The Write-Up

by Saša Cibula

White Paper

Managing the Unmanageable



The Chronic Complainer, the Quiet Quitter, and the Star Who's Toxic.

PEOPLE MANAGEMENT / FRONTLINE LEADERSHIP

Managing the Unmanageable

The Chronic Complainer, the Quiet Quitter, and the Star Who's Toxic

A research-grounded management guide to coaching recurring complaints, resetting performance expectations, addressing damaging conduct, and knowing when HR must step in.

> **THE MANAGEMENT PRINCIPLE**
> "Respond to what can be observed, required, supported and verified—not to the label attached to the employee."

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THE MANAGEMENT PROBLEM

Three familiar labels. Three different management decisions.

A supervisor can lose hours trying to change someone's attitude when the actual problem is much more specific. A concern keeps returning without a decision. Required work is no longer completed at the agreed standard. A strong producer repeatedly treats coworkers in ways that damage coordination or trust. These situations may look similar because they create frustration. They do not require the same response.

The terms chronic complainer, quiet quitter and toxic star are useful headlines for this paper, not diagnoses or labels to place in an employee record. A manager cannot measure a personality label. A manager can establish what was said or done, what standard applies, what impact followed, and what should happen next. This distinction is more than polite wording. It makes decisions fairer, coaching clearer and documentation more reliable.

Do not confuse discomfort with misconduct

Employees can challenge a decision, raise a safety concern, disagree with a manager or decline work outside their actual role without automatically performing poorly. Complaints about working conditions may be legally protected, including when employees act together or speak for coworkers. Silence can conceal problems rather than prove commitment. Leaders who demand positivity instead of examining facts risk missing information they need to run the operation.

The reverse error is just as costly. A genuine concern does not excuse threats or independently unacceptable conduct. Good production results do not excuse harassment, intimidation or repeated disrespect. And an employee's dissatisfaction does not remove the duty to perform the essential work of the role, subject to applicable rights and accommodations. Judge the concern, the performance and the conduct separately.

The useful question is not "What kind of person is this?"

Ask instead: **What exactly needs to change, and what decision is mine to make?** Complaints call first for fact-finding and a response. Performance gaps call for clear expectations, support and review. Conduct concerns call for boundaries and consistent consequences. Serious allegations and protected issues may require HR involvement before an ordinary coaching conversation begins.

> THE OPERATING STANDARD
>
> "Describe the behavior. Check the rule or expectation. Hear the employee's account. Decide the next action. Set a review point. Escalate promptly when the issue exceeds your authority."

BEFORE THE FIRST CONVERSATION

Get the facts before you choose the response

Managers create unnecessary conflict when they begin with a conclusion: “You are negative,” “You do not care,” or “You think the rules do not apply to you.” Those statements invite an argument about motives. Stronger management begins with a narrower record of actions that can be checked. A useful fact describes the task, conduct, date, requirement or message involved. It avoids guessing about attitude, loyalty or intent.

Separate four questions

What happened? Identify first-hand observations, approved records and specific reports that still need verification. **What should have happened?** Find the role requirement, performance standard or conduct rule that applied at the time. **What might explain the gap?** Ask about unclear direction, staffing, tools, training, competing instructions or a concern the employee wants to raise. **Who must decide?** Determine whether this is ordinary coaching, a formal performance matter or a report requiring HR or another designated function.

This sequence also stops managers from treating every disagreement as insubordination. A person can contest an instruction respectfully while remaining responsible for required work. A manager can listen to the objection, confirm what is and is not negotiable, and document the agreed next step without entering a debate about personality.

Use a short, direct opening

> OPENING SCRIPT
> “I want to address [specific work or behavior]. The expectation is [standard]. Here is what I can verify: [facts]. What am I missing, and what made the requirement difficult to meet?”

Listen for information that changes the decision. If the employee reports discrimination, harassment, a safety issue, possible retaliation, or an accommodation or leave need, follow the approved reporting route promptly. Do not promise absolute confidentiality, conduct a private investigation into serious allegations or ask for medical details you do not need. Record the concern accurately and involve the right people.

A good conversation ends with one of three decisions: the concern needs an answer; the required performance or behavior needs improvement; or the matter needs a more formal, impartial review. It should not end with a vague instruction to “improve your attitude.”

PATTERN ONE / REPEATED COMPLAINTS

The chronic complainer: find the issue behind the repetition

Repeated complaints drain time when nobody distinguishes an unresolved issue from a repeated conversation. The first responsibility is not to silence the employee. It is to learn whether the concern is specific, valid, already decided, still being investigated or outside the manager's authority. Good managers protect the value of speaking up while preventing endless uncertainty about what will happen next.

Give the concern a decision path

Ask the employee to identify the condition, its impact and what has already been reported. Check the facts rather than demanding a positive attitude or insisting that the employee bring a solution. Safety, discrimination, wage and working-condition concerns still require the proper route when no solution is offered. Identify who can decide, what must be checked and when the employee will hear back. Keep the concern open until an answer, action or clear next review has been provided.

When a concern is valid, correct the problem or give a credible plan. When a request cannot be approved, explain the decision and the constraint. When facts remain uncertain, say what is being checked and by whom. Mark the status plainly: open for review, awaiting another decision, answered with follow-up due, or closed after a communicated decision. Closing an internal task does not remove an employee's right to raise a new concern, pursue an available appeal or engage in protected activity.

Close the loop without shutting down employee voice

> RESPONSE SCRIPT
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> "I understand the concern is [issue] and the impact you are reporting is [impact]. I will check [facts or decision owner] and update you by [date]. If you have new information or an urgent safety issue, raise it immediately. I will not ask you to stop reporting concerns."

After the response, check whether there is new evidence, a continuing risk, an unanswered point or a different issue. Any of these may require another review. Where the employee is asking about the same decision with no new information, repeat the answer and the available next channel instead of restarting an identical discussion. Keep the distinction clear: organizing management follow-up is appropriate; limiting protected speech or discouraging legitimate reporting is not.

A useful response when the decision is questioned again is: "The decision on [specific request] remains [decision], for [reason]. If there is new information, a safety issue or a concern requiring another reporting route, I will make sure it is reviewed. Otherwise, the next step is [available review route or scheduled update]." The manager should record the decision and review date, not count how often an employee has spoken up.

The objective is not fewer complaints at any cost. It is fewer **unanswered** concerns, clearer decisions and less time lost revisiting matters that can be tracked and resolved.

PATTERN ONE / ACCOUNTABILITY

When repeated complaints become a conduct issue

Some recurring conversations eventually include behavior that requires a separate response: interruptions during required briefings, personal insults, refusal to follow a lawful and properly assigned task, or interference with another person's work. Do not describe those behaviors as "complaining too much." Record the specific conduct and evaluate it against a rule that is applied consistently. The content of a protected complaint must not be treated as the performance offense.

Address the behavior, not the right to raise concerns

Before addressing conduct linked to a complaint, check whether it may involve protected reporting or labor activity; seek HR or labor-relations guidance when unsure. If a distinct and unprotected conduct problem remains, identify the behavior and the consistently applied rule. Hear the response, explain the standard and set a review. Avoid suggesting that the employee must stop raising the original concern. The goal is a workable boundary, not a public argument or a warning against speaking up.

> **BOUNDARY SCRIPT**
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> "You can continue raising concerns through the available channels. Separately, during [required activity], the standard is [specific conduct rule]. I observed [verifiable behavior]. I need [observable behavior] going forward. Let us confirm what that requires."

What deserves documentation

Record the issue raised, the route used to address it, the answer or pending decision, and any separately verifiable conduct concern. Include the employee's explanation, the expectation communicated and the follow-up date. Do not write "chronic complainer," "bad attitude," or speculation about motives. Documentation should allow a different manager to understand the facts without inheriting your frustration.

Escalate promptly when the report concerns harassment, discrimination, retaliation, threats, injury or unsafe conditions, or when it involves pay or working conditions that may be protected. Also seek guidance before formal discipline if complaints and conduct are intertwined. A supervisor's role is to preserve facts and keep the operation safe, not to decide protected-activity questions alone.

If an employee says the boundary is an attempt to silence a complaint, respond to that concern directly: "Raising the concern is not the issue I am addressing. I am asking for [specific conduct required during the work activity]. You may use [available reporting route] about the original concern." If the two cannot be separated confidently, stop the disciplinary discussion and obtain guidance before proceeding.

The management test is simple: **Did we respond to the substance, and are we holding a clear standard for independently unacceptable conduct?** Both parts matter. Neglecting the first suppresses useful information. Neglecting the second allows harmful behavior to continue.

PATTERN TWO / DISENGAGEMENT

The quiet quitter: define the job before judging commitment

"Quiet quitting" often describes a worker who has withdrawn extra effort, stopped volunteering or appears less engaged. None of those observations, by itself, proves a performance failure. An employee may meet the actual requirements of the job while declining optional work. Another may miss core deliverables, disregard required handoffs or fall below established quality standards. Those are different management problems, and only the second establishes a performance gap on its own.

Make the required standard visible

Review the work actually assigned to the role: output, quality, timeliness, safety, teamwork obligations and required communication. Confirm that targets are reasonable for the available time, staffing and equipment, and that expectations were explained consistently. Do not quietly turn favors, voluntary overtime or extra assignments into mandatory expectations for a single employee. When business needs have changed, use the proper process to update the role or assignment.

Research on engagement suggests that clarity, development and the quality of management conversations influence how connected employees feel to their work. But engagement is not an enforceable personality trait. The supervisor's practical job is to establish the performance standard and explore what prevents the employee from meeting it. Personal enthusiasm is not a substitute for observable results.

Have a reset conversation, not a loyalty test

> **PERFORMANCE RESET SCRIPT**
>
> "I want to separate required work from optional extra work. The role requires [outputs, quality and communication]. Over [review period], the records show [specific gap, if any]. What is affecting your ability to meet that requirement? Let us agree on the work standard, support and next check."

There are two legitimate paths. When the required work is being done well, there is no performance case to invent. Keep a normal management conversation about workload, recognition, development, scheduling and whether the employee sees a future in the role. Do not demand enthusiasm, volunteering or unpaid extra effort as proof of commitment. When required work is below the established standard, identify the gap, remove obstacles within your control and begin a measurable improvement review. In both cases, avoid guessing at private motives or medical conditions.

When performance is satisfactory, lead rather than discipline

Ask what would make the assigned work more effective, which parts of the role use the employee's strengths, and whether there is a useful development opportunity. Listen without promising a promotion or schedule change you cannot approve. Agree on any action the manager actually controls and follow through. If the employee prefers to meet the role as written and has met the standards, manage the work fairly instead of penalizing a lack of visible excitement.

PATTERN TWO / RECOVERY

Coach the performance gap and verify the change

Once an actual gap is established, the goal is not to win a motivational speech. It is to make successful work achievable and verifiable. A useful coaching agreement names the result to deliver, the quality threshold, the resources or training provided, and the date of the next review. It should also identify what the manager must do. Assigning accountability without removing a known obstacle is not a credible improvement plan.

Make the review short and measurable

Choose a small number of meaningful measures taken from the job itself. Review completed required assignments, quality checks, handoff accuracy, attendance or response times only where these are legitimate job expectations and the data are reliable. Avoid counting facial expressions, social participation or willingness to stay after a shift unless a documented role requirement actually applies. Explain how improvement will be evaluated before the review begins.

Give feedback close to the work. Compare the observed result with the agreed standard, ask what got in the way and decide on one change to test. Check whether the measure reflects the employee's actual assignments and available support. A disputed record deserves verification, not an argument. If training, workload or staffing is the obstacle, address it and reassess. If the requirement is clear, the support is available and the gap continues, document each missed standard and consult the formal performance process.

> **FOLLOW-UP SCRIPT**
> "We agreed on [required result] by [date] with [support]. The verified result is [fact]. The remaining gap is [specific requirement]. What will change before [next review], and what support or decision do you need from me?"

Know when the issue is no longer yours alone

Bring HR in when formal corrective action is being considered, when similar cases have been handled differently, or when attendance, leave, disability, accommodation or possible retaliation issues arise. Do not demand a diagnosis or make your own medical judgment. Describe essential job duties and refer accommodation questions to the designated process. If urgent safety or serious misconduct appears, follow the applicable escalation route rather than waiting for the ordinary coaching cycle.

Respond when the employee challenges the assessment

When the employee disputes the numbers, say: "Let us check the source record together and correct anything inaccurate before deciding." When the answer is that others are allowed to miss the same target, check consistency instead of dismissing the point: "I will verify how this standard is applied across the team; we still need a fair expectation for this role." When the employee identifies a genuine barrier, record the support decision and the new review point. Do not announce disciplinary consequences before the required process and facts have been checked.

A performance reset is successful when the employee knows the required work, has a fair chance to meet it, receives specific feedback and understands the next decision. It is not successful merely because the employee promises to "be more engaged."

PATTERN THREE / HIGH OUTPUT, HARMFUL CONDUCT

The star who is toxic: separate results from behavior

A top performer can create a difficult management decision when the output is strong but the working relationships are damaged. Managers often delay action because the person holds critical knowledge, fills staffing gaps or delivers results others cannot match. Delay has a price: coworkers may stop raising problems, coordination suffers, standards become uneven, and people learn that production buys permission to disregard the rules.

Research on harmful workplace conduct makes the business risk clear: individual output does not erase the cost of actions that damage colleagues or the wider operation. Studies of workplace rudeness also show how even relatively low-intensity negative interactions can influence later interactions. But "toxic" is too broad to manage. Use observable behavior: insults, intimidation, withholding required information, undermining agreed processes or violating a stated rule. Check allegations fairly rather than assuming they are true because the employee is unpopular.

Set two standards at the same time

The first is the performance result the role requires. The second is how work must be carried out: respectful communication, safe conduct, appropriate sharing of information, compliance with team decisions and treatment of coworkers. Neither standard replaces the other. Use written policies and consistently applied role expectations; do not invent a new rule only for the person who frustrates you.

Speak plainly about the conduct

> CONDUCT COACHING SCRIPT
>
> "Your results on [verified performance measure] meet the standard. I also need to address [specific observed conduct]. Our requirement is [policy or behavior standard]. This behavior must change regardless of output. What is your understanding of what occurred?"

Give the person time to respond. Then be exact about the behavior expected at the next meeting, handoff or shared task. Explain how the change will be observed, record the conversation and agree on a near-term check. Do not bargain for good behavior by offering exceptions to normal rules. Recognize performance fairly while making conduct non-negotiable.

Keep the conversation steady when results are used as a defense

If the employee points to excellent output, the response is: "The performance result matters, and the behavior standard still applies." If the employee says coworkers are too sensitive, bring the discussion back to the exact action and rule: "I am not asking you to agree with someone's feelings; I am asking you to meet [specified workplace standard]." If the facts are contested, pause the conclusion and verify the record. Never treat a disputed allegation as a proven violation merely to make the conversation easier.

PATTERN THREE / CONSEQUENCES

Protect the team without turning coaching into an investigation

Ordinary performance coaching and serious misconduct allegations must not be handled the same way. If a reliable observation shows a low-level breach of a clear conduct expectation, direct feedback and a documented review may be appropriate under policy. If someone reports harassment, discrimination, threats, retaliation, serious bullying, violence, or another serious policy violation, contact HR or the designated reporting function promptly. Preserve what you know and avoid promising an outcome before the facts are reviewed.

Do not ask harmed employees to carry the solution

Coworkers should have a safe, accessible way to report concerns without having to confront the person accused. Do not require a private reconciliation meeting as a condition of reporting serious conduct. Avoid sharing allegations broadly. Ask HR or the authorized investigator what interim steps are appropriate and ensure that no one is punished for raising or participating in a protected concern.

When the manager is authorized to address a verified, lower-level conduct problem, the message should be steady. State the behavior that must stop, the required replacement behavior, how it will be checked and the review date. At review, record whether the expectation was met; do not substitute a production result for evidence about conduct. A repeated breach may require formal action under policy. Serious allegations may require an impartial investigation from the start, regardless of how productive the employee is.

If the employee minimizes the concern, repeat the behavioral requirement once and redirect to the next decision. Do not prolong an argument over whether someone “meant” harm when observable conduct can be assessed. For a recurring verified breach, provide HR with the prior standard, coaching dates, employee responses, objective records and the result of each review. HR or the authorized decision maker determines the formal process and proportionate consequences. The manager remains responsible for preventing further harm within their authority and checking that the referral was received.

> **ACCOUNTABILITY SCRIPT**
> “The work result does not change the conduct standard. We agreed that [specific behavior] would stop and that [required behavior] would occur. The verified information now shows [fact]. I am referring this through [appropriate process] for the next decision.”

Change the system that rewards exceptions

Check whether managers excuse the conduct because the employee delivers numbers, controls a key process or is seen as irreplaceable. Reduce unnecessary dependence on one person by sharing expertise, creating backups and applying the same conduct expectations to everyone. Also review whether the behavior was encouraged by incentives, poor workload design or inconsistent leadership responses. Correcting the system does not remove individual responsibility; it makes the standard more believable.

THE MANAGEMENT DECISION

Know when to coach, document and escalate

Coaching, documentation and escalation are not three steps that every case must pass through. A manager may coach and document the same day, or refer a serious allegation immediately while making a factual record. Choose the first response based on risk, verified facts, prior action, consistency and the authority you actually hold. The following four conditions provide a practical starting point; employer policy still governs the formal process.

SITUATION	MANAGER ACTION	RECORD / NEXT DECISION
Serious or protected matter	Refer promptly to HR, safety, labor relations or the designated authority. Preserve facts; protect immediate safety; do not conduct an unauthorized investigation.	Who received it, when, and what happens next. Do not wait for repeated coaching.
Clear, ordinary gap	Coach against the stated standard, hear the response, offer support and agree on a review.	Brief factual note: what was seen, what was agreed and the review date.
Repeated verified gap	Review the earlier coaching and results. Check consistency and consult HR before formal corrective action.	Prior dates, evidence, support, employee response and authorized next step.
Unresolved or disputed facts	Verify records and obtain the proper decision. Keep legitimate reporting channels open.	What remains unknown, who is checking it and the update date.

One record that can withstand a second look

For every meaningful action, write the date, what was observed or reported, the rule or requirement, the employee's response, the decision, support offered and the next review. If the matter was referred, identify the receiving function, the date and time, the person or channel that accepted it, and who owns the next update. Attribute statements accurately: "reported" is not "observed." Keep notes in approved systems with restricted access; do not include labels, rumors, unnecessary medical details or conclusions an investigation has not established.

A fair response is a complete management action

At the review point, choose and record an outcome: standard met and issue closed; more support with a revised date; a newly verified concern requiring fact-finding; or formal review through the correct process. Avoid endless informal coaching when the same measurable gap persists. Equally, do not surprise employees with formal action for unclear expectations unless serious conduct or governing policy requires immediate response. Confirm that the employee received the message and that the next decision has a named owner.

Use the same logic for all three patterns: hear the substance of complaints; measure the required work; hold a consistent conduct standard. Confidence does not require aggression. The manager's authority becomes stronger when decisions are specific, fair and followed through.

PRINTABLE MANAGER TOOL

The behavior-to-decision record

Use this one-page record after coaching or when arranging a referral. Enter real facts only, keep it in the approved system and limit access. Report threats, harassment, retaliation and other serious matters immediately through the designated process; this worksheet is not an investigation or incident report.

1 ISSUE TYPE	[ ] Repeated concern [ ] Required-performance gap [ ] Conduct concern
2 FACTS	Date / source: _____ Observed or verified action, result, or statement: _____ _____
3 STANDARD	Applicable requirement or policy: _____ What satisfactory work or conduct looks like: _____
4 EMPLOYEE RESPONSE	Explanation / concern / possible barrier (use employee's words accurately): _____
5 MANAGER ACTION	[ ] Concern routed for decision [ ] Coaching [ ] Support / training [ ] Escalation Agreed next action and responsible owner: _____ Support / decision the manager owes: _____
6 REVIEW	Review date: _____ Evidence of change: _____ Status: [ ] Resolved [ ] Continue support [ ] Further action under policy
7 ESCALATION TRIGGERS	[ ] Safety / threat [ ] Harassment / discrimination [ ] Possible retaliation [ ] Collective working-conditions concern [ ] Accommodation / protected leave [ ] Serious allegation / formal action [ ] Other issue requiring referral
8 REFERRAL & NEXT OWNER	[ ] No referral needed Referred to (role / channel): _____ Date / time: _____ Received / acknowledged by: _____ Next action owner: _____ Due / follow-up date: _____

Three short sentences worth keeping

For concerns: "Here is what I will check and when I will update you." **For performance:** "Here is the required result, the support available and when we will review it." **For conduct:** "The result does not excuse this behavior; the same standard applies to everyone."

RESEARCH & FURTHER READING

Sources behind the management method

This paper combines research on employee voice, engagement, feedback and workplace conduct with official management guidance. The three labels are teaching shorthand, not validated personnel categories. Local rules, collective agreements and employer policy control procedures; the reporting examples primarily reflect U.S. guidance. The Acas source provides a separate UK perspective.

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The leadership standard worth keeping

Good managers do not need to win a personality contest. They need to make work requirements visible, keep the door open to legitimate concerns, correct unacceptable conduct and decide when another function must act. The strongest response is neither endless patience nor instant discipline. It is accurate judgment followed by consistent execution.

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