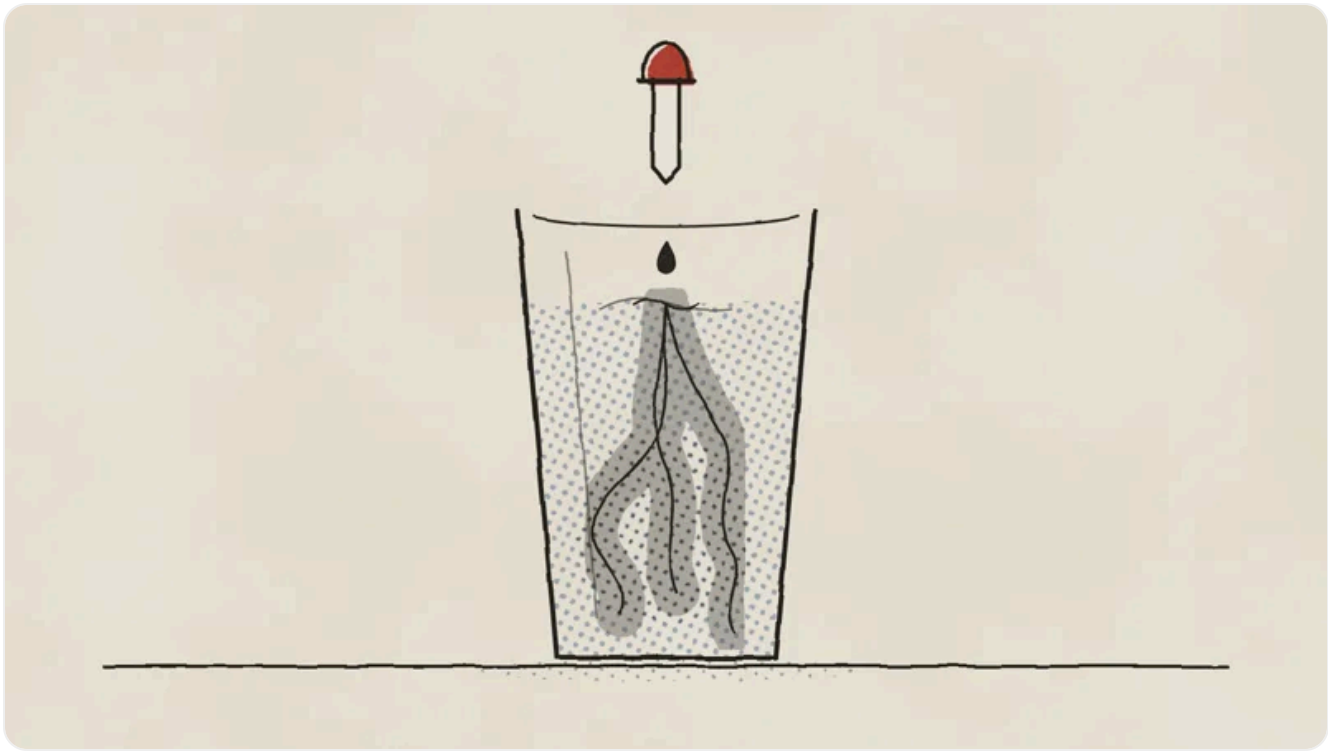
Issue 042 • ON LEADERSHIP • NOVEMBER 8, 2026 • 6 MIN READ

Why Mediocrity Is a Poison.



By Tommy Lee



When an organization slowly gets worse, there usually isn't one big disaster you can point to. Somewhere along the way, people started accepting okay work, and nobody said anything.

I think mediocrity works like a poison. A little bit doesn't seem like a big deal, but over time it gets into everything.

Think about a team you have been on where mediocre work was allowed. How long did it take before the best people stopped trying, or left?

Back before all of this I worked in the telecom industry. We had a wonderful manager, but over time that manager became so good he was promoted. They replaced him with an individual that lacked his hard work ethic and was so insecure. She was also lazy and took credit for what you did. Over time people started following her work habits because she got away with it. The team became a shell of itself of the hard working team it once was. Eventually she was laid off because the team had become such a mess.

Mediocrity is harder to deal with than bad performance

Joseph Grenny wrote an article for *Harvard Business Review* called "What to Do About Mediocrity on Your Team." His point was that the toughest test of a manager isn't how they handle poor performance. It is how they handle mediocrity.

When someone is doing terrible work, it is obvious, and most managers will eventually do something about it. Mediocre work is harder. It is good enough that you can let it slide. The person is nice, they show up, and they get most of it done. So you don't say anything. Then you don't say anything the next month either.

Grenny said you shouldn't let it fester, and he put it this way: "High performance is a norm that needs to be defended regularly and vigilantly."

How it spreads

Mediocrity spreads in a few ways.

- **Your best people notice.** They see someone else doing half the work and getting the same pay and the same praise. After a while they ask, why am I working this hard? Some of them slow down. Some of them leave.
- **The standard drops for everyone.** Whatever you allow becomes the new normal. If one late report is fine, then the next one is fine too.
- **New people pick it up.** New hires watch what everyone else gets away with, and that becomes their standard, no matter what the handbook says.
- **Your customers and clients feel it.** They may not be able to tell you what changed, but they can tell the service isn't what it used to be.

Netflix was very blunt about this. Its well known culture deck, which Patty McCord helped write and later explained in *Harvard Business Review*, had this line: “Adequate performance gets a generous severance package.” You don’t have to run your organization like Netflix. But they understood that keeping adequate performers around costs everyone else on the team.

This is different from perfectionism

Fighting mediocrity doesn’t mean demanding perfection. Everyone is going to mess up and make mistakes. We aren’t perfect.

But there is a mental commitment. You decide ahead of time that you are going to do your best work, even on the days you don’t feel like it.

Fast Company ran a piece arguing that perfectionism can actually be one of the fastest routes to mediocrity. Perfectionist leaders wear their teams out and slow everything down, and the work never gets out the door.

A mistake happens when you are really trying and you get it wrong. That is fine, and you learn from it. Mediocrity is when you know it could be better and you just don’t care enough to fix it.

Expect a lot and care a lot

In March 2026, *Fast Company* reported on a FranklinCovey study about leaders who expect a lot from their people and also care a lot about them. Only 7% of leaders were rated high on both by their teams. But on those teams, 43% of the people were in the highest level of engagement, compared to 20% on other teams.

You need both. If you only expect a lot, people burn out and feel used. If you only care a lot, you end up protecting people from the truth, and mediocre work gets a pass.

It happened to David and Solomon too

David was one of the best kings Israel ever had. He trusted God, he was brave, and his people loved him. But look at how 2 Samuel 11 starts: “In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle … David remained at Jerusalem.”

He was supposed to be out with his army. He stayed home instead. One evening he got up from his bed, walked out on his roof, and saw Bathsheba. What followed was adultery, a cover up, and the murder of her husband Uriah, one of David’s most loyal soldiers. It started with David not

showing up where he was supposed to be.

Solomon's slide was slower. He started out asking God for wisdom, and God gave it to him. But other things kept taking first place. He spent seven years building the temple and thirteen years building his own palace. He married hundreds of wives, many from nations that worshiped other gods. The Bible says that when Solomon was old, "his heart was not wholly true to the Lord his God" (1 Kings 11:4). After he died, the kingdom split in two.

Even the church in Acts 2 had things slip. Those first believers shared everything, ate together, and met every day. But by Acts 6, some of the widows were being overlooked when the food was handed out each day. The apostles dealt with it right away. They picked seven men to take care of it so nobody got missed.

Ephesus is another one. In Acts 19, the church there was on fire for God. Paul stayed with them for over two years, people burned their books of magic in public, and the message spread all over the region. About forty years later, Jesus told that same church, "You have abandoned the love you had at first" (Revelation 2:4). They were still working hard and doing a lot of the right things, but the fire was gone. Today Ephesus is a field of ruins in Turkey, and the church that was once there is gone too.



The ruins of Ephesus, near Selçuk, Turkey, 2014. Photo: shankar s., Wikimedia Commons, Creative Commons Attribution 2.0.

In those same letters, Jesus had strong words for the church in Laodicea. He told them, “You are neither cold nor hot” (Revelation 3:15). They weren’t doing anything terrible. They were lukewarm. That might be the best picture of mediocrity in the whole Bible.



Syria Street in the ruins of Laodicea, near Denizli, Turkey, 2020. Photo: A.Savin, Wikimedia Commons, Free Art License.

Is there a place in your work right now where you should be showing up, and **you are not**?

Work as if it is for the Lord

Paul wrote, “Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men” (Colossians 3:23). He was writing to people with ordinary jobs, including slaves. Their work mattered to God, even when no one else was watching.

Tim Keller once asked, “What’s the Christian way to be a pilot?” His answer was simple: “Land the plane.”

We don’t do good work to earn God’s love. In Christ we already have it. We do good work because the people on the other end of it matter to Him.

Again, being perfect isn't the key. For me, it's waking up every day committed to being excellent and doing my best, because God deserves the best in everything I do.

What you can do about it

- **Be clear about what good looks like.** People can't hit a standard they don't know about. Write it down and talk about it with your team. Be open with it.
- **Show the cost.** Grenny suggested letting people see how mediocre work affects others.
- **Say something early.** Have the direct and honest conversation the first time you see it, not the fifth time. "Hey, this isn't where we need it to be. What's going on?" It's awkward, but nip it in the bud early.
- **Let the team hold each other accountable.** Grenny pointed out that no manager can catch everything. On the best teams, people can respectfully call each other out when the work slips.
- **Start with yourself.** Where have you been coasting? If you are coasting, your team will notice, and they will coast too.

Tommy

Issue 042 · On Leadership · November 8, 2026



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tommy Lee is the founder and president of Resource Global, a network that teaches, mentors, and connects emerging Christian marketplace leaders in cities around the world. He writes about faith, leadership, work, and AI at tommyplee.ai.

Read more issues at tommyplee.ai