

Managing weaponised incompetence in the workplace

By [Kate Neilson](#) 2 August, 2024

If weaponised incompetence is left unchecked, it can lead to significant productivity issues and relationship breakdowns. An HR expert offers advice to help build cultures of self-sufficiency and accountability.

"Can you take the minutes? You're just so much better at it than I am."

"Can you just do it for me? I'm too slow. You're faster than me."

"She didn't send me her parts of the presentation. That's why the deadline was missed."

Weaponised incompetence in the workplace can manifest in a variety of ways. It can look like task evasion, consistently missing deadlines, trying to justify poor-quality work, or shirking responsibility for tasks deemed outside of one's pay grade.

"It's the feigning of incompetence for personal gain," says Karen Gately, founder of HR consultancy Corporate Dojo. "There's usually a convenience factor attached – something is made easier for them if they [act] incompetent for whatever reason."

Gately believes there are three main drivers of this behaviour: avoidance, sabotage or control.

"They might be trying to avoid accountability or the inconvenience of having to do something. They might be trying to sabotage progress towards achieving things they don't want. Or, they might be trying to control the decisions or paths being taken."

It's not always a conscious behaviour, she adds. It might stem from a systemic issue, such as a [culture of blame](#) or avoidance, or, on an individual level, it could be the result of low confidence or fear.

"It could be coming from a fear of exposure, which could impact someone's credibility," she says.

It might seem like innocuous behaviour – a colleague asking how to convert a document into a PDF for the fourth time that week is hardly a 'toxic' behaviour – but given the potential snowball effects, it's worth considering how to curb these disruptive behaviours.

For example, knowledge workers in Australia [lose up to 600 hours due to distractions at work](#) each year which, according to [insights from the Economist Group](#), equates to \$27,585 per employee, or 29 per cent of the average salary.

After being distracted, [research](#) shows it takes the average employee 23 minutes to recover their focus – a concept known as [attention residue](#). With employees reportedly being distracted up to 10 times per day, that equates to nearly half of their workday being impacted.

Other than the immediate productivity costs, there are also longer-term impacts to consider, such as disengagement and increased turnover rates, which, of course, come with their own price tags.

"There's also an impact on team cohesion," says Gately. "Whenever people aren't carrying their load, that creates a challenge for everybody. It can create frustration and conflict. It can also erode relationships because if someone is feigning ignorance, ultimately somebody else is going to have to pick up that work, which can lead to resentment."

Essentially, weaponised incompetence can turn into a major handbrake on organisational outcomes and success.

Stonewallers and power hoarders

It's important to determine the difference between weaponised incompetence and a genuine need for assistance or additional support or training.

A telltale sign of weaponised incompetence is that it's often paired with one of the following behaviours or situations:

- A [patronising or condescending comment](#) cloaked as praise, such as: "You're so much better at stacking the dishwasher than I am..." or "I know you'll do a better job at this because you're better with technology..."
- **Stonewalling or knowledge hoarding.** People often withhold details or information when they feel their power, processes or position are under threat.

"I was once working with a company and we went to an individual to help us map out how a new process was going to work. We wanted to break down this process and learn how to do it more efficiently.

"She said things like, 'Well, I don't know how the whole thing works. I only know what I do.' She was very reluctant to give information and claimed she didn't have any of the information we needed, which wasn't necessarily true."

In this instance, Gately slowly coaxed the information out of the woman by asking a [series of strategic questions](#) and slowly piecing together the bigger picture.

- **Fear or instability:** During periods of change that employees aren't on board with, consciously or unconsciously, they might lean on perceived incompetence to sabotage the change. For example, they might be concerned that a new technology could put their job at risk; therefore, they do their best to push against it and pretend they don't understand how to use it.
- **Power play:** When someone is trying to exert power or control over

another person, they can exhibit weaponised incompetence.

For example, learning how to do 'menial' administrative elements of their job might be perceived as 'below them', therefore they burden more junior employees with the tasks, despite the tasks not being part of their job description.

"There are many businesses that don't have [executive assistants], for example. So an executive might be tempted to hand off those support tasks, rather than just doing it themselves.

"Ultimately, this undermines the ability of those other team members to have the focus and capacity on the job they need to get done."

To spot someone exhibiting this behaviour, Gately says HR should listen out for excuses rather than reasons.

"Obviously, there are plenty of circumstances where people need more resources or help to be able to do their jobs. But you also need to discern between that and an excuse."

An excuse might look like:

- [Scapegoating](#) or blaming others (e.g. not taking any personal accountability)
- Becoming overly emotional or defensive
- Citing vague or unverifiable obstacles. For instance, "The system was down, and I couldn't access the files," without any proof or follow-up.
- Consistently highlighting personal limitations, such as, "I'm just not good with numbers."
- Using workload as a perpetual excuse.
- Referring to lack of training repeatedly. For example, "I never received proper training for this," despite multiple opportunities for learning.

A good test to assess if someone might be feigning ignorance is to reflect on their past performance.

“If we understand people’s capabilities deeply, we can see if all of a sudden they’re unable to do something they were capable of in the past,” says Gately.

You can then engage in a conversation with them, forefronting curiosity and empathy.

“[You might say], ‘Help us to understand why this has changed, because you’ve been more than capable up until this point to learn new systems or take on this bigger challenge or deal with these complexities. What’s different now?’

“Observe what you know about this person. How have they been in the past? What have they been capable of? Where do we have evidence that it’s reasonable to expect that they can do this now?”

“Remove the game and introduce something that makes it become a detriment to their credibility, reputation or job security. This gives them a compelling reason to get past feigned incompetence.” – Karen Gately, Founder, Corporate Dojo

5 solutions to address weaponised incompetence at work

As with most instances of [unproductive workplace behaviours](#), the first port of call should always be to coach individuals to solve the challenges themselves, says Gately.

For example, those experiencing weaponised competence from a colleague could try saying:

- “Would it be helpful if you document this process for next time?”

- "I've got some competing priorities at the moment, but if you still need help tomorrow, I'm happy to show you how to do it."
- "It might be more efficient if you take a look at the previous examples we've done."
- "Have you checked the training manual or our knowledge base? You might find the steps there."

It won't always be realistic or effective for individuals to handle this on their own, so if HR or managers need to step in, it's important to depersonalise the conversation and focus on the impact, says Gately. She also suggests the following steps to move teams away from defaulting to this behaviour:

1. Make the behaviour feel undesirable

Weaponised incompetence is also often referred to as 'strategic incompetence', because the person usually gains something useful from the behaviour, such as avoiding having to take on more administrative duties or learn a new system.

HR practitioners can coach leaders to eradicate this behaviour by making the behaviour seem undesirable.

"If they've been incompetent in order to avoid taking on a task, then reinforce the fact that your judgement of their performance or competence has eroded. This makes it inconvenient to be incompetent.

"Remove the game and introduce something that makes it become a detriment to their credibility, reputation or job security. This gives them a compelling reason to get past feigned incompetence."

2. Create a culture of accountability

Underpinning a culture of accountability is a mindset of "owning the outcome", says Gately.

She uses the example of people who constantly blame others for their

missed deadlines or low quality of work.

“They’ll say things like, ‘I couldn’t deliver this report because the people in my team didn’t add in their parts.’ It’s about shining a spotlight on that [and saying] part of your responsibility is to chase the information you need because, ultimately, what you’re accountable for is that the outcome is successfully achieved.”

3. Give visibility to your organisation’s problem-solvers

So often, the people who receive praise and acknowledgement for their work are those whose names are on the final product: the report’s authors, the strategy’s masterminds, the deal’s closers.

But what about all the people who played a part throughout the process? Such as the person who untangled a complicated process or introduced a streamlined process? These problem-solvers are your organisation’s secret weapons, and they should be publicly championed.

“Recognise the people who can solve problems on their own and move processes forward. Reinforce the behaviours that you want to see across the business, rather than just addressing the gaps.”

Leaders should also coach people to become better problem-solvers, says Gately.

“When people come to them with a problem, leaders should say something like, ‘Take me through what you’ve already thought of in terms of solutions.’ When they do that, they’re leaving accountability with the person.”

4. Ensure people can easily access information

HR practitioners can champion a culture of self-sufficiency by ensuring everyone knows where to find key information.

“A classic one is people saying, ‘Do you know the answer to this question?’, and people are like, ‘Yeah, it’s in that report I sent you last

week,' or 'It's in the database that we all work hard to maintain.' We need to build awareness around where to find information to avoid unnecessary distractions for our colleagues."

Ensure all employees know how to access a database and make its location well-communicated in onboarding and training sessions, as well as at regular intervals, to reinforce the expectation that employees should engage in self-service support before seeking external support.

5. Make expectations clear

Gately recalls an instance where a CEO was concerned about the performance of one of their executives.

"They weren't delivering and they weren't able to answer the CEO's questions. Their excuse was, 'I've got other leaders in place to drive those things. I can't be expected to know everything they're doing. It's not possible to have my eye across everything!'

"That was about realigning expectations and saying, 'No one expects that of you, but as a senior leader, the expectation is that you will have mechanisms in place to accurately measure and monitor progress. We expect you to have competence around building frameworks and dashboards.' It's about clearly communicating what is within their remit."

Addressing weaponised incompetence requires a multifaceted approach that combines empathy, clear communication and strategic interventions. By fostering a culture of accountability, visibility and self-sufficiency, organisations can mitigate the detrimental effects of this behaviour and promote a more productive and harmonious workplace.

Learn how to have difficult conversations with employees by signing up to AHRI's [short course](#), which is designed to give you all the foundational tools you'll need to handle these conversations with confidence.