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MAXIMIZING RESULTS

A SNAPSHOT OF IMPORTANT ISSUES FOR STRATEGIC LEADERS

Based on the advisory work of David Seregow, Ed. D.

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INCOMPETENCE IS BLISS

"People who do things badly are usually supremely confident of their abilities—more confident, in fact, than people who do things well."

David Dunning, Cornell University

A RECENT EXAMPLE OF BLISSFUL INCOMPETENCE

A market-leading company asked me to partner with them to create a strategy to more effectively develop and enhance the strategic impact of their management team. Feedback from our initial focus group showed that managers varied widely in their ability to manage effectively.

Against my advice, the client insisted on assessing managerial competence by having all managers rate themselves on twenty leadership and management characteristics. Well aware that subjective, self-assessment data, by itself, is often inaccurate, I agreed to include the rating list in my assessment process. And I insisted that the managers' direct reports would also rate their managers on the same qualities.

Not surprisingly, when analyzing the anonymous data we collected, we found that almost all managers consistently gave themselves very high ratings on every characteristic. It was also no surprise that the managers' direct reports often

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rated their managers quite differently on the same qualities. The managers' response indicated an unrealistically high (blissful) level of satisfaction with their abilities and a significant lack of awareness or acceptance of any need for further development.

While the managers' ratings were obviously suspect, we were confident of one thing. Without more objective feedback, this group of managers would resist any leadership development initiative—they didn't believe they needed it! And without intervention, continued incompetence would be assured and the causes of poor personal and organizational performance would be projected onto others.

MOST INCOMPETENT PEOPLE DON'T KNOW THEY ARE INCOMPETENT

It is likely that many of my client's managers were performing exceptionally well. Others were probably less than fully competent in several of the essential qualities of a successful, high-performing manager. The problem is that they all rated themselves equally high on each competency. It's important to emphasize again that subjective self-assessment is by itself, a poor basis on which to determine developmental needs.

Three factors contribute to inaccurate self-assessment and ongoing incompetence:

1. A deficiency in self-monitoring skills.
2. An inability to clearly understand and recognize the essential qualities of each required competency.
3. The lack of various and regularly reported sources of objective feedback.

Dunning and Kruger (Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, December 1999) believe the incompetent suffer doubly. Not only do they come to the wrong conclusions and make incorrect decisions, but their incompetence robs them of the ability to realize it. On a battery of tests, Dunning and Kruger found that those without adequate self-monitoring skills guessed that their scores were several times higher than their actual scores. They also found that incompetent

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individuals were less able to recognize competence in others—“I’m competent and you’re not!”

Self-monitoring skills are also identified by Goldman as an essential component of emotional intelligence (Emotional Intelligence—Why It Can Matter More Than IQ, 1995). Goldman points out that traditional IQ contributes about 20 percent to the factors that determine life success. This leaves about 80 percent to other factors including emotional intelligence. Goldman defines emotional intelligence as a meta-ability, determining how well we can use or self-monitor whatever other skills we have, including raw intelligence.

This deficiency in self-monitoring skills helps to explain why some managers who consistently execute poorly on those factors essential to a healthy, high-performing organization never seem to pick up on the often obvious cues about how their behavior negatively affects their organization. It hinders—if not destroys—individual and team motivation, performance, and innovation. They just don’t get it.

BLISSFULLY INCOMPETENT ORGANIZATIONS

Like individuals, organizations can suffer from the “incompetence is bliss” syndrome. Two factors contribute to organizational incompetence:

1. The negative impact of blissfully incompetent employees.
2. A lack of awareness, along with a lack of ongoing assessment, of the competencies of a highly effective organization, including organizational self-monitoring skills.

And as with individuals, organizations require intervention or continued incompetence is assured.

Based on in-depth interviews of over 80,000 managers in more than 400 companies, Buckingham and Coffman found that the most successful and competent companies effectively developed and monitored the core elements needed to attract, focus, and keep talented employees. The less successful,

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incompetent companies did not. (First, Break All The Rules—What The World's Greatest Managers Do Differently, 1999)

TAKING THE BLISS OUT OF INCOMPETENCE

Unlike playing golf, performing poorly in social settings, such as managing an organization, is less obvious. The road to true personal and organizational competence and sustained market leadership is built on four factors:

1. Clearly define and communicate the critical qualities of each essential personal and organizational competency.
2. Provide training in logical reasoning and self-monitoring skills.
3. Provide and require ongoing, objective feedback from a variety of sources.
4. Develop a culture of open communication, candid conversations, and accountability.

In their blissful ignorance, many organizations don't believe they need to make these four success factors a priority. Our experience has shown, though, that those organizations that thoughtfully implement these factors realize significant personal and organizational performance improvement. They also have more highly engaged employees. Those organizations that don't eventually lose market leadership and fall to an also-ran status.

It may be uncomfortable, but it must be politically acceptable and encouraged to inform the king that he has no clothes. The success—and possibly the survival—of your organization depends on it.

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