held, reports completed and procedures followed are inputs; productivity, service, cost, quality and improvement remain the outputs against which management should ultimately be judged.

The post-war story is not a morality tale in which soft ones replaced tough managers. Earlier management often tolerated discrimination, unsafe working conditions, and arbitrary authority, which modern organisations rightly reject. Parliament progressively strengthened protections through legislation including the Race Relations Act 1965, Equal Pay Act 1970 and Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974. Better management must preserve those gains while still expecting managers to exercise legitimate authority.

The central test is whether accountability has become negotiable. Managers should neither bully nor dominate, but management without consequences eventually ceases to be management. When responsibility is dispersed among HR, committees, policies, consultants, and senior executives, individual managers can become process coordinators rather than owners of outcomes. The erosion happens gradually: difficult conversations are postponed, standards become elastic, high performers compensate for weaker colleagues, and organisational underperformance becomes nobody's responsibility.

Management Is Not the Same as Leadership

Management and leadership overlap, but they are not interchangeable. Leadership sets direction, builds confidence, and persuades people to move toward a purpose; management turns that purpose into organised work. It sets responsibilities, schedules resources, measures performance, resolves problems and intervenes when standards are not met. Organisations can survive temporarily with inspirational leadership and weak management, but eventually invoices, rotas, contracts, budgets, stock, projects and customer commitments expose the difference.

The confusion became increasingly fashionable because "leadership" sounds strategic while "management" can sound administrative. Yet a hospital ward, manufacturing plant, housing association, warehouse or procurement team cannot be run on vision alone. Somebody must decide who does what, by when, to what standard and at what cost. More importantly, somebody must act when the answer is unsatisfactory. Accountability begins where responsibility is attached to a named person with sufficient authority to deliver.

That distinction is visible in contemporary evidence. ONS measures structured management across continuous improvement, performance indicators, targets and employment practices.

In 2023, businesses with 250 or more employees averaged 0.68 on its management scale, compared with 0.51 for those employing 10 to 19 people. The scale can support formal systems, but they remain useful only when managers understand what the information means and use it to improve performance rather than merely report it.

Public-sector management adds another dimension because accountability runs in several directions simultaneously: to service users, taxpayers, ministers, elected members, regulators and Parliament. ONS research covering 2023 found public-sector organisations more likely than private-sector businesses to report best practice in target use, with 71% of local-government organisations reporting the highest category. Targets can clarify accountability, but they can also encourage managers to optimise the measure while missing the purpose behind it.

The strongest managers therefore combine leadership with managerial discipline. They explain why work matters and monitor whether it happened. They coach capable employees and confront repeated failure. They delegate authority without delegating accountability. They distinguish an honest mistake from persistent carelessness and support innovation without accepting unmanaged risk. None of those behaviours requires an authoritarian workplace; they require clarity about obligations and a willingness to make sometimes unpopular decisions.

A recurring weakness in modern organisations is promoting excellent specialists into management and then rewarding them for appearing "leadership-like" rather than teaching them how to manage. Technical expertise alone does not create competence in workload allocation, performance conversations, absence management, budgeting, supplier challenge or employee development. When organisations celebrate leadership while neglecting these disciplines, managers can gain status without mastering the practical mechanisms that actually produce organisational performance.

The Manager Britain Inherited in 1945

The manager Britain inherited in 1945 had been shaped by war, hierarchy and scarcity. Wartime production required command, standardisation, rationing and tight allocation of labour and materials. The return to peace did not immediately restore a free commercial environment; government controls still shaped consumption, investment, imports, and prices. Managers were accustomed to clearer chains of command than many workplaces now accept, but they operated with limited data, slower communications and cultures often built around rank.

The state also became a much larger owner and organiser of economic activity. The Labour government elected in 1945 nationalised the Bank of England in 1946 and, by 1950, legislation had transferred coal, telecommunications, transport, energy supply and steel into public ownership. The National Health Service (NHS) began in July 1948, bringing hospitals and other services into a new national framework. Management responsibility increasingly existed inside large public systems as well as private businesses.

That expansion created a distinctive managerial settlement. Senior managers in nationalised industries had to reconcile operational performance with political objectives, employment considerations, investment constraints and public-service obligations. Accountability could therefore extend beyond profit, but it was also harder to isolate. A railway, mine, or electricity undertaking might be judged simultaneously on reliability, employment, pricing, investment, and national policy. Operational competence existed inside structures where strategic authority ultimately rested with ministers and public boards.

Private-sector management remained markedly paternalistic. Large manufacturers, banks and retailers often relied on long service, internal promotion and clearly graded status. The model could generate loyalty and deep operational knowledge, but it also excluded talent. Women had carried immense wartime responsibilities yet faced occupational segregation after demobilisation, while racial discrimination remained lawful across much employment. The

apparent decisiveness of post-war management therefore carried social costs that should not be confused with managerial excellence.

What 1945 nevertheless established was a powerful expectation of duty. Scarcity made trade-offs visible, reconstruction made outcomes tangible and managerial authority generally carried responsibility for delivery. The weakness was that accountability often flowed downward more readily than upward. Employees were expected to obey, while senior managers and public institutions could use hierarchy to insulate themselves. The later challenge was to democratise the workplace without losing the useful connection between authority, responsibility and consequences.

The 1950s – Hierarchy, Duty and the Post-War Settlement

The 1950s combined the fading memory of austerity with rising production, investment, and consumption. House of Lords Library data show growth above 4% annually from 1953 to 1955, followed by slower expansion below 2% from 1956 to 1958 and another rise above 4% in 1959. Managers therefore worked in a "stop-go" economy, where the government repeatedly tightened or loosened demand to protect sterling, employment, and price stability rather than allowing uninterrupted expansion.

Public investment was unusually important. It averaged 7.3% of national income during the decade, almost three times the interwar level of 2.7%, while total investment rose from 10.9% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 1950 to 16.1% in 1959. For managers in construction, energy, transport and manufacturing, the post-war state was not simply a regulator: it was a major customer, owner and allocator of capital, shaping priorities and capacity.

The fiscal background also disciplined decision-making. Public debt stood at about 200.6% of GDP in 1950 but fell to 112.4% by 1959, helped by economic growth and relatively contained borrowing. That reduction did not make management easy; shortages, exchange-rate pressures and inflation still constrained organisations. Retail-price inflation reached 9.2% in 1952 before falling sharply. Managers learned to operate within limits that were visible, external and difficult to negotiate away.

Industrial relations nevertheless remained capable of disrupting production. ONS records show 8.4 million working days lost to labour disputes in 1957 and 5.3 million in 1959. The numbers were far below the later peaks of the 1970s, but they show that the supposedly orderly 1950s workplace was not uniformly compliant. Managers still had to bargain, schedule around disruption and preserve output in heavily unionised industries where collective relationships mattered enormously.

Hierarchy gave managers authority, yet custom usually bounded it. Supervisors often rose through the occupation they managed and understood its machinery, materials and routines first-hand. That could make performance conversations more concrete: output, defects, downtime and attendance were visible rather than abstract. The weakness was clear. Command structures could discourage challenge from below, protect mediocre seniority, and mistake obedience for competence, letting poor decisions survive unchallenged.

The 1950s therefore offer no lost managerial paradise. They do, however, reveal an environment in which management was closely connected to physical delivery. Coal had to be mined, trains run, houses built, and goods produced with fewer analytical tools than managers have today. Management could exercise responsibility harshly and distribute it unfairly, but operational failure was difficult to disguise. Later decades improved employee rights and management science while making organisational responsibility increasingly diffuse.

"Never Had It So Good" – Prosperity Changes Expectations

Harold Macmillan's 1957 observation that "most of our people have never had it so good" captured a genuine change in living standards, not merely political rhetoric. By 1959, real household disposable income was 22% higher than in 1950. Rising wages, expanding

consumer credit and greater availability of household goods changed employees' expectations of work. Management could no longer rely indefinitely on gratitude for employment alone; workers increasingly expected progress in pay, conditions and personal consumption.

Prosperity altered the balance inside organisations. Near-full employment made labour comparatively scarce, strengthening employees' ability to move jobs or bargain collectively. Managers therefore faced pressure to retain skills while controlling wages and productivity. Macmillan himself warned that prosperity could prove unsustainable if inflation undermined competitiveness. The managerial question was clear: how could organisations share gains with employees while ensuring rewards reflected output rather than passed through as higher prices?

The transformation was visible in investment. Total investment increased from 10.9% of GDP in 1950 to 16.1% by 1959 as private investment strengthened alongside substantial public programmes. New factories, roads, housing and consumer markets increased managerial complexity. Growth required supervisors who could coordinate larger workforces, mechanisation and supply networks. Yet many organisations still relied upon experience and hierarchy rather than systematic management education, widening the gap between enterprise scale and managerial sophistication.

Consumer prosperity also changed how businesses were judged. Manufacturers competed not merely to produce scarce goods, but to satisfy customers choosing between alternatives. The British Motor Corporation launched the Mini in 1959, emblematic of a market becoming more design-conscious and consumer-oriented. Managers had to reconcile cost, quality, volume and innovation. The transition rewarded organisations that could turn engineering capability into products people wanted, while exposing structures too slow or inward-looking to adapt.

The important managerial legacy of the late 1950s was expectation. Employees expected rising living standards; customers expected choice; government expected growth without destabilising inflation; organisations expected managers to deliver more within increasingly complex systems. Success itself raised the standard against which management would be judged. Prosperity did not immediately weaken accountability, but it shifted employment away from pure command toward negotiation, retention, and persuasion, laying the groundwork for the social changes of the 1960s.

The 1960s – Social Change Enters the Workplace

The 1960s brought strong economic growth alongside a profound challenge to inherited authority. GDP growth averaged 3.5% across the decade, unemployment averaged 2.7% and inflation 3.5%, while real disposable household income per head ended about 25% higher than at the close of the 1950s. Yet prosperity coexisted with declining profitability and intensifying social change. Managers increasingly faced employees less willing to accept status, discrimination or workplace rules simply because they were traditional.

Competitive pressure was becoming harder to ignore. The estimated economy-wide rate of return on capital fell from 28.8% in 1960 to 19.4% in 1967, while the UK share of global exports declined from 8.1% to 6.4% between 1960 and 1969. West Germany and Japan were rebuilding formidable industrial positions. British managers were therefore tested not only by domestic labour relations, but also by competitors improving productivity, quality, and manufacturing capability.

The government repeatedly responded with a "stop-go" policy, and sterling eventually forced a larger adjustment. In November 1967 the pound was devalued by about 14.3% against the United States (US) dollar. Exports strengthened and the balance of payments reached surplus by 1969, but imports became dearer and purchasing power was squeezed. Managers could not treat economic policy as distant background: exchange rates, inflation and credit conditions altered material costs, investment decisions, wages and competitiveness.

Social expectations changed just as sharply. The Race Relations Act 1965 prohibited racial discrimination in public places, while the 1968 Act extended protection into employment and housing. These measures began dismantling practices that earlier managers could exercise with little legal constraint. The shift was essential, but it also marked a broader transformation: managerial discretion increasingly had to operate within explicit legal rights. Authority became more accountable, documented, and contestable rather than accepted through rank.

Ford Motor Company's Dagenham plant demonstrated how workplace expectations were changing. In 1968, women sewing machinists struck after their jobs were graded below those of male colleagues and they received 85% of the male rate. Their action helped build political momentum towards the Equal Pay Act 1970. For management, the lesson extended beyond pay: employees increasingly challenged whether classifications, rewards and decisions were substantively fair, not simply whether established procedures had been followed.

The 1960s therefore weakened unquestioned hierarchy without making management unnecessary. Quite the opposite: competition, legislation and employee voice demanded better managers. Some organisations interpreted reduced deference as reduced managerial authority rather than a requirement to justify decisions competently. The strongest response was evidence-based management: clear standards, defensible decisions and fair treatment. The weaker response was avoidance, allowing disagreement itself to become a reason not to decide. That distinction would grow.

The Expanding State and the Professional Manager

The expanding post-war state did more than enlarge government; it changed the scale and character of management. By June 1973, estimated UK public-sector employment stood at 6.541 million, including 4.027 million people in services such as health, education and government. Large public organisations required layers of planners, administrators, engineers and operational managers. Accountability increasingly involved reconciling professional standards, ministerial priorities, budgets and public expectations rather than satisfying a single owner or customer.

Nationalised industries were themselves immense employers. Parliamentary figures show public corporations employed about 1.947 million people in 1967. British Steel Corporation, created that year by bringing together major steel producers, initially employed about 268,500. Such scale encouraged professional administration, but it could also distance decisions from operational consequences. When ownership, policy, finance, and delivery sat in different institutional layers, responsibility for failure became easier to explain collectively and harder to attach personally.

Professional management education developed partly in response. London Business School was founded in 1964, while Manchester Business School opened in 1965 as one of the country's first major business schools. The Industrial Training Act 1964 created a Central Training Council and Industrial Training Boards; by 1970, 27 boards covered industries from engineering to construction and catering. Management was becoming something to study systematically, not merely a status earned through seniority.

That professionalisation was valuable. As technology and scale increased, organisations needed better financial analysis, workforce planning, operations research, and investment appraisal. Yet professionalisation created a subtle risk: management could become separated from direct responsibility for work. The more specialists, advisers and functional departments surrounded the line manager, the easier it became to treat decisions as products of "the system". Expertise should improve judgement; it should not provide a mechanism for ownership to disappear.

The expanding state therefore contributed both capability and complexity. It created national infrastructure, healthcare, training and professional careers on a scale earlier generations had not known. It also accustomed managers to environments where objectives could multiply, and trade-offs could be political as well as commercial. The lesson is not that public ownership

automatically weakens management. Accountability becomes harder when success has several definitions, making clear objectives and named responsibility more important.

The 1970s – When Management Met Industrial Power

The 1970s transformed workplace power. Working days lost to labour disputes rose from 11.0 million in 1970 to 23.9 million in 1972, largely because of the miners' strike. At the same time, unemployment passed one million in January 1972 for the first time since the 1930s. Managers were squeezed between powerful collective bargaining, rising costs, political intervention and weakening economic performance. Authority still existed, but exercising it increasingly required negotiation across competing centres of power.

The Industrial Relations Act 1971 attempted to impose a new legal framework, including a National Industrial Relations Court and restrictions on union immunities, but major unions boycotted it. That failure exposed a central management problem: formal authority is ineffective without legitimacy and enforceability. Organisations could have rules and contracts yet still fail to secure cooperation. Managers learned that outcomes depended not only on hierarchy but on relationships with shop stewards, unions, government and employees.

Inflation intensified every conflict. The economic shock of 1973–75 pushed inflation to extraordinary levels, and UK output fell sharply; ONS estimates indicate GDP contracted 7.7% from its early-1974 peak to the early-1975 trough. Wages, materials, energy and financing costs moved rapidly, turning annual budgets into moving targets. Managers could not simply preserve margins through routine control. They had to bargain over pay while customers resisted price rises and government worried about inflation.

British Leyland became an emblem of the decade's management difficulties. The 1975 Ryder Report envisaged investment of about £1.5 billion at constant prices, with government taking a majority stake. By 1978, Parliament was told that since Ryder, £800 million of public money had been committed, with £625 million already paid. Capital shortages mattered, but so did productivity, product strategy and workforce relations. Funding could buy time; it could not substitute for effective management.

The state's own finances also imposed pressure. By end-September 1976, foreign-currency borrowing by the UK public sector since 1974 was equivalent to £5.6 billion when borrowed, or £7.3 billion at October 1976 exchange rates, with annual interest then estimated around £0.6 billion. The government also negotiated support from the International Monetary Fund. For managers, the message was uncomfortable: neither state support nor bargaining strength could indefinitely protect organisations from economic reality.

The decade therefore demonstrated the necessity and limits of managerial authority. Employees needed protection; unions provided countervailing power, and legislation such as the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 imposed responsibilities that modern management rightly accepts. Yet where decisions became hostage to permanent negotiation, management could lose the ability to manage. Accountability weakened whenever leaders attributed poor outcomes entirely to unions, government, inflation or markets instead of confronting what remained within their control.

The Winter of Discontent and the Crisis of Authority

The Winter of Discontent concentrated years of tension into a national crisis of confidence. ONS data record 29.5 million working days lost to strikes in 1979, the highest annual total since 1926 and driven mainly by widespread public-sector disputes. Trade-union membership also reached its historical peak of 13.2 million that year. The visible issue was pay, but beneath it lay a deeper question: who held practical authority in the workplace.

The government's attempt to restrain pay increases to around 5% collided with bargaining realities. Ford Motor Company endured a nine-week strike before reaching a settlement worth about 17%, after which government sanctions briefly affected discretionary purchasing and assistance. The episode illustrated how public policy, union power and corporate management

could pull in different directions. Managers were expected to control pay and productivity while political constraints limited their negotiating room and prolonged costly industrial confrontation.

Public services then became the most visible battlefield. Refuse collection, hospitals, local authorities and other services were disrupted as employees sought settlements above government guidelines. The managerial damage extended beyond lost working days. Once supervisors and executives could not secure basic continuity, public confidence weakened. A manager whose instructions could not be implemented was still formally responsible, but responsibility without sufficient authority became increasingly hollow, encouraging explanations through constraint rather than ownership.

Yet the lesson should not be simplified into an argument that unions alone caused weak management. Many disputes reflected inflation, restrictive pay policies, poor communication and longstanding grievances. Management sometimes failed to modernise production or build credible relationships with employees. The Ford case shows both extremes: management unable to negotiate freely and employees willing to impose severe operational pressure. Effective accountability requires discretion, but also the competence and legitimacy to use it.

The political consequences were profound. The 1979 general election brought a government determined to alter the balance among unions, markets and management. The next decade would be less tolerant of explanations rooted in inherited structures. Competition, financial return and productivity would become stronger tests of performance. The pendulum was about to swing from negotiated restraint toward managerial prerogative, creating efficiency gains but also new risks as commercial measures dominated definitions of success.

The 1980s – Markets, Competition and Management Responsibility

The 1980s deliberately changed the terms on which managers operated. Inflation stood at 18.0% in 1980, and the Bank Rate had reached 17% in November 1979, while policy shifted towards controlling inflation rather than preserving full employment at almost any cost. Businesses faced stronger pressure to earn returns, cut capacity and compete. Managers were increasingly expected to justify resources commercially, making profitability, productivity and cash generation more explicit tests of organisational competence.

The adjustment was severe. ONS data show manufacturing jobs falling from about 6.7 million in 1979 to 5.2 million in 1983. Entire communities were disrupted as businesses closed plants, reduced labour and shed outdated capacity. Management regained room to reshape operations, but accountability became harsher because failure could mean redundancy or closure rather than another round of support. The decade restored consequences, though employees and industrial regions often bore them most heavily.

Industrial relations remained confrontational, most dramatically during the 1984–85 miners' dispute. In 1984, the economy lost 27.1 million working days, with the miners' dispute accounting for about 82% of that total. Yet the longer-term direction was clear. Union membership had peaked at 13.2 million in 1979 and then fell sharply through the 1980s and early 1990s, altering the balance of workplace power in favour of management.

British Steel illustrates the scale of restructuring. Parliamentary data show a net loss of £1.784 billion in 1979–80, with 166,400 UK employees and productivity of 13.2 man-hours per tonne of liquid steel. By 1986–87, employment had fallen to 52,000, productivity improved to 6.2 man-hours per tonne, and the organisation recorded a £178 million profit. The human cost was enormous, but the transformation was equally difficult to dismiss.

The philosophy also reshaped public management. Managers were asked to distinguish activities government needed to own from those that could face competition or contracting. Value for money became a stronger part of the managerial vocabulary, alongside customer service and measurable outputs. The risk was that financial discipline could narrow judgement too far. A manager can meet a cost target by deferring maintenance, reducing resilience or shedding capability, creating apparent improvement while transferring expense into tomorrow.

The strongest lesson from the 1980s is not that markets automatically create good managers. Markets make consequences harder to postpone. Management improved where sharper incentives were combined with operational knowledge, investment and clear responsibility. It failed where immediate financial measures displaced judgement or restructuring became an end in itself. The decade restored the legitimacy of managerial decision-making, but it also began another shift: from accountability for running an organisation towards accountability expressed through numbers.

Privatisation and the Return of Commercial Discipline

Privatisation shifted managerial accountability from political stewardship to shareholder, customer, and regulatory scrutiny. Parliamentary figures show gross sale proceeds of about £3.916 billion for British Telecom in 1984, £5.434 billion for British Gas in 1986, £900 million for British Airways in 1987 and £2.5 billion for British Steel in 1988. Ownership changed, but the bigger managerial change was that capital markets could now price performance continuously and punish weak expectations.

The scale of withdrawal from direct state ownership was substantial. Nationalised industries employed about 1.849 million people in 1979, or 6.9% of the working population, compared with 798,000, or 2.8%, by 1988. Some of that reduction reflected privatisation rather than job destruction, but it altered managerial incentives. Executives who had answered through ministers and public boards increasingly faced investors, debt markets, regulators and competitors, each demanding clearer evidence of performance.

British Airways provides a useful case study because improvement preceded the sale itself. Parliamentary figures show a pre-tax loss of £108 million in 1982, followed by profits of £74 million in 1983, £185 million in 1984, £191 million in 1985 and £195 million in 1986. The 1987 flotation valued the airline at £900 million and was heavily oversubscribed. Privatisation crystallised commercial discipline, but management restructuring had already done much of the operational work.

Commercial discipline also created new tensions. A privatised utility could no longer rely on ministerial protection in the same way, yet customers still depended on essential services, and competition was sometimes limited. Regulation therefore became part of accountability. Managers were not simply told to maximise profit; they balanced shareholder returns, service obligations, investment requirements, and regulatory expectations. The old political complexity did not disappear. It was translated into licences, price controls and performance commitments.

The enduring lesson is that changing ownership sharpens accountability only when objectives remain clear. A manager cannot sensibly be responsible for everything at once. Privatisation made some consequences more immediate, but it also encouraged organisations to quantify success through financial outputs. That was useful where earlier structures had obscured cost and productivity. It became problematic where managers learned to manage the measure rather than the underlying service, a behaviour the target-driven 1990s would amplify.

The 1990s – From Manager to Corporate Professional

The 1990s inherited recession but gradually produced a more stable, professionalised management environment. Inflation rose to 9.5% in 1990, and unemployment reached 9.9% by 1992, yet by the decade's end inflation was lower and growth steadier. Managers increasingly used personal computers, management information systems, formal budgets, and professional functions that produced more data than earlier generations had. Decision-making became faster, documented and easier to compare across business units.

Corporate governance also tightened after scandals exposed weak boards and inadequate oversight. The 1992 Cadbury Report established principles that London Stock Exchange listing requirements incorporated and introduced the enduring "comply or explain" approach. It recommended clearer separation between board leadership and executive management,

stronger non-executive representation and audit committees. Accountability was shifting from the heroic chief executive to systems of challenge, assurance, and disclosure designed to make senior management answerable for decisions.

The public sector changed in parallel. The 1988 Next Steps programme moved operational functions into executive agencies with defined objectives and performance targets. By May 1991, 50 agencies had been established, with ministers expecting nearly half of all civil servants soon to work on that basis. The Citizen's Charter followed in 1991, emphasising published standards, information, choice, remedies and value for money. Public management borrowed private-sector language: customers, outputs, targets and accountable chief executives.

Professionalisation changed the manager's identity. Promotion increasingly rewarded qualifications, transferable competencies and the ability to work across functions, rather than decades spent mastering one operation. That broadened perspective and opened management to people once excluded by closed career ladders. Yet it could also weaken operational intimacy. A manager fluent in strategy, finance and presentations might know less about the actual work than the supervisors and employees whose performance they were expected to judge.

The decade also strengthened HR as a distinct organisational function. Recruitment, appraisal, training, redundancy, equality and employee relations became more formally governed, reflecting legal obligations and better employment practice. This reduced arbitrary treatment and gave managers specialist support. It also created ambiguity: line managers could begin treating people management as something HR owned. As difficult performance decisions were routinely referred elsewhere, accountability for managing people could shift away from managers.

The corporate professional of the 1990s became more capable, connected and controlled than the traditional post-war manager. Boards adopted governance codes; public bodies adopted service standards; managers gained computers, spreadsheets, and specialist advice. The paradox was that each improvement introduced another interface between responsibility and action. Governance could challenge executives, but committees could diffuse decisions. HR could improve fairness, but managers could outsource confrontation. Information could illuminate performance, but it could soon dominate it.

Black Wednesday and the Return of Economic Reality

Black Wednesday on 16 September 1992 was a concentrated lesson in the limits of managerial and political control. The UK had entered the European Exchange Rate Mechanism (ERM) in 1990 at a central rate of £1 to 2.95 deutschemarks, hoping external discipline would reinforce anti-inflation policy. By 1992, however, domestic recession, rising unemployment and German monetary conditions made that commitment increasingly difficult to defend without imposing further economic pain.

On the day, the UK raised interest rates from 10% to 12%, and announced a further increase to 15% for the following morning, before cancelling it. Sterling still came under overwhelming selling pressure, and the government suspended ERM membership. The Treasury's cost of defending the exchange rate was later estimated at £3.3 billion. Formal commitment had collided with market reality, and reality won in hours.

The economic context made the policy increasingly untenable. Inflation had fallen to 3.7% by 1992, but unemployment had risen from 7.1% in 1990 to 9.9%, while GDP growth averaged minus 0.2% from 1990 to 1992. Remaining inside the ERM constrained the freedom to cut interest rates further. After the exit, sterling depreciated, and rates fell, helping exports, consumption and recovery. Discipline remained necessary; the chosen mechanism had become counterproductive.

For managers, Black Wednesday offers a broader lesson in accountability: persistence is not

competence. Organisations often defend failing targets, projects, or strategies because reversing them seems like admitting weakness. Yet accountability should include recognising when assumptions have changed. A manager who continues an uneconomic contract, unproductive process, or unrealistic forecast merely to preserve consistency shows no resolve. Good management requires the courage to change course while staying accountable for the objective.

The episode also helped reshape British economic governance. It damaged confidence in discretionary exchange-rate management, but the recovery that followed strengthened interest in clearer policy and performance frameworks. The management parallel is striking. When trust in judgement weakens, organisations often respond by creating rules, metrics and controls intended to make decisions more objective. The 1990s increasingly followed that route, producing stronger transparency but also laying the foundations for management by target, indicator and spreadsheet.

Management by Target, KPI and Spreadsheet

By the late 1990s, managers in both sectors were increasingly expected to make performance visible through targets, scorecards and spreadsheets. That was an advance over vague assurances. A number attached to cost, quality, delivery or productivity allows challenge and comparison. The problem begins when measurement replaces management. A target describes one aspect of desired performance; it cannot capture every trade-off, explain every cause or remove the need for managerial judgement.

Central government embraced this approach explicitly. Public Service Agreements were introduced in 1998 to state what departments intended to achieve and to strengthen accountability for resources. In 1998–99, 136 executive agencies and four departments operating on Next Steps lines were set more than 1,200 key targets. Ninety-one large executive non-departmental public bodies reported against more than 650 additional targets. Measurement was becoming government infrastructure rather than an occasional management tool.

The attractions were obvious. Ministers could compare delivery against promises; boards could question trends; managers could identify variation and taxpayers could see whether money produced results. Properly designed KPIs translate strategy into operational expectations. Poorly designed ones create theatre. Employees learn what gets counted, managers focus resources on the reported measure, and unmeasured activity that matters can become secondary. The spreadsheet may then become accurate while the organisation it describes becomes less effective.

The National Audit Office (NAO) repeatedly emphasised that performance information depends on data quality, integration with planning, and measures that support, rather than distort, frontline work. Later reviews found performance systems could improve accountability but imposed collection burdens and sometimes lacked robust validation. That tension was built into target management from the beginning. More information does not automatically produce better decisions; it can increase confidence in poor decisions when the metric itself is incomplete.

The modern evidence remains revealing. In 2023, ONS found that, across four dimensions of structured management, continuous improvement scored highest at 0.80, while KPIs scored lowest at 0.42. Employment practices improved substantially, yet performance measurement lagged. The finding complicates any claim that management has become more bureaucratic or more data-driven. Many organisations have extensive systems, but disciplined use of meaningful performance information remains uneven, especially where accountability is hard to define.

Targets should therefore support accountability, not replace it. The accountable manager asks why a number moved, what behaviour produced it, what unintended consequences followed and what corrective action is required. The unaccountable manager reports the number,

explains the variance and waits for the next cycle. That distinction marks a decisive stage in management erosion: responsibility shifts from the decision-maker to the process that records it, allowing administration to masquerade as control.

The Rise of HR and Process Management

The personnel department gradually became HR, reflecting a much broader organisational role than payroll, recruitment and industrial relations. The professional body itself symbolised the change: the Institute of Personnel and Development received its Royal Charter in 2000 and became the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD). By October 2003, more than 37,000 full members, fellows and companions had been awarded chartered status, strengthening HR's claim to professional authority.

The operating model changed as well. During the late 1990s and 2000s, many organisations separated transactional work into shared services while creating HR business partners and specialist centres of excellence. The influential model associated with Dave Ulrich sought to move HR from administration towards organisational strategy. Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) systems, corporate portals and outsourcing supported that transition, promising lower processing costs while leaving specialists more time to influence workforce planning and organisational performance.

Employment law simultaneously became more formal and extensive. The Employment Rights Act 1996 consolidated key statutory protections, while later measures on working time, minimum wages, discrimination, and family rights increased the matters managers needed to understand. This was not unnecessary bureaucracy: clearer rights restrained arbitrary decisions and improved consistency. Nevertheless, managers increasingly operated alongside specialist HR advice, documented procedures, and formal approval routes before making consequential decisions about employees.

That professional support created an unintended temptation. A manager facing poor performance could say the matter was "with HR", as though responsibility had transferred with the paperwork. Yet HR can advise on fairness, evidence, process and legal risk; it cannot observe every missed deadline, weak decision or behavioural problem. When line managers relinquish ownership, a protective function becomes an organisational waiting room where difficult decisions can remain unresolved indefinitely.

The development of HR therefore illustrates modern management's central paradox. Professionalisation improved employment practice, legal compliance, and access to expertise, but it could also widen the gap between performance and consequence. The best organisations use HR to strengthen managerial judgement, not replace it. Accountability remains with the manager who allocates work, observes performance, and owns results, while HR helps ensure intervention is proportionate, lawful, evidenced, and fair.

The 2000s – Growth, Credit and the Professionalisation of Everything

The early 2000s appeared to validate increasingly sophisticated corporate management. The UK experienced almost sixteen consecutive years of economic growth after the 1991 downturn, the longest continuous expansion on record. Real GDP grew by 4.5% in 2000 and 3.0% in 2007. Stable growth, relatively low inflation and expanding financial services encouraged confidence that better policy, governance and risk techniques had made severe economic disruption less likely.

Credit amplified that confidence. Bank of England research shows UK household debt rising from about £500 billion in 1992 to £1.5 trillion in 2007. Relative to annual disposable income, household debt increased by roughly 60 percentage points to almost 160%. Rising house prices and easier mortgage finance made leverage appear manageable while asset values increased. Managers, investors and consumers could therefore mistake favourable conditions for permanent improvements in judgement, productivity or risk control.

Professionalisation spread through almost every organisational function. HR gained chartered

status, procurement became more strategic, project management expanded, compliance teams grew and information technology connected previously separate activities. Consultants flourished alongside them. The NAO found that seventeen central government departments spent about £904 million on consultants in 2006–07, while the wider UK consulting market expanded rapidly as organisations bought specialist expertise rather than maintaining every capability internally.

Technology reinforced the trend. Consultancy associated with information technology generated about £1.635 billion for members of the Management Consultancies Association in 2005, compared with £748 million in 1998. Integrated systems promised a single organisational view of finance, people, purchasing and operations. Used well, these tools exposed problems earlier. Used poorly, they created the illusion that because information was captured in a system, someone must necessarily understand, challenge, and act on it.

The public sector embraced comparable disciplines through programme management, targets, outsourcing and specialist commissioning. These were rational responses to organisations becoming larger and more technically demanding. Yet every new profession also created another boundary across which responsibility could be transferred. A project problem belonged to the programme office, a staffing problem to HR, a contractual problem to procurement and a control weakness to risk or internal audit. Coordination improved, but ownership could become fragmented.

Growth concealed many weaknesses because rising revenues, credit and asset prices provided room for mistakes. A mediocre investment can look successful while markets rise; excessive debt can appear efficient while refinancing remains cheap. The managerial test arrives when conditions reverse. The 2000s showed that organisations can employ highly qualified specialists, sophisticated systems, and extensive governance while still making collectively disastrous decisions when no one with sufficient authority insists that uncomfortable evidence override organisational optimism.

When Process Began to Replace Judgement

Process is indispensable to competent management. Procurement competitions require transparent evaluation; recruitment should apply consistent criteria; disciplinary decisions require evidence and fairness; major investments need governance. Standardisation reduces arbitrary treatment and enables organisations to learn. The problem begins when compliance with the procedure becomes the definition of success. A manager can follow every prescribed step and still reach a poor decision if nobody asks whether the underlying assumptions, evidence or outcome make sense.

Central government's experience with consultants illustrates the distinction. The NAO found that seventeen departments spent more than £1 billion on consultants and interim managers in 2009–10, yet management information remained poor. Most departments did not routinely assess consultant performance or whether the work had delivered benefit. The purchasing process could therefore exist without a reliable answer to the most basic managerial question: what value did the expenditure actually create?

The same danger appears in performance management. Forms, ratings and improvement plans provide structure, but the structure cannot substitute for a manager identifying what is wrong. If objectives are vague, evidence is weak, or feedback is postponed, an immaculate process merely documents indecision. Conversely, informed judgement without procedural fairness creates legal and ethical risk. Mature management therefore requires both: a defensible process and a person prepared to reach a defensible conclusion.

Process can also become psychological protection. Saying "policy does not allow it", "the system requires it" or "the committee decided" reduces the personal exposure associated with judgement. Sometimes those statements are entirely correct. The problem is relying on them out of habit when discretion actually exists. Accountability erodes when managers discover that following the route is safer for their careers than questioning whether the route is

producing the right destination.

The objective should never be to return to arbitrary management. It should be to restore judgement inside process. Rules define boundaries, specialists contribute expertise and systems preserve evidence, but managers must still interpret circumstances, balance competing objectives and own decisions. A procedure is successful only when it improves the quality, fairness or consistency of an outcome. Once completing the procedure becomes the outcome, administration has displaced management rather than supported it.

The Financial Crash – Management's Crisis of Credibility

The financial crisis exposed the limits of professionalised management with extraordinary force. UK GDP fell 6.3% from peak to trough, while redundancy levels rose 160% to 311,949 between early 2008 and spring 2009. Unemployment subsequently increased from 5.2% in early 2008 to 8.4% by late 2011. Institutions that had presented themselves as technically sophisticated suddenly required public intervention, turning a banking failure into a wider crisis of confidence in management, governance and regulation.

Northern Rock provided the first unmistakable warning. After the 2007 run on deposits, the government guaranteed depositors and wholesale creditors, and the bank entered public ownership in 2008. The NAO later noted that, even while receiving public support, Northern Rock continued to write mortgages at up to 125% of a property's value. Formal controls existed, yet commercial judgement and challenge had failed to keep pace with an increasingly fragile funding model.

Royal Bank of Scotland (RBS) presented the crisis on a larger scale. The government ultimately invested approximately £46 billion. The Financial Services Authority's 2011 report identified weak capital, dependence on short-term wholesale funding, credit losses and the acquisition of ABN AMRO with inadequate due diligence. It concluded that poor decisions by management and the board caused the failure, pointing to deeper deficiencies in management, governance and culture rather than an unforeseeable external shock.

HBOS offered an even clearer lesson about accountability. The Prudential Regulation Authority and Financial Conduct Authority later concluded that the board and senior management bore ultimate responsibility. They pursued an inappropriate strategy and failed to challenge a business model dependent on continued growth without sufficient regard for risk. Regulators identified important weaknesses, but supervision also relied too heavily on assurances, controls, and apparently cooperative relationships rather than sufficiently challenging the underlying substance.

The taxpayer consequences made those failures impossible to classify as private mistakes. The government acquired a 43% interest in Lloyds Banking Group during the crisis and later returned the group fully to private ownership in 2017; excluding financing costs, the shares sold for more than their purchase price. RBS remained a much larger and longer exposure. Management decisions made in boardrooms therefore transferred immense risk onto the public balance sheet when confidence collapsed.

The crisis damaged the proposition that expertise automatically produces accountability. Banks had risk committees, compliance functions, models, auditors, and experienced directors, yet serious weaknesses survived. The lesson was not that governance had no value, but that governance becomes ceremonial when challenge is weak. A sophisticated organisation can fail for a simple managerial reason: powerful people keep pursuing a strategy while those able to question it either cannot, will not, or are not heard.

The 2010s – Doing More With Less

The 2010s opened under fiscal pressure. In 2010–11, central government departments cut real spending by 2.3%, equivalent to £7.9 billion, compared with the previous year. The NAO warned that much larger reductions lay ahead, with departments expected to reduce spending by a further 19% over four years. Managers were asked not merely to administer smaller

budgets, but to redesign services while preserving politically and operationally important outcomes.

Staffing changed accordingly. The NAO reported that Civil Service numbers fell 18%, from 492,000 in March 2010 to 405,000 in December 2014. By March 2014, the annualised salary bill was £11.13 billion, £2.49 billion lower in real terms than four years earlier. Cost reduction was measurable; whether capability reduced proportionately was much harder to establish. Managers inherited wider spans, thinner specialist capacity and increasing pressure to prioritise relentlessly.

Across the economy, the public sector's share of total employment fell from 21.9% in 2010 to 16.8% by 2019. Those numbers partly reflected classification changes and private-sector employment growth, but the direction remains important. Managers in public bodies increasingly worked within narratives of efficiency, transformation and "doing more with less". In some services, this stimulated innovation; elsewhere, savings from vacancies, deferred maintenance, or reduced preventative activity created costs that appeared later.

External expertise did not disappear. Government controls initially reduced spending on consultants and temporary staff by around £1.5 billion annually, but the NAO later found expenditure had risen again by between £400 million and £600 million from its 2011–12 level while permanent workforces were shrinking. The pattern illustrated a recurring management problem: reducing headcount can improve the visible cost line while creating subsequent dependence on externally purchased capability.

Austerity therefore sharpened accountability while sometimes weakening the capacity needed to exercise it. Managers were judged simultaneously on savings, delivery, and workforce engagement, often with less organisational slack. The strongest redesigned work around priorities and stopped lower-value activity. The weakest distributed additional workload across fewer people. "Doing more with less" can describe genuine productivity, but it can equally describe hidden deterioration until backlogs, turnover, service failures or emergency expenditure reveal what was deferred.

The Productivity Puzzle

The defining economic problem of the 2010s was that employment recovered far more convincingly than productivity. Before the 2008 downturn, UK labour productivity growth had been close to its long-run rate of around 2% annually. Afterwards, output per hour grew exceptionally slowly. ONS described the resulting "productivity puzzle" as one of the country's central economic questions because productivity ultimately supports wages, profits, competitiveness, taxation and public services.

By 2015, ONS estimated that productivity was around 16% below the level implied had its pre-2007 trend continued. That gap cannot sensibly be attributed solely to managers. Economists have examined weak investment, changes in finance, labour-market composition, measurement difficulties, regional differences and the survival of lower-productivity businesses. Nevertheless, management matters because capital, technology and skills create value only through decisions about how work is designed, measured, improved and coordinated.

The management evidence reinforces that connection without proving simple causation. ONS research finds a statistically significant relationship between stronger structured management practices and productivity: a 1% increase in labour productivity is correlated with a 0.02 increase in management-practice score. In its survey, 89% of businesses reported taking action to improve management quality, though methods ranged from employee consultation and formal training to management consultancy and internally designed experiments.

The puzzle also exposes the weakness of equating longer hours or higher employment with better performance. Productivity concerns output relative to inputs. A team can appear busy while producing little additional value if processes are duplicated, decisions repeatedly

escalated, or poor performance remains unresolved. In procurement, more approvals do not necessarily improve productivity if they are unnecessary. Management creates productivity partly by deciding what work should stop and what should continue.

Formal management practice did not collapse during the decade. ONS data for Great Britain showed average structured management scores of 0.50 in 2016 and 0.48 in 2019, a broadly stable picture rather than a sharp decline. Managers had not suddenly forgotten established techniques, so their disappearance cannot explain the productivity problem. The deeper question is whether organisations translated those techniques into sufficiently decisive changes in resources, behaviour and priorities.

The productivity puzzle therefore belongs at the centre of any discussion about management erosion. If living standards ultimately depend upon producing more value per hour, managers cannot be assessed solely by employee sentiment, procedural compliance or budget adherence. Those indicators matter, but they are incomplete. The management profession must eventually answer an output question: after accounting for capital, technology and external conditions, did the decisions under managerial control make the organisation materially more effective?

When Employee Engagement Became a Management Objective

Employee engagement became a defining management idea in the late 2000s and 2010s. The 2009 MacLeod Review for government identified four broad enablers: clear strategic narrative, engaging managers, employee voice and organisational integrity. The proposition was not that employees should always be happy. People who understand purpose, receive effective management, can contribute ideas, and trust organisational behaviour are more likely to commit discretionary effort toward organisational success.

Government adopted engagement measurement extensively. The first full Civil Service People Survey took place in 2009 and created an engagement index alongside nine related themes. The median engagement benchmark rose from 58% in 2009 to 63% in 2019, while the median score for the "my manager" theme increased from 64% to 71%. Measurement gave leaders information about employees' work experience that earlier generations of managers rarely had.

This was a genuine improvement where engagement became a diagnostic tool. Low scores could expose weak communication, mistrust, unmanageable workloads or poor leadership. Employee voice could also identify operational problems before senior management saw them. The error was to turn engagement into an objective measure detached from performance. If managers become reluctant to challenge employees because a difficult conversation might reduce a survey score, the instrument intended to strengthen management can inadvertently discourage it.

Engagement is also not synonymous with agreement. A capable manager may make decisions employees dislike: rejecting a pay request, changing a process, reallocating work or confronting poor performance. Employees can remain engaged when such decisions are explained, consistently applied and perceived as legitimate. Conversely, an organisation can generate pleasant survey responses while tolerating weak execution. Sustainable engagement rests on fairness, competence and meaningful work, not on removing every source of disappointment or challenge.

The most useful legacy of engagement thinking is reciprocal accountability. Managers should listen, explain, support, and give employees genuine opportunities to contribute. Employees should understand objectives, perform agreed responsibilities and respond constructively to reasonable feedback. When only the first half survives, engagement becomes managerial appeasement. When only the second survives, it becomes command-and-control. Good management requires both, creating a workplace where voice is respected without making every managerial decision subject to popularity.

The Manager Who Became a Facilitator

Modern management increasingly emphasised coaching, facilitation and empowerment. Much of that change was beneficial. Knowledge workers often understand specialist problems better than their managers, and frontline employees frequently see service failures before executives do. For example, NHS improvement programmes have encouraged leaders to trust staff, share responsibility, and communicate openly with senior management. A manager who insists on personally controlling every decision can therefore suppress expertise, initiative and speed rather than improve accountability.

HR evolved in the same direction. The CIPD describes the people profession as moving from transactional administration towards strategic partnership, organisational development, engagement and change. Line managers were likewise encouraged to coach rather than command. The underlying idea was sensible: adults generally perform better when expectations are clear, but they retain meaningful discretion over how work is accomplished. The problem arises when empowerment is interpreted as management withdrawing from decisions that genuinely require managerial authority.

Facilitation is a method, not a complete job description. A facilitator helps a group examine options and reach understanding; a manager remains accountable when consensus does not emerge. Budgets still require choices, conflicts require resolution, and not every priority can rank first. When managers believe their role is merely to convene discussion, unpopular trade-offs can circulate through meetings without ownership. Consultation then becomes a way to delay rather than improve decisions.

Matrix structures intensified that temptation. Employees could serve projects, professions, and operational teams simultaneously, while managers depended on colleagues they did not directly control. Such structures can mobilise scarce expertise effectively, but accountability becomes vulnerable when authority is unclear. A missed commitment can be attributed to another workstream, stakeholder or governance forum. Skilled managers therefore make interfaces explicit: who recommends, who decides, who delivers and who remains answerable when the combined system fails.

Public-service collaboration demonstrates both sides. Integrated services often require councils, health bodies, charities and contractors to work across institutional boundaries. No single manager can issue instructions to everybody involved. Facilitation, negotiation and relationship-building are therefore essential competencies. Yet collaborative systems still require named decision rights and escalation routes. Shared purpose does not mean shared accountability for every decision; when everybody is collectively responsible, practical responsibility can disappear precisely when a difficult choice emerges.

The facilitator-manager is therefore valuable when facilitation expands information before judgement. The erosion begins when it replaces judgement. Good managers ask, listen, coach and empower, but they also decide, prioritise, challenge and intervene. Authority exercised respectfully is not a failure of inclusion. Employees deserve managers who can give direction when circumstances demand it, rather than managers who repeatedly return difficult questions to the team because making the final decision risks disagreement.

Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials and Generation Z

Generational labels provide an attractive shorthand for explaining workplace change. Baby Boomers are commonly associated with post-war expansion, Generation X with restructuring and deindustrialisation, Millennials with digitalisation and the financial crisis, and Generation Z with social media, pandemic disruption and hybrid work. Those experiences can matter because labour markets, technology and institutions shape expectations. They do not, however, establish that millions of people born within an arbitrary period possess a common managerial personality.

Research strongly cautions against that conclusion. A 2018 study of workplace attitudes found

more than 98% of variance occurred within generations rather than between them, while score distributions overlapped by more than 79%. Other reviews argue that apparent generational differences frequently combine age, historical period and birth-cohort effects that cannot be cleanly separated. The evidence therefore does not support treating a person's generational label as a reliable predictor of commitment, resilience or managerial ability.

What does change is the environment in which managers learn. A manager starting work in the 1970s encountered powerful unions and high inflation; someone promoted in the 1990s faced restructuring, personal computing, and formalised HR; a manager entering after 2008 experienced weak wage growth, tighter regulation, and economic insecurity. Generation Z's early employment years included the pandemic and rapid normalisation of virtual communication. Those experiences influence skills and expectations without determining individual character.

Intergenerational workplaces can generate friction when employees interpret behaviour through stereotypes. Younger colleagues may see established practices as unnecessarily hierarchical; older colleagues may interpret requests for flexibility as reduced commitment. Research on workplace stereotypes has found perceptions that Millennials have a weaker work ethic and Baby Boomers weaker technological capability, although actual differences are far less clear. Once managers accept stereotypes as evidence, they risk managing categories rather than individuals.

The more useful question is not which generation caused management decline, but what each period taught managers to regard as normal. Every generation inherits institutions built by predecessors and modifies them. Baby Boomers did not invent hierarchy, Millennials did not invent employee engagement, and Generation Z did not invent hybrid work. Accountability weakens when organisations stop teaching managers how to manage; birth dates offer a convenient explanation, but organisational choices provide an actionable one.

Did Everybody Really Get a Prize?

The phrase "everybody gets a prize" captures a widespread suspicion about modern childhood: that protecting children from losing supposedly produced adults who expect recognition without corresponding achievement. It is a powerful story because management inevitably involves unequal outcomes. Some candidates are not appointed, some employees outperform others, and some proposals fail. People who cannot tolerate disappointment will struggle with those realities. The difficulty is that the generational explanation is rhetorically stronger than the evidence.

Research does not demonstrate that Millennials or Generation Z became systematically weaker workers because participation awards existed. Studies of generational attitudes generally find differences much smaller than stereotypes imply, with most variation occurring within the same labelled generation. A major 2023 review concluded that convincing evidence for distinct, objectively measurable generations remains lacking and that many observed differences are better explained through age, period or other social influences.

That does not make the underlying cultural question irrelevant. Children and employees learn from incentive structures surrounding them. If every result receives indistinguishable praise, information about relative performance becomes less useful. The workplace equivalent is not a school trophy but a performance system in which almost everybody is rated satisfactory, objectives lack consequences, and managers avoid differentiating contribution. Such an organisation can produce the psychology attributed to a generation, regardless of anyone's birth year.

Conversely, losing alone does not build resilience. People learn most when outcomes connect to useful feedback, another opportunity, and a realistic path to improvement. Effective management therefore neither humiliates employees nor pretends that every contribution is equivalent. It distinguishes effort from outcome and potential from current performance. An unsuccessful tender, missed target or unsuccessful promotion can become development if

somebody explains honestly why the result occurred and what would materially improve the next attempt.

The "prize" argument also risks absolving organisations of responsibility. Employers recruit graduates, promote supervisors and select managers; they design appraisals, incentives and leadership development. If a manager reaches senior responsibility without ever learning to reject a weak proposal, challenge a colleague, or accept criticism, blaming childhood culture avoids asking why years of employment failed to develop those capabilities. Organisations cannot control upbringing, but they can control the behavioural standards they reward.

The stronger conclusion is therefore uncomfortable for every generation. Management requires the ability to disappoint people fairly and to experience disappointment without collapsing or retaliating. Those are learnable professional behaviours, not inherited characteristics of an age cohort. A healthy organisation does not celebrate failure, but it also does not stigmatise it. It recognises genuine achievement, treats setbacks proportionately and preserves the fundamental reality that different levels of contribution should sometimes produce different outcomes.

When Feedback Became Difficult

Feedback is one of management's simplest mechanisms and one of its easiest to neglect. The CIPD describes performance reviews and feedback as important ways to connect employees with objectives, while current practice increasingly favours regular conversations over reliance on an annual appraisal. Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (Acas) guidance similarly recommends informal discussions, coaching, check-ins and regular feedback alongside formal reviews. The principle is straightforward: performance problems should rarely arrive as annual surprises.

Yet feedback becomes difficult when managers interpret criticism as damaging to engagement or relationships. Praise is easy; telling a competent and likeable employee that their work is below standard is not. Delay temporarily protects both parties from discomfort, but it also removes the employee's opportunity to correct the problem. Months later, a manager may describe an issue as persistent even though the person was never given sufficiently specific information to understand what had to change.

Law and good practice make clarity more important, not less. Under the Employment Rights Act 1996, capability can constitute a potentially fair reason for dismissal, but employers must act reasonably. Acas states that organisations should support improvement, maintain evidence and follow a fair procedure, with dismissal as a last resort. Avoiding feedback therefore does not reduce legal risk; it can increase it by leaving an employer without evidence that it communicated expectations and offered support.

Constructive feedback should distinguish standards from personality. "You are not committed" invites argument about motive; "three agreed reports were submitted after the deadline" identifies observable performance. Managers should set the expected standard, explain the gap, listen for causes, offer support where appropriate, and set a reasonable review point. That process is neither punitive nor indulgent. It gives employees something that vague reassurance cannot provide: a fair opportunity to understand and influence their own outcome.

Difficulty is therefore not evidence that feedback should be softened until its meaning disappears. Respectful directness is itself fair. High performers need to know what will stretch them; struggling employees need to know where they stand; colleagues carrying additional workload need confidence that inequity will be addressed. A manager who avoids truthful feedback may preserve short-term harmony, but the eventual cost is often greater frustration, mistrust and a harder conversation later.

The Fear of the Difficult Conversation

Acas describes challenging conversations as discussions that require managers to handle sensitive information and emotion while addressing issues such as poor performance,

conduct, grievances, personal problems, and workplace conflict. Its training materials acknowledge that managers often avoid or delay such conversations. Avoidance feels rational because the immediate reward is peace. The underlying problem, however, continues to accrue interest: resentment grows, evidence becomes stale, and employees construct their own explanations in the absence of managerial clarity.

The economic cost of poorly managed conflict is substantial. Acas-sponsored research estimated workplace conflict costs UK organisations around £28.5 billion annually, more than £1,000 per employee. Nearly ten million people experience conflict each year, with nearly half a million resigning and more than 300,000 being dismissed. These figures show that conflict avoidance is not kindness; unmanaged disagreement eventually shows up through absence, lost productivity, turnover, or formal procedures.

The same research found that formal internal procedures cost around £12.8 billion, while resignations associated with conflict represented approximately £11.9 billion. By contrast, informal resolution accounted for a comparatively small proportion of total cost. Formal mechanisms remain essential where allegations are serious or informal action has failed, but early management matters. A competent conversation when expectations first diverge can be operationally cheaper and personally fairer than letting positions harden.

Managers sometimes fear that direct conversation will generate a grievance, discrimination allegation or legal claim. That concern should encourage preparation, not silence. Decisions should rely on evidence, comparable standards, and relevant policies; respect reasonable adjustments and protected rights; and allow employees to explain their circumstances. Fairness is not achieved by refusing to judge performance. It is achieved by making necessary judgements through a lawful, transparent and proportionate process.

Senior leadership matters because line managers observe how colleagues tackle difficult problems. If senior executives routinely overturn decisions to avoid complaint, managers quickly learn that challenge carries personal risk while avoidance does not. Conversely, organisations can become harsh if leaders reward decisiveness without scrutinising fairness. Managers need support for reasonable decisions and correction for unreasonable ones; accountability requires both authority and review, not unquestioning support or habitual retreat.

The difficult conversation is a test of whether management still means anything. A title, salary and team confer formal status, but the practical role begins when interests conflict, and someone must address the gap. Managers who can only lead when employees agree are not being asked to manage the hardest part of employment. The goal is not confrontation for its own sake, but the professional courage to keep temporary discomfort from becoming permanent dysfunction.

Psychological Safety or Managerial Avoidance?

Psychological safety is frequently misunderstood as protection from criticism or discomfort. The CIPD defines it more precisely as confidence to take appropriate interpersonal risks because of relationships with colleagues and managers. In psychologically safe teams, employees can raise concerns, admit mistakes, question assumptions, and contribute ideas without fear of humiliation or punishment. Evidence reviews associate psychological safety with stronger learning and team performance. When understood properly, it supports challenge rather than protecting people from it.

The NHS demonstrates why the distinction matters. Patient safety depends upon employees being willing to speak when something appears wrong, including when concerns challenge hierarchy. NHS England's Freedom to Speak Up framework and patient-safety guidance emphasise openness, fair treatment and learning. A workplace where junior employees stay silent to avoid upsetting senior clinicians reflects weak management. Psychological safety gives leaders more uncomfortable information, not less.

Managerial avoidance is the opposite. It occurs when leaders avoid challenging poor work, harmful behaviour, or weak decisions for fear of causing distress, disagreement, or complaints. Calling that psychological safety reverses the concept. A team cannot be genuinely safe if reliable employees fear flagging that colleagues are not contributing, or if junior staff know questioning a popular but flawed decision will be seen as negativity. Safety requires candour in every direction.

Fairness and accountability can therefore reinforce one another. CIPD research finds that employees who see managers as fair are more confident speaking up, while problematic relationships discourage voice. Managers strengthen safety by explaining standards, admitting their own mistakes and responding proportionately when others raise concerns. They weaken it through ridicule and retaliation, but also through inconsistency: ignoring obvious underperformance tells employees that raising legitimate concerns may achieve nothing.

The choice is not between compassionate management and demanding management. The strongest environment combines high interpersonal safety with high standards: people can disagree, admit uncertainty and report mistakes, but commitments still matter, and performance remains discussable. When psychological safety is reduced to freedom from uncomfortable feedback, it becomes another route to accountability disappearing. When applied properly, it allows organisations to confront reality earlier, learn faster, and manage more effectively.

The 2020s – Pandemic, Hybrid Working and the Invisible Manager

The 2020s began with a management experiment nobody had planned. Coronavirus restrictions forced millions of employees out of established workplaces, while hospitals, logistics networks, supermarkets, utilities, and manufacturers had to keep physical operations running. Managers discovered almost overnight that attendance could no longer serve as a convenient proxy for performance. Objectives, trust, communication and output became more important precisely when direct observation became less available and operational uncertainty was at its highest.

The economic disruption was extraordinary. ONS estimates show UK GDP fell 19.8% between April and June 2020, while household spending contracted by more than 20%. Public service productivity fell 15.2% across 2020 as output dropped while additional resources were mobilised to fight the pandemic. Managers faced simultaneous shocks to demand, staffing, supply chains, health protection, and service delivery, rather than anything resembling a conventional recession.

Remote working then became a lasting hybrid model rather than a temporary emergency. ONS research found that 28% of working adults in Great Britain worked hybrid between January and March 2025. Managers, directors and senior officials were among the groups most likely to work this way. The practical challenge shifted from enabling homeworking to managing performance, development, collaboration and organisational culture when employees and managers were no longer routinely co-located.

Hybrid working did not automatically make managers invisible; weak management could. A manager who previously relied on physical proximity, informal observation, and spontaneous conversations had to become more deliberate about objectives, workload, and feedback. Equally, surveillance software and compulsory attendance could create the appearance of control without improving output. The managerial task became harder because effective oversight required better information and clearer expectations, not just seeing employees sitting at desks.

The pandemic also revealed sharp differences between occupations. Many professional employees gained flexibility, while nurses, warehouse staff, drivers, care workers and production employees could not relocate their work. That created a new fairness problem for managers: flexibility could not always mean identical arrangements. Managers had to

distinguish consistency from sameness, basing decisions on role requirements, customer needs, and operational feasibility rather than treating one working pattern as a universal entitlement or obligation.

The invisible-manager problem therefore concerns management's presence, not physical presence in an office. Employees need accessible decision-makers, clear priorities, timely feedback and intervention when commitments fail. Hybrid working can strengthen management by forcing organisations to define outputs more clearly; it can weaken it when distance becomes an excuse for reduced supervision. The 2020s have made an old truth harder to avoid: measure management by what is achieved, not where the manager sits.

Technology Gives Managers More Information Than Ever

Technology has given modern managers access to far more information than earlier generations could obtain, even at great cost. Enterprise systems can show sales, expenditure, inventory, absence, delivery performance and customer demand almost instantly. In 2025–26, 86% of UK businesses surveyed by government handled digitised data, while 69% of large businesses used data analysis to generate new insights. The scarcity problem has increasingly shifted from obtaining information to interpreting it intelligently.

That abundance can strengthen accountability. A procurement manager can identify maverick expenditure, a warehouse manager can track fulfilment failures, and a director can compare performance across locations without waiting for monthly paper reports. ONS research also found businesses with below-median management scores were four times more likely to use little or no analysis for important decisions. Better-managed organisations tend to use information more extensively rather than relying solely upon instinct.

Information, however, does not manage anybody. Dashboards can flag overdue actions without explaining why they occurred, whether the target remains sensible, or what intervention is proportionate. The danger is managerial spectatorship: leaders watch increasingly sophisticated displays of deteriorating performance and assume visibility itself equals control. A red indicator should begin a management conversation, not conclude one. Data become useful only when someone has both the authority and willingness to act on what they reveal.

The same problem appears in public services. NHS Supply Chain can access purchasing and transaction information across an organisation that spends approximately £8 billion annually on medical equipment and consumables. Yet the NAO found weaknesses in savings measurement, customer satisfaction and market-share information. Technology can reveal patterns and aggregate purchasing power, but reliable data, commercial judgement and aligned accountability remain necessary before information becomes value for money.

The managerial advantage of modern technology is therefore conditional. Managers possess better forecasting, communication and analytical tools than their predecessors, but the threshold for competent management should rise accordingly. It is difficult to argue that poor performance was unknowable when systems repeatedly display it. Technology should reduce plausible ignorance, shorten the interval between problem and intervention, and improve decisions. Where it merely generates more reporting, the organisation has digitised administration rather than strengthened management.

AI – The Next Excuse Not to Manage?

AI intensifies the same dilemma because it can analyse, draft, predict and recommend at extraordinary speed. ONS data published in July 2026 show self-reported AI use among UK businesses with ten or more employees rising from about 12% in late 2023 to around 35%. Adoption reached 58% in information and communication businesses but only 13% in construction, demonstrating that managerial exposure remains highly uneven across sectors.

Early evidence suggests genuine productivity potential. The CIPD reported in 2025 that 16% of surveyed employees had tasks automated using AI and 85% of that group believed

automation improved their performance. In the 2025 Civil Service People Survey, 27% of respondents said AI saved them at least one hour weekly, while 76% expected it to change how they performed their current job within five years.

Those gains create an obvious temptation to outsource judgement, not just administration. AI can rank suppliers, summarise employee records, forecast demand, draft objectives and flag anomalies, but none of those functions eliminates managerial responsibility for assumptions, context or consequences. A confident machine-generated answer can still be incomplete or wrong. The accountable manager must therefore understand enough about the decision to challenge the tool rather than using technological sophistication as protection from personal ownership.

UK law reinforces that distinction where automated processing affects individuals significantly. The Data (Use and Access) Act 2025 created a more permissive framework for solely automated significant decisions while retaining safeguards, including information, representations, human intervention and the ability to contest decisions. The Information Commissioner's Office has specifically warned employers using automated recruitment decisions to preserve transparency and fairness. Automation can assist decision-making; it does not abolish responsibility for how decisions are governed.

AI also raises a subtler management risk: productivity gains may simply create more output rather than better outcomes. If a manager can generate ten reports instead of two, the organisation does not necessarily need ten reports. If meeting summaries, presentations and procurement documents become costless to produce, weak managers may create administrative volume without improving decisions. The real productivity opportunity lies in removing low-value work and reallocating human attention towards judgement, relationships and intervention.

AI should therefore make management more accountable, not less. It can expose patterns earlier, reduce repetitive work and strengthen analysis. It cannot decide which trade-offs an organisation should accept, explain values to employees or carry moral responsibility when outcomes harm people. The next erosion of management would occur if leaders begin saying "the system recommended it" where earlier generations said "the process required it". The technology changes; the avoidance mechanism remains human.

The Productivity Test – Are Managers Actually Producing Results?

Productivity is the clearest test of whether management converts resources into results, although managers never control every determinant. Investment, skills, infrastructure, regulation and economic conditions all matter. Even so, the UK's long productivity slowdown makes managerial effectiveness impossible to ignore. ONS administrative-data estimates placed output per hour in the second quarter of 2026 only 4.6% above its 2019 average, with annual growth of just 0.7%.

The public sector faces an equally demanding test because outputs are often harder to value than market sales. ONS estimates show total public service productivity increased 1.4% in 2023 after rising 3.8% in 2022, but average growth between 1997 and 2019 was only around 0.2% annually. Healthcare and education improved in 2023, demonstrating that productivity should be assessed carefully rather than reduced to crude headcount or expenditure cuts.

Management quality is associated with better outcomes. ONS found a statistically significant relationship between structured management scores and labour productivity, while 37% of businesses in the top management decile had tested or adopted AI, compared with 3% in the bottom decile. Correlation does not prove that management alone causes productivity, but it undermines the idea that managerial quality is a decorative organisational concern rather than an economic one.

The managerial productivity test should therefore ask what changed because a manager was present. Did throughput improve, costs fall sustainably, quality rise, customers receive a better

service or employees develop greater capability? A manager who works extremely hard while presiding over unchanged performance may be committed but ineffective. Equally, a manager delivering immediate savings by exhausting staff, deferring maintenance or increasing risk may improve one period's figures while reducing the organisation's longer-term productive capacity.

Accountability becomes meaningful when outcomes are linked to controllable decisions. Managers should not be blamed for inflation, pandemics or market movements, but they should anticipate foreseeable risks, respond to evidence and explain variances within their influence. Productivity is useful precisely because it prevents activity from becoming the final measure of success. The central question is not how busy management appeared, but whether people, capital and time produced more worthwhile value as a result.

Management in Procurement and Supply Chain Management

Procurement and supply chain management expose managerial quality particularly clearly because responsibility crosses organisational boundaries. Managers must specify requirements, select suppliers, allocate risk, manage contracts, understand markets and protect continuity while controlling cost. A weak decision can remain embedded for years after contract signature. Conversely, excellent procurement can create value long before an invoice arrives, through demand management, standardisation, competition, innovation and supplier relationships that improve resilience as well as price.

The pandemic demonstrated the consequences when normal supply arrangements are overwhelmed. The NAO reported that government awarded £17.3 billion of new contracts between January and July 2020, including £12.3 billion for Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). Global shortages justified extraordinary speed, but the watchdog found incomplete documentation in sampled procurements and noted that 71 suppliers, receiving contracts worth £1.5 billion, had been appointed before financial and company due diligence became standardised.

The lesson is not that emergency procurement should resemble business as usual. Delay during a health emergency can itself cost lives, and the NAO recognised the achievement of rapidly building a new international PPE supply chain. The managerial question is whether emergency authority is accompanied by proportionate controls, documented judgement and rapid correction. When procedures are shortened, personal accountability becomes more important because fewer safeguards remain between a decision and substantial public expenditure.

NHS Supply Chain illustrates a different challenge. It estimates that the NHS spends about £8 billion annually on medical equipment and consumables, yet trusts spent approximately £3.4 billion outside its route in 2022–23. The NAO also found that claimed savings had not been independently validated and that eDirect orders were delivered an average 22 days late between June 2022 and March 2023. Scale therefore does not guarantee procurement performance.

The Procurement Act 2023, effective from 24 February 2025 for the new regime, places value for money, public benefit, transparency and integrity among objectives contracting authorities must consider. Those principles require judgement rather than mechanical compliance. A legally compliant competition can still purchase the wrong specification, allocate risk badly or select an unsustainable commercial model. Procurement governance succeeds only when responsible managers understand both the rules and the commercial consequences of choices.

Defence procurement reinforces this. The Ministry of Defence (MoD) Equipment Plan for 2023–2033 contained a £288.6 billion budget, yet forecast equipment costs exceeded available funding by £16.9 billion. The NAO warned that delaying prioritisation could waste money on programmes later cancelled, reduced or deferred. Procurement professionals cannot control national strategy, but management must reconcile ambition with affordability.

An unaffordable portfolio is both a management problem and a financial calculation.

When Poor Performance Becomes Normalised

Poor performance rarely becomes normal overnight. It normalises through repeated exceptions: a missed deadline gets no response, an incomplete task is quietly reassigned, a behavioural problem is tolerated because confrontation seems disproportionate, and stronger colleagues compensate. Each decision may appear reasonable in isolation. Collectively, they redefine the standard. Employees learn less from the written performance framework than from watching what happens when someone consistently fails to meet an agreed expectation.

Encouraging evidence shows that structured employment practices have improved. ONS management scores for employment practices rose from 0.52 in 2020 to 0.64 in 2023, reflecting more action on underperformance and greater emphasis on ability and performance in promotion. Yet a formal system cannot guarantee effective intervention. An organisation may have performance policies, but managers may repeatedly postpone using them, leaving the practical standard below the standard described on paper.

Normalisation also changes team behaviour. Reliable employees stop expecting managers to intervene and begin building workarounds around weaker colleagues. Some reduce their own effort because additional contribution appears unrewarded; others continue compensating until frustration or exhaustion changes their relationship with the organisation. The immediate output may therefore remain acceptable, disguising deterioration underneath. By the time performance visibly collapses, the team may have been carrying the managerial failure for months or years.

Fair performance management must distinguish inability, unclear expectations, inadequate training, ill health, disability, misconduct and simple unwillingness to perform. Different causes require different responses, and legal obligations, including reasonable adjustments, cannot be bypassed in pursuit of speed. Accountability is therefore not shorthand for dismissal. It means diagnosing the problem honestly, providing appropriate support, setting clear expectations, and deciding when sufficient evidence shows whether improvement has occurred.

The strongest defence against normalised underperformance is consistency. Managers should notice problems early, document relevant facts, discuss them promptly and review agreed actions. They should also recognise improvement rather than allowing an employee to remain permanently labelled by past weakness. Standards become credible when consequences are predictable and proportionate. If excellent, adequate, and persistently inadequate performance all produce the same managerial response, the organisation has made accountability optional, regardless of what its policies claim.

The Cost Paid by High Performers

High performers often become the hidden shock absorbers of weak management. When someone is dependable, difficult work gravitates toward them because managers know it will get done. That can be rational during a short emergency. It becomes corrosive when exceptional reliability is rewarded with more work while weaker contributions go unaddressed. The organisation then converts competence into a penalty, asking its most capable people to subsidise a performance problem management has chosen not to resolve.

The health consequences of excessive pressure are measurable even though they cannot be attributed solely to this mechanism. The Health and Safety Executive estimated that work-related stress, depression or anxiety accounted for 22.1 million working days lost in Great Britain during 2024–25. Around 964,000 workers were affected by new or longstanding cases. High performance therefore cannot sensibly be defined as output extracted without regard to whether the workload remains sustainable.

Public-sector evidence shows why management matters alongside pay. In the 2025 Civil Service People Survey, employees intending to leave cited poor leadership in 30% of cases,

poor line management in 18% and unmanageable workload in 17%, although respondents could select multiple reasons. Better pay and benefits remained the most common reason at 39%. Retention is therefore influenced by economic reward, but management quality still shapes the decision to stay.

There is also an equity problem. If a manager repeatedly assigns urgent work to the most reliable employee because challenging another person is uncomfortable, workload allocation ceases to reflect role design. High performers notice when standards are asymmetric. They may initially accept additional responsibility because they are conscientious, ambitious or team-oriented, but goodwill is finite. Eventually the organisation risks losing precisely the employees whose discretionary effort has been concealing the underlying weakness.

Competent managers protect high performance by differentiating between development and exploitation. Stretch assignments should build capability, visibility or progression rather than transfer unfinished work. Extra contribution deserves recognition, but recognition cannot indefinitely compensate for structural imbalance. Managers must also ensure that capable employees can take leave, disconnect and make mistakes without becoming victims of their own reputation. Resilience is strengthened by spare capacity and cross-training, not by permanent dependence on a few individuals.

The test is simple: would the team still function if its strongest contributor stopped compensating tomorrow? If not, management has a resilience problem disguised as talent. High performers should raise the standard around them through expertise, coaching and example, but they should not become substitutes for managerial courage. Accountability protects weaker employees by giving them a chance to improve, and protects stronger employees by ensuring reliability does not become an unlimited organisational resource.

Have Organisations Confused Kindness With Low Standards?

Kindness and standards are sometimes presented as opposing management philosophies when they should reinforce one another. A manager who explains expectations, considers circumstances, and gives someone a genuine opportunity to improve is more humane than one who offers comforting ambiguity until failure becomes irreversible. Compassion concerns how people are treated; standards concern what the organisation requires. Neither logically demands abandoning the other, and competent managers should be able to hold both simultaneously.

The CIPD's 2025 Good Work Index found generally improving perceptions of line management: 81% of employees with a manager said they were respected as a person, 79% said they were treated fairly, and 79% described their manager as supportive when they had a problem. Those results matter because effective management need not be abrasive. Respect and support can coexist with expectations, feedback and accountability rather than replacing them.

The same research nevertheless found only 60% of managers believed they had the training and information required to manage staff well, while 59% said they had sufficient time. This suggests some apparent managerial softness may reflect capability or capacity rather than ideology. A manager overloaded with operational work may postpone performance conversations because preparation, documentation and follow-up take time. Organisations cannot demand accountability while denying managers the practical conditions needed to exercise it competently.

Kindness becomes damaging only when it is redefined as protecting adults from reasonable consequences. Ignoring repeated lateness is not necessarily kind to colleagues who cover the work. Avoiding honest feedback is not kind to an employee who later discovers that unexplained issues blocked progression. Permitting a toxic high performer to damage a team is not compassionate management. The ethical question must consider everyone affected by managerial inaction, not only the person being challenged.

The better principle is humane accountability. Employees should be treated with dignity, given clear evidence, allowed to explain and supported where improvement is realistic. Managers should recognise illness, disability, caring responsibilities, and legitimate individual circumstances without letting flexibility erode standards. Kindness changes how authority is exercised; it should not erase authority itself. An organisation can be supportive and demanding at the same time, just as it can be unpleasant when badly managed.

Authority Without Autocracy

Authority is not the same as autocracy. Managers require sufficient authority to allocate work, set priorities, approve resources, evaluate performance and make decisions within their remit. Autocracy begins when that authority becomes arbitrary, unchallengeable or detached from evidence. Modern employment protections rightly constrain managerial power, but constraints should improve decision quality rather than make decisions impossible. Legitimate authority is strongest when employees understand both the manager's mandate and the boundaries governing its use.

The legal framework already embodies that balance. Employment Rights Act 1996 principles require potentially fair reasons and reasonable handling when dismissing an employee, while the Equality Act 2010 prohibits unlawful discrimination and requires employers to meet relevant legal duties. Acas guidance emphasises fair procedures and opportunities to improve. None of these requirements prevents management from addressing capability or conduct; they require managers to do so carefully, consistently and with evidence.

Authority also needs escalation boundaries. A procurement manager should not commit expenditure beyond delegated limits, and a line manager should not improvise legal policy. Equally, requiring senior approval for every modest decision infantilises management. If managers carry accountability for outcomes but lack discretion to change resources, priorities or performance arrangements, the organisation creates responsibility without authority. That mismatch encourages escalation, delay and defensive behaviour because the safest decision becomes making no independent decision.

The reverse mismatch is equally dangerous. The Post Office Horizon scandal demonstrated the consequences when organisational authority, flawed evidence and weak challenge combine. Decisions affecting sub-postmasters were made with unjustified confidence, while contrary evidence struggled to change the institutional position. The lesson extends further: authority without credible challenge can harden error into policy, making accountability harder because senior decision-makers become invested in defending past conclusions.

Healthy authority therefore operates inside contestable systems. Employees should be able to question evidence, raise concerns and appeal serious decisions without every disagreement becoming a veto. Managers should explain reasoning where appropriate and change course when better evidence emerges. Senior leaders should distinguish a reasonable decision that produces an unfortunate outcome from a careless decision that happens to succeed. Accountability concerns the quality of judgement and conduct, not whether hindsight flatters the result.

The objective is neither the deferential manager of the 1950s nor the hesitant facilitator who believes authority itself is suspect. Modern management needs confidence without arrogance. The manager should be able to say yes, no, not yet, improve this, stop doing that, and I was wrong. Those phrases require different kinds of courage, but together they define legitimate authority: power exercised transparently, proportionately and with acceptance that the manager can also be held to account.

Making Managers Accountable Again

Making managers accountable again does not require more slogans. It requires explicit ownership. Every significant objective should have a named person responsible for delivery, sufficient authority to influence the result, measurable evidence and a review point.

Committees can provide scrutiny, and specialists can advise, but neither should dissolve personal responsibility. Where ownership is shared, organisations should still define who decides, who delivers, who provides assurance and who explains failure when intended outcomes are not achieved.

Accountability must also run upwards. A line manager cannot reasonably be blamed for persistent vacancies, an impossible budget or contradictory priorities imposed by senior leadership. Directors should therefore be evaluated on the operating conditions they create as well as the numbers reported beneath them. The 2025 Civil Service People Survey is instructive: 30% of respondents planning to leave cited poor leadership, compared with 18% citing poor line management. Senior management behaviour materially shapes workforce outcomes.

Managers need time and capability to manage. In 2025, the CIPD found that only 59% of managers said they had enough time to manage people well and 60% had the necessary training and information. Organisations that overload managers with personal workloads and administrative reporting should not be surprised when coaching, feedback and performance intervention deteriorate. Management cannot remain an additional task performed after the manager's "real job" is finished.

Measures should combine results with how those results were achieved. Cost reduction accompanied by service failure is not automatically good management; high output generated through unsustainable workload is not necessarily success. Relevant indicators might include productivity, quality, customer outcomes, budget performance, employee development, absence, retention, risk and improvement. The balance will vary by role, but managers should understand in advance what evidence will be used to judge whether their stewardship has genuinely improved the organisation.

Finally, consequences must apply to managers themselves. Repeated failure without learning, unexplained missed objectives or avoidance of obvious people problems should influence appraisal, development and progression just as employee performance does. Accountability without consequence is merely reporting. The aim is not to create fear, but credibility: employees are more likely to accept standards when they can see those setting them are also assessed against expectations and required to explain outcomes within their control.

What the Best of Every Generation Can Contribute

Every generation brings strengths shaped by the conditions in which it worked. Baby Boomers often accumulated deep organisational memory and face-to-face negotiation experience. Generation X learned through restructuring, technological transition and flatter organisations. Millennials entered management as digital tools, employee engagement, and cross-functional work became the norm. Generation Z arrives with instinctive familiarity with collaborative technology, rapid access to information, and stronger expectations around flexibility, transparency, and organisational purpose.

Those are broad tendencies, not fixed traits. The strongest organisation therefore avoids turning generational shorthand into selection criteria or excuses. An older manager may be technologically adventurous; a younger one may prefer hierarchy and structure. What matters is whether organisations transfer useful capabilities across age groups. Experience without adaptation becomes rigidity, while innovation without institutional memory can repeat avoidable mistakes. Intergenerational management should combine accumulated judgement with willingness to question inherited assumptions.

Baby Boomers can contribute perspective on economic cycles, industrial relations and the consequences of decisions that take years to mature. Generation X often brings experience of operating between analogue and digital systems and through repeated organisational change. Millennials frequently possess strong collaborative and technological fluency developed during rapid workplace digitisation. Generation Z can challenge assumptions about communication, accessibility and technology that older colleagues may treat as permanent

when they are merely familiar.

Younger generations can also learn from managerial disciplines that predate them: the value of direct conversation, consequences, commercial awareness and responsibility for difficult decisions. Older generations can learn that authority lasts longer when explained, that employee voice can expose risk, and that flexibility need not mean weaker standards. The productive exchange therefore runs in both directions. Organisations lose when generational debate becomes a contest over which age group supposedly possesses superior character.

The workplace itself makes this collaboration increasingly necessary. Longer working lives mean several generations can work together while technology changes faster than conventional career cycles. A procurement director may hold decades of category knowledge, while a graduate analyst intuitively understands new data tools. The sensible management response is neither deference to age nor worship of novelty; it is deliberate exchange, with expertise recognised by relevance rather than by the birth year of whoever provides it.

The best inheritance for the next generation of managers is therefore not a return to the 1950s or a rejection of everything that preceded them. It is a synthesis: clarity without bullying, confidence without arrogance, employee voice without managerial abdication, technology without dependency, compassion without lowered expectations and accountability without fear. Every generation can contribute to that model, but only if organisations stop using generational labels as substitutes for developing individual managerial competence.

Summary – Why Management Still Matters

Britain has not forgotten how to manage. The evidence is too complicated for that conclusion. Structured management practices improved between 2020 and 2023; employees report many positive line-manager behaviours; technology is expanding managers' analytical capability; and organisations possess employment protections unimaginable in 1945. The erosion lies elsewhere: in the recurring temptation to separate responsibility from authority, process from judgement and management activity from measurable organisational outcomes.

Each post-war period altered the bargain. The 1950s emphasised hierarchy and duty; the 1960s challenged deference; the 1970s demonstrated organised labour's power; the 1980s restored market discipline; the 1990s professionalised governance; the 2000s multiplied specialists and systems; the 2010s elevated engagement amid weak productivity; and the 2020s added hybrid work and AI. Each stage corrected real weaknesses while creating new opportunities for accountability to shift elsewhere.

The answer is not nostalgia. Earlier workplaces could be discriminatory, arbitrary, unsafe and unnecessarily hierarchical. Modern management should retain stronger employment rights, employee voice, flexible working, professional expertise and evidence-based decision-making. It should restore the connection between authority and consequence. Managers need permission to make reasonable decisions, employees need protection against unreasonable ones, and senior leaders must accept responsibility for the systems, priorities and resources within which those decisions are made.

Productivity gives the debate economic importance. A country cannot indefinitely improve wages, profits, public services and living standards without producing greater value from available labour and capital. Better technology may help, but machines cannot resolve every conflict over priorities, standards or resources. Britain therefore still needs managers who can translate information into action, distinguish explanation from excuse, and tell the difference between supporting someone through difficulty and letting persistent underperformance become the accepted norm.

Management has evolved enormously since 1945, and much of that evolution represents progress. The task now is to prevent humane employment practice, professional process and sophisticated technology from becoming shelters for indecision. Accountability should never mean arbitrary punishment; it should mean knowing who owns an outcome, what authority

they possess and what happens when performance repeatedly falls short. Organisations ultimately succeed through decisions, and decisions matter only when someone is prepared to own them.

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