

The Magnolia Manager – The Cost of Standing Still



Procurement and Supply Chain Management Made Simple.

Foreword

Some leadership weaknesses announce themselves: decisions collapse, standards slip, and teams lose direction. Others remain hidden beneath orderly operations, accurate reports and apparently dependable management. Work gets done, familiar routines continue, and little seems obviously wrong. Yet capable employees receive little encouragement to develop, useful suggestions fade, and recurring problems settle into the background. The organisation keeps functioning while gradually accepting less than its people and resources could reasonably achieve.

The Magnolia Manager offers a metaphor for this quieter pattern. Technically competent and often conscientious, such a manager maintains existing arrangements without helping the team prepare for changing demands. The concern lies in observable behaviour, not personality, confidence or presentation. Calm leadership can provide clarity and purpose; stagnation emerges when caution repeatedly displaces judgement, familiarity prevents learning and preserving normal operations becomes the outer limit of what management seeks to accomplish.

Understanding the cost of standing still requires a balanced view of management and organisational responsibility across the United Kingdom (UK). Leaders need clear expectations, appropriate authority and realistic support, while employees need opportunities to contribute, learn and exercise judgement. Dependable delivery remains essential in public services and commercial organisations, but it cannot replace purposeful development. Sustainable performance depends on preserving what works while strengthening people and systems' capacity to meet the challenges ahead.

Who Is the Magnolia Manager?

Magnolia is a familiar decorating choice: neutral, inoffensive and unlikely to attract objections. Applied to management, it describes leadership that blends into the background while leaving established arrangements largely untouched. The metaphor helps identify a recognisable pattern of competent administration accompanied by limited ambition for improvement. It is a descriptive device rather than a recognised management classification, and it offers no diagnosis of anyone's personality, motivation or professional worth.

The Magnolia Manager usually knows the procedures, meets reporting deadlines and understands the technical work. Meetings proceed politely, routines continue, and difficult questions receive reassuring answers. Yet decisions that might improve performance remain unresolved, employees receive few opportunities to stretch their capabilities and recurring problems become accepted features of working life. The concern is the repeated absence of purposeful leadership, not a preference for a calm, measured or understated personal manner.

The Chartered Management Institute (CMI) surveyed more than 4,500 people with YouGov for its October 2023 Better Management Report. It found that 82% of managers entering management positions had received no formal management and leadership training, making them what the CMI calls accidental managers. The figure does not measure stagnation, but it exposes the risk of treating promotion as adequate preparation for leading people towards better outcomes over a sustained period.^[1]

Observable behaviours provide a fairer starting point than labels. A manager who repeatedly postpones development discussions, dismisses suggestions without examination or refers upwards decisions that sit comfortably within their own authority deserves closer attention. So does a team whose working methods have barely changed in several years despite new technology, new regulation or shifting customer expectations. Patterns sustained over time matter far more than a single cautious decision or an unusually quiet quarter.

Context matters equally. Apparent inactivity may reflect vacancies, budget restrictions, conflicting instructions, or top-down controls, and those conditions deserve examination before drawing conclusions. Assessment should therefore consider conduct and circumstances together. The useful question is whether the manager makes progress within the constraints available, or lets those constraints explain everything. The first describes a leader under pressure; the second describes the pattern the Magnolia label is intended to capture.

Technical Competence Is Only the Beginning

Technical competence earns trust because colleagues need accurate advice, dependable judgement and a sound grasp of operational realities. A procurement specialist must understand commercial arrangements; a housing manager must understand repair obligations and tenant expectations; an engineering supervisor must recognise technical risks. These foundations matter enormously. Leadership adds another responsibility: enabling others to contribute effectively. Expertise becomes limiting when the manager remains the principal problem solver long after stepping into the role.

The transition requires new habits. Excellent individual work depends heavily on personal knowledge and effort, whereas leading a team involves setting priorities, explaining expectations, resolving disagreements and giving useful feedback. A newly promoted specialist may keep doing the work that originally secured recognition, leaving these responsibilities underdeveloped. The CMI found that 52% of managers had no management or leadership qualification, suggesting many make this shift with little structured preparation.^[1]

Starbucks offered an example of deliberate preparation in July 2025, when it opened applications for a 13-month Accelerated Leadership Programme delivered with training provider Corndel. The company said it was investing £5,000 per participant in learning covering decision-making, leadership, commercial understanding and conflict resolution, with

participants working towards a Level 3 apprenticeship. The design treats running a store as a distinct skill to be taught, rather than a reward for excellent work behind the counter.^[2]

Preparation must continue after appointment. New managers need opportunities to practise difficult conversations, learn from mistakes, and hear candid feedback from the people they supervise. Employers can test promotion candidates on their ability to coach colleagues, make proportionate decisions, and handle disagreement, rather than assuming strong technical performance will naturally produce those abilities. In every sector, the test is whether expertise helps others perform better, rather than merely confirming the manager's own indispensability to the organisation.

Stability or Stagnation?

Stability gives teams the conditions they need to perform reliably. Clear procedures, predictable priorities and consistent expectations reduce avoidable confusion, particularly in safety-critical services and complex supply chains. Employees should not have to reinterpret their responsibilities whenever a manager discovers a new initiative. The distinction lies in responsiveness: stable organisations preserve what works while adapting where evidence shows a problem, whereas stagnant organisations preserve familiar arrangements even when those arrangements repeatedly disappoint.

Constant disruption carries its own costs. Repeated restructures, shifting reporting lines, and unfinished improvement programmes absorb attention that should support customers, residents, or patients. A manager who challenges every established practice without understanding its purpose may weaken performance as readily as someone who challenges nothing. Effective leadership therefore requires selective change, supported by clear reasoning, realistic resources and enough time for new arrangements to become embedded in everyday work.

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) reported an average management practice score of 0.55 for 2023, up from 0.49 in 2020 on a scale from zero to one, after correcting an earlier scoring error. Its survey covered businesses with at least ten employees, excluding the public sector, agriculture and financial services. The measure assesses structured practices such as continuous improvement and target setting, and the ONS found management quality significantly related to productivity.^[3]

A companion ONS pilot, the first UK survey of structured management practices in public bodies, produced a mean score of 0.56 across five public sector subsectors in 2023, against 0.55 for private businesses. Fire and police services scored 0.90 for continuous improvement. The ONS cautioned that some public sector targets are set elsewhere and can feel unachievable, so the comparison shows capability existing in both sectors rather than crowning either one.^[4]

The key distinction is whether consistency is paired with learning. Stable leadership reviews recurring errors, tests employee suggestions and adjusts processes when circumstances change. Stagnation treats the absence of disruption as proof that everything is satisfactory. Teams may continue meeting yesterday's targets while customer expectations, technology and service demand move steadily ahead. Preserving dependable delivery should therefore include regularly examining whether the organisation is still delivering the right things, and delivering them well.

How Organisations Reward Standing Still

Management behaviour often reflects the rewards surrounding it. When promotions favour long service, agreeable reporting, and avoiding visible mistakes, employees may reasonably conclude that initiative creates more personal risk than benefit. A manager who maintains familiar routines looks dependable, while a colleague who tries necessary improvement attracts scrutiny when implementation becomes difficult. Over time, the organisation may select people who protect established arrangements more readily than those who question

them.

Performance measures can reinforce the tendency. Key performance indicators (KPIs) are useful when they reveal outcomes, service quality and emerging risks. They become less helpful when managers are judged mainly on activity counts, expenditure against annual budgets, or on-time reports. A department can satisfy all those measures while failing to develop its people or address recurring weaknesses. What receives formal attention usually determines what managers consider worth their effort.

The 2025 Civil Service People Survey, completed by 343,961 civil servants across 102 organisations at a 59% response rate, offers a useful counterweight to sweeping claims about resistance. Some 74% believed they would be supported if they tried a new idea to transform how things are done. Yet, only 52% felt senior leaders had a clear vision for a modernised, technology-enabled organisation. Encouragement at team level evidently needs clearer direction from above.^[5]

The same survey recorded a median of 76% for the theme covering staff experience of their own manager, but 56% for learning and development, the largest fall of any theme at two percentage points, and 50% for leadership and managing change. These are perceptions, not measured outcomes. They nevertheless show how a workforce can feel reasonably well managed day to day while doubting that development and change are valued further up.^[5]

When Caution Becomes Decision Avoidance

Caution is essential when decisions affect safety, public resources, contractual commitments or people's livelihoods, and proper consultation can reveal risks a manager would otherwise miss. Decision avoidance begins when gathering information becomes an indefinite substitute for judgement. Reports are requested repeatedly, stakeholders revisit settled questions, and recommendations circulate without a designated decision-maker. Activity accumulates around the problem while the underlying issue remains unresolved and continues consuming resources every working day.

The clearest warning sign is a failure to explain what additional evidence would change the decision. A legitimate pause has a purpose, an owner and a review date; without them, demands for further certainty become impossible to satisfy. Managers should distinguish between information essential to a lawful, informed choice and information that merely makes the choice feel more comfortable before someone finally accepts responsibility for it.

The National Audit Office (NAO) examined the Euston element of High Speed Two (HS2) in March 2023. It reported a £4.8 billion estimate for the ten-platform station design against a £2.6 billion budget, and £106 million of design work discarded during earlier efforts to integrate plans with Network Rail. It warned that the newly announced two-year pause would defer spending but could increase overall costs by restarting work, changing contracts, and extending project management.^[6]

The lesson extends well beyond major infrastructure. Postponement is itself a decision, with costs that rarely appear in the paper recommending it. The Euston difficulties arose from complex programme governance rather than any individual's temperament. Yet, they show how a design that is neither affordable nor abandoned can consume money and time for years. Any proposal to pause should therefore state what the pause will cost, alongside what it is expected to save.

A simple decision record helps. It can set out the options, material uncertainties, completed consultation, and the expected cost of further delay, along with a named decision-maker and a review date. For reversible choices, a limited trial may provide better evidence than another round of discussion. Higher-risk decisions need stronger assurance, but assurance should lead towards a defined conclusion, because responsible judgement almost always involves some uncertainty that cannot be removed.

The Hidden Cost of Doing Nothing

Inaction rarely arrives with an invoice identifying its full cost. Instead, it shows up as repeated rework, unresolved complaints, inefficient processes, and opportunities that quietly disappear. A manager may protect the current budget by postponing an improvement while operating costs continue unnecessarily. The financial consequence becomes clearer when organisations compare the cost of change with the cumulative cost of maintaining existing arrangements over a realistic period, rather than over a single budget year.

In January 2025, the NAO estimated the government's property maintenance backlog at a minimum of £49 billion, warning that incomplete and outdated condition data meant the true figure could be higher. Ministry of Defence properties, schools and National Health Service (NHS) properties each carried backlogs above £10 billion. Funding constraints and wider policy choices contributed, so managers alone cannot be blamed, but the backlog shows how deferred decisions accumulate into substantial liabilities.^[7]

The consequences are operational as well as financial. The same report recorded approximately 5,400 NHS clinical service incidents a year between 2019–20 and 2023–24 caused by property and infrastructure failures. It also cited a Cabinet Office estimate that deferring backlog maintenance can increase costs by more than 50% within two to four years. Deferred expenditure frequently becomes larger expenditure later, accompanied by disruption to the very services the original saving was meant to protect.^[7]

Social housing provides the starkest illustration. Awaab Ishak, aged two, died in December 2020 from a respiratory condition caused by prolonged exposure to mould in his family's flat, rented from Rochdale Boroughwide Housing. Concerns were raised repeatedly without effective action, and the landlord later acknowledged that it had made incorrect assumptions about the family's lifestyle. The chief executive was dismissed in November 2022, and the government withheld £1 million in new affordable-homes funding.^[8, 9]

The legislative response followed. Awaab's Law, in force for social landlords in England since 27 October 2025, requires landlords to investigate emergency hazards and make them safe within 24 hours. Social landlords must investigate significant damp and mould hazards within ten working days. The Housing Ombudsman's 2024–25 review, covering 7,082 determinations, found maladministration in 71% of cases and made 26,901 orders or other interventions, with property condition the leading complaint category.^[10, 11]

Private-sector teams can examine smaller losses with transparent assumptions. In an illustrative calculation, twenty employees each losing thirty minutes daily to a redundant process would consume ten working hours a day. At an assumed employment cost of £25 per hour across 220 working days, the annual resource cost reaches £55,000. That represents capacity consumed rather than guaranteed cash, yet it rarely appears anywhere when the improvement that would recover it is postponed again.

What Happens When Employee Ideas Go Nowhere?

Employees often notice operational weaknesses long before they appear in management reports. They directly encounter duplicated tasks, unclear instructions, and avoidable customer frustration. When suggestions repeatedly go unanswered, contributing feels pointless, and silence reflects experience rather than a lack of ideas or commitment. A manager who mistakes that silence for satisfaction loses access to practical knowledge that could resolve difficulties before they become serious, expensive or widespread.

The wider picture is sobering. Gallup's State of the Global Workplace 2026 report recorded UK employee engagement at 10% and daily stress at 46%, using three-year rolling averages ending in 2025. Engagement stood at 12% across Europe and 20% globally. These measures reflect several influences, including pay, workload and job design; they provide context for the leadership challenge without establishing how much disengagement results specifically from stagnant management.^[12]

The John Lewis Partnership shows what formal employee voice can look like. Its Gazette, first

published in March 1918, gave Partners a letters section to praise and criticise, and its elected Partnership Council has constitutional power to remove the Chairman. In May 2023, after a £234 million loss and a withheld bonus, Dame Sharon White faced a confidence vote in the Council. The structure was built for challenge, not left to chance.^[13, 14, 15]

Inviting ideas creates a duty to respond thoughtfully, not an obligation to accept every proposal. Employees need to know who will assess a suggestion, when to expect an answer and why a decision was reached. A clear explanation of a rejection preserves confidence; silence teaches that participation changes nothing. Concerns about wrongdoing or safety are different, requiring dedicated reporting and escalation routes that a general suggestions scheme should never replace.

Delegation Without Real Authority

Delegation can fail even when a manager appears to distribute work generously. Employees receive tasks, deadlines and responsibility for results, but must seek approval for every meaningful choice. Accountability moves downwards while authority remains concentrated above. Colleagues wait for decisions, managers become overloaded and routine delivery slows. What looks like close supervision may actually be a dependency that keeps capable employees from exercising judgement and building the confidence that comes with it.

Real delegation begins with clarity about the outcome, the available resources and the boundaries of discretion. An employee should understand which decisions they can make independently, what must be escalated and when progress will be reviewed. The manager remains responsible for appropriate oversight and support. Delegation therefore involves designing a workable relationship between authority and accountability, rather than assigning a difficult task and assuming the recipient can overcome every organisational obstacle alone.

Within central government, Managing Public Money, the Treasury's framework for handling public funds, makes each accounting officer personally responsible for regularity, propriety, value for money and feasibility. Local authorities, housing associations and NHS bodies operate under their own statutory and regulatory regimes. In every case, empowering a team neither dilutes those responsibilities nor authorises spending outside agreed limits. The task is to provide the greatest practical discretion within lawful boundaries, with clear escalation routes.^[16]

The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government's accounting officer system statement, published in July 2026, offers a concrete departmental example. Investment proposals or financial transactions costing more than £12,000, including value added tax, require a business case and approval through specified senior authorities. At the same time, the budget holder can authorise commitments below that figure. A defined threshold tells staff exactly where their discretion ends, which is the precondition for using it confidently.^[17]

Managers can apply the same principle to everyday operations by agreeing purchasing limits, service recovery options or defined process adjustments appropriate to each role. Support should increase where decisions carry greater consequences, while routine choices should avoid unnecessary approval layers. The aim is a team that delivers confidently within understood boundaries. Leadership becomes more effective when the manager builds reliable judgement across the team, rather than remaining indispensable for every decision.

The Talent That Never Gets Developed

Undeveloped talent rarely looks like an operational failure. Work continues, experienced employees deliver reliably, and vacancies remain manageable. The weakness surfaces when the organisation needs new capabilities or when a departing specialist takes knowledge no one else holds. Succession then depends on luck or expensive external recruitment. The Magnolia Manager can preserve current output for years while quietly reducing the organisation's capacity to respond to demands that everyone can see approaching.

The Department for Education's Employer Skills Survey 2024 estimated employer training

expenditure at £53.0 billion, down from £59.0 billion in 2022 at 2024 prices, a real-terms fall of 10.2%. In England, government funding for new Level 7 apprenticeships starting from January 2026 is restricted to under-22s, with exceptions for 22–24-year-olds with an education, health and care plan or local authority care experience. Earlier starts remain funded through completion.^[18, 19]

Jaguar Land Rover (JLR) reported in May 2024 that more than 20,000 colleagues and partners had received electrification and digital skills training through its Future Skills Programme, with at least 15,000 more employees to follow. Its Learning Academy was investing about £20 million a year. The lesson for managers is timing: JLR built capability ahead of its planned shift to electric vehicles, rather than scrambling to recruit once demand arrived.^[20]

Succession planning translates these ambitions into practical experience. Employees can lead a defined project, deputise for a colleague or take responsibility for a manageable decision with appropriate support. Each critical role should have at least one person progressing towards cover, with the gap reviewed regularly. Progress becomes visible when more people can handle important work confidently, reducing dependence on individual expertise and creating credible routes for advancement that capable employees can see.

Busy Teams, Little Progress

A crowded diary can create the appearance of effective management. Meetings take place, reports circulate, and employees move quickly between urgent tasks. Yet activity says little about whether customers receive better service, recurring problems are resolved, or resources are used more effectively. The Magnolia Manager may become comfortable overseeing this movement because it is visible and familiar, while the outcomes it was meant to deliver quietly fail to improve.

Meetings become particularly costly when they lack a decision, a clear owner or a defined next step. In an illustrative calculation, twelve employees attending a weekly two-hour meeting consume twenty-four working hours each week. At an assumed employment cost of £30 per hour over forty-six weeks, that represents £33,120 of annual staff capacity. The calculation does not prove the meeting is wasteful; it establishes the resource commitment against which you can assess its contribution.

Reports can create a similar illusion when producing them matters more than using them. A dashboard showing completed tasks may conceal delayed cases, repeat contacts or unresolved complaints. Useful measures link activity to quality, timeliness, and outcomes, and show whether better processes reduce demand. When the same problems generate the same reports month after month, reporting becomes a record of ongoing difficulty rather than a tool for resolving it.

The NAO's May 2024 report on His Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC) illustrates the gap between effort and experience. Customers and their agents spent 7.0 million hours waiting to reach advisers in 2022–23, equivalent to 798 years, while the customer service directorate's net cost was £881 million. In the first eleven months of 2023–24, callers waited nearly 23 minutes on average, and only about two-thirds of attempts were answered, against an 85% target.^[21]

The appropriate response is to clarify the relationship between work and results. Managers can identify which meetings change decisions, which reports prompt action and which routine tasks genuinely prevent errors. Activities without a defensible purpose deserve reconsideration, while necessary assurance should remain proportionate. A team makes meaningful progress when its effort improves delivery or capability, rather than merely filling every available hour with work that produces little benefit for those it serves.

When Strong Performers Stop Trying—or Leave

Strong performers often contribute more than their job descriptions require. They anticipate difficulties, support colleagues and suggest improvements because they care about the quality

of the work. That contribution can diminish when effort repeatedly meets indifference, or when increased responsibility brings neither development nor recognition. Employees may continue meeting contractual expectations while withdrawing the initiative that previously helped the team adapt, and the loss stays hidden because routine performance initially appears unchanged.

The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) surveyed 5,017 employees for its Good Work Index 2025. It found that 29% considered themselves overqualified for their role and 34% believed they had the skills to cope with more demanding duties. Among overqualified employees, 29% said they were likely to quit within twelve months, compared with 15% whose qualifications matched their job. The association highlights a retention risk when capability remains underused.^[22]

The CMI's research points in the same direction: half of workers who rated their manager as ineffective planned to leave within twelve months, compared with 21% of those who rated their manager as effective.^[1] The CIPD found that only 39% of employees saw good prospects for career advancement, although 56% reported opportunities to develop their skills.^[22] Development therefore remains possible where promotion is scarce, through broader responsibilities and visible recognition of growing capability.

Managers should avoid treating every departure as disloyalty or every reduction in extra effort as poor attitude. Pay, caring responsibilities, health and career changes all influence decisions. Equally, retaining capable people requires listening before frustration becomes an exit interview. Regular conversations about workload, development and ambition can reveal preventable problems early. The aim is sustainable contribution, with employees choosing to engage rather than being expected to provide unlimited additional effort indefinitely.

The Magnolia Manager in Procurement and Supply Chains

In procurement and supply chains, stagnant leadership can hide behind apparently orderly processes. Purchase orders are issued, tenders follow established procedures, and suppliers receive routine performance reports. However, commercial opportunities remain unexplored, delivery failures recur, and employees learn little beyond processing transactions. Technical compliance remains essential, but teams also need the judgement to challenge specifications, understand markets and recognise when familiar arrangements no longer serve the organisation's operational requirements.

Public procurement accounts for around £385 billion of spending each year, according to the Cabinet Office's guide to the Procurement Act 2023, which came into force on 24 February 2025 for most contracting authorities in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The Act strengthens the emphasis on contract management and transparency. Compliant award procedures remain essential, but the regime increasingly asks whether contracts deliver what was promised after the standstill period ends.^[23]

Section 52 generally requires contracting authorities to set at least three KPIs before entering public contracts with estimated values above £5 million, unless performance cannot appropriately be assessed through KPIs. Exceptions include framework agreements, concessions, and light-touch contracts. Where the reporting requirements apply, Section 71 requires assessment against those KPIs at least once every twelve months and on termination, with information published. Defined measures therefore support accountability throughout the contract's life.^[24, 25]

The NAO's July 2024 review reported approximately £125 billion in annual public sector expenditure on common goods and services, including £25 billion through Crown Commercial Service (CCS) frameworks in 2022–23. Its analysis estimated that halving the CCS levy could save over £500 million over five years to 2028–29, assuming projected growth and suppliers pass all savings to customers. The estimate illustrates the importance of examining procurement charges and their consequences.^[26]

Supplier relationships reveal the difference particularly clearly. A stagnant approach records missed deliveries without investigating causes, or demands lower prices without examining requirements and dependencies. Constructive leadership brings procurement, finance, operations and suppliers together, weighing total cost, quality and continuity alongside price. Resilience choices need the same openness: a second source may raise costs while reducing disruption, and holding more stock protects service but ties up working capital. Avoiding the discussion leaves assumptions untested.

In January 2025, the NAO reported that government commercial teams had insufficient digital expertise and typically adopted a generalist model when buying technology. It cited annual digital procurement expenditure of at least £14 billion, while warning that the spending picture was incomplete. Its findings reinforce the need for commercial and technical colleagues to work as one team. Additional paperwork cannot compensate for limited understanding of the market, the requirement or the implementation challenge.^[27]

Leadership Within Constraints

Apparent stagnation does not always originate with the manager. A team may face an unfilled vacancy, an outdated system, restricted spending authority or priorities that change faster than work can be completed. Employees can experience these conditions as weak leadership even when their manager is working hard to improve them. Fair assessment therefore examines what the manager can influence, what requires escalation and whether the organisation provides the resources needed to meet reasonable expectations.

The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) provides a historical example. In December 2022, the NAO reported that maintaining ageing systems consumed 76% of Defra's digital, data and technology expenditure. It praised a well-designed plan to address urgent legacy risks, backed by £366 million for 2022 to 2025 compared with £100 million for 2016 to 2019, but concluded that the funding could neither reduce risks to an acceptable level nor support wider transformation.^[28]

The case shows how structural limits and purposeful action can coexist. Managers cannot spend the same money twice, replace systems without authorisation or promise additional staff when recruitment is restricted. They can explain consequences, prioritise transparently and escalate material risks with evidence. Leadership weakens when constraints become vague excuses, and strengthens when leaders document their practical effects so that decision-makers understand the delivery choices those constraints force upon the organisation.

Practical escalation follows a recognisable shape. A manager facing more demand than capacity can set out what must continue, what can safely wait and what needs further support, together with the risks of each choice. A clear, evidenced request for a decision gives senior colleagues something to act upon, whereas repeated general complaints about workload rarely do. Progress within constraints depends on honest prioritisation and realistic commitments.

The Responsibility of Senior Leadership

Senior leaders cannot reasonably demand initiative while maintaining arrangements that discourage it. If managers receive conflicting priorities, little development support, and criticism whenever a sensible trial hits a snag, caution becomes an understandable response. Addressing stagnation therefore requires more than urging middle managers to become ambitious. Boards and executive teams must examine whether their decisions on priorities, resources and rewards actually support the behaviour they want to see.

The Financial Reporting Council (FRC) places culture within board responsibility through the UK Corporate Governance Code 2024, which applies to financial years beginning on or after 1 January 2025. Principle B asks boards to align purpose, values, strategy, and culture, and Provision 2 requires them to assess and monitor culture. The Code applies to companies in

the commercial companies and closed-ended investment funds listing categories, rather than to every UK employer.^[29]

Its wider relevance lies in the link between executive decisions and behaviour throughout an organisation. The Code asks remuneration committees to review workforce remuneration and align incentives and rewards with culture. Any executive team can apply the same test: whether promotion panels examine how candidates develop others and resolve persistent problems, and whether they treat carefully designed failures as learning or as incompetence. Practical signals outweigh published values.^[29]

Support structures matter equally. The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) identifies six areas within its Management Standards for work-related stress: demands, control, support, relationships, role and change. Its statistics for 2024–25 estimated that 964,000 workers suffered work-related stress, depression or anxiety, while workplace injury and new cases of work-related ill health cost an estimated £22.9 billion in 2023–24. Unrealistic demands and unclear roles are executive responsibilities, not individual failings.^[30, 31]

Accountability ultimately runs in both directions. Senior leaders should set priorities, grant proportionate authority, and ensure managers can seek advice when decisions become difficult. They should also challenge repeated avoidance where resources and expectations are clear. Consistency matters: a manager cannot develop confidence if senior colleagues routinely overturn reasonable choices without explanation. Executive teams should expect to explain their own decisions as readily as they expect managers who report to them to explain theirs.

Recognising the Warning Signs

Recognising stagnation begins with patterns, not isolated incidents. An occasional delayed decision may be sensible; a repeated inability to conclude straightforward matters deserves examination. A practical first step is a decision log that records each matter awaiting resolution, its age, the stated reason for delay, the person authorised to act, and the agreed review date. Decisions repeatedly outstanding beyond those review dates provide far stronger evidence than general impressions of indecisiveness.

Employee proposals offer a second source of evidence. Reviewers can count the suggestions submitted over the past year, how many still await a response, how long the oldest has waited, and how many were implemented or rejected with reasons. A team that has stopped proposing anything deserves curiosity rather than reassurance, because employees may have learned that contributing changes little. Conversations with colleagues at different levels help explain what the numbers show.

Development commitments provide a third test. Appraisal records show what training, coaching or stretch assignments were agreed, but the more revealing question is how many were completed and then applied to real work. A manager whose team attends courses but never takes on broader responsibilities may be meeting development targets on paper while capability stays exactly where it was. Evidence of new skills in use matters more than attendance.

Escalation patterns form a fourth indicator. Reviewers can sample routine decisions referred upwards over a recent period and ask whether each genuinely required higher authority. Persistent escalation of matters that fall within delegated limits suggests either a lack of confidence or reluctance to let go. Restricted discretion may, however, reflect organisational controls, so reviewers should establish whether limits are being retained personally or imposed by others before drawing any conclusions.

Sustained improvement completes the picture. Teams should be able to point to changes in quality, timeliness, capability or resource use measured against an established baseline, and to show that gains have lasted rather than faded after initial attention. When performance hasn't moved, reviewers should consider shifts in demand and available capacity before

drawing conclusions. Flat results during rising demand may represent a genuine achievement, while flat results during stable conditions deserve questions.

No single indicator proves stagnation. The strongest assessments combine operational records with employee experience and the manager's own explanation, looking for the same pattern across several sources. Two or three indicators pointing in the same direction justify a constructive conversation; one in isolation rarely does. Equally, reviewers should record evidence of progress as carefully as evidence of difficulty, so the assessment reflects the whole picture rather than confirming an impression formed in advance.

Helping the Magnolia Manager Move Forward

Improvement begins more effectively with specific feedback than with a memorable label. Calling someone a Magnolia Manager may create defensiveness while revealing little about what must change. A constructive discussion identifies the behaviour, its consequences and the expected alternative. For example, repeatedly delaying development conversations leaves colleagues uncertain about progression. Explaining that impact creates a clearer starting point than criticising personality or demanding an undefined increase in leadership energy and visible enthusiasm.

The manager's explanation deserves careful attention. Limited confidence, competing demands, unclear authority, or insufficient preparation each calls for a different response. Coaching cannot resolve an unmanageable workload, just as additional resources will not automatically correct habitual avoidance. The discussion should therefore establish both personal development needs and organisational barriers. A credible improvement plan records what the manager will do, what support senior colleagues will provide and how both contributions will be reviewed.

The Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (Acas), in guidance updated in June 2026, recommends that performance reviews cover what an employee does well, areas for improvement, whether more support or training is needed, and development objectives. It also encourages regular feedback, coaching and one-to-one check-ins between formal reviews, with objectives that are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound. Good practice, in other words, is continuous rather than annual.^[32]

Coaching should create opportunities to practise judgement on real work. An illustrative ninety-day plan might include clearing an agreed backlog of outstanding decisions, making one supported change to delegation within the team and delivering one process improvement measured against a baseline. These are adaptable examples rather than universal targets, and circumstances may require different priorities. The aim is demonstrable behavioural change, supported by reflection and feedback, rather than simply completing another course.

A September 2025 Home Office case study showed how organisations can make improvement easier to attempt. Working with the Accelerated Capability Environment, the department developed an innovation readiness assessment, a practical toolkit, and a route planner across three workstreams, addressing barriers such as limited confidence and difficulty finding the right people to support an idea. The lesson is that managers attempt change more readily when the route is visible, and help is easy to find.^[33]

Building Teams That Can Challenge and Improve

Teams become more capable of improvement when they treat questioning as part of responsible work. Employees should be able to ask why a process exists, identify an unintended consequence or challenge an assumption without being seen as obstructive. Leaders can model this by acknowledging uncertainty and responding calmly to disagreement. The expectation remains constructive contribution: colleagues explain the issue, consider evidence and help develop workable alternatives instead of simply criticising existing arrangements.

Sharing authority gives that contribution practical meaning. Teams can receive permission to

test a defined change within agreed limits, with a clear owner, available resources and a review date. Oversight should reflect the consequences, particularly where safety, personal information, contractual obligations or public expenditure are involved. A useful trial sets out the intended benefit, foreseeable risks, and stopping conditions before implementation begins, allowing learning while retaining appropriate control.

The Cabinet Office's evaluation of One Big Thing 2024, a civil service initiative focused on innovation, recorded 161,152 completions of an online Innovation Masterclass, 4,891 team conversations and 2,411 case studies of experiments from 34 public sector organisations. The evaluation excluded long-term cultural change, noting that embedding culture across an organisation of that size could take more than five years. Launching participation is easy; sustaining it requires persistent leadership.^[34]

Accountability should continue whether experiments succeed or fail. Teams need to document what changed, whether outcomes improved and which assumptions proved incorrect. A trial that reveals an unsuitable approach can still prevent a bigger mistake, provided boundaries were respected, and the learning is used. Leaders should recognise honest reporting while addressing careless practice. An improving culture combines permission to question with responsibility for evidence, consequences, and applying lessons learned.

Measuring Progress Beyond Routine Delivery

Routine delivery remains essential, but it should sit alongside evidence that the organisation is becoming more capable. A balanced review can examine service quality, timeliness, recurring errors and the team's ability to handle unfamiliar demands. Measures should reflect the operation's purpose and the needs of those it serves. Counting completed actions alone risks overlooking whether those actions changed anything meaningful, or moved problems elsewhere in the system.

Decision quality can be assessed through the timeliness of choices, the clarity of reasoning and the frequency of avoidable reversals. Faster decisions are valuable only when proportionate checks remain effective. Employee voice is better assessed by responses to proposals and the changes they prompt than by submission numbers alone. Development should show stronger skills, broader coverage, and greater independence, with evidence that learning has been applied successfully to real responsibilities.

Operational measures also need a baseline and an appropriate comparison period. A reduction in complaints may reflect lower demand, while faster completion may conceal poorer quality or greater pressure on colleagues. Teams should therefore examine related indicators and workload changes before claiming improvement. Sustained progress is more convincing than a favourable week, and monitoring should continue long enough to establish whether benefits persist under normal operating conditions once initial attention has moved elsewhere.

East London NHS Foundation Trust reported in January 2025 that a quality improvement programme on patient flow had cut weekly out-of-area placements from a peak of 86 to one, reduced bed occupancy from 105.5% to 94% and shortened length of stay across its London services by 17%. It projected £8.6 million in annual cost avoidance against an April to July 2024 baseline. Clear baselines made both the service and financial claims testable.^[35]

Financial reporting should distinguish money released from a budget, expenditure avoided and staff capacity made available. Each can matter, but they are not interchangeable, and projected avoidance is not the same as realised savings. Finance colleagues should validate calculations, implementation costs and assumptions about continued performance. A useful management review then asks whether improvements have strengthened delivery without creating unacceptable risks or workloads elsewhere in the organisation or among the people delivering them.

Summary: The Cost of Standing Still

Dependable management has real value. Organisations need people who understand the

work, maintain standards and provide consistency when circumstances become difficult. The problem begins when reliability becomes a reason to leave capability undeveloped, decisions unresolved and recurring weaknesses untouched. The Magnolia Manager represents that pattern of limited progress, not a personality type. Calm leadership can be highly effective when it provides direction, encourages learning and responds purposefully to changing demands.

The cost of stagnation extends well beyond immediate financial performance. Maintenance backlogs grow, customers wait, capable employees go underused, and succession depends on knowledge held by too few people. In the most serious cases, unanswered concerns about living conditions have cost lives and reshaped the law. These consequences accumulate gradually, which makes them easy to overlook until the bill for years of inaction finally arrives in full.

Responsibility sits across the leadership structure. Managers should develop others, exercise judgement, and address problems within their authority, while senior colleagues must set clear priorities, provide realistic resources, and maintain consistent incentives. Improvement should start with evidence and constructive support, not labels or indiscriminate change. Organisations need room for proportionate experimentation, alongside controls that protect safety, public resources and commercial interests. Progress becomes sustainable when accountability and learning reinforce each other.

Standing still is sometimes the right choice, especially when stability protects essential services or lets a sound improvement take hold. It becomes damaging when the choice is never reconsidered, and familiarity outweighs evidence. Effective leadership preserves what works while helping people and systems develop for what comes next. The lasting test is whether the organisation remains dependable while expanding its ability to respond, improve and use the potential already within its teams.

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