Weeding out Incompetent Leaders

Carl V. Rabstejnek, P.E., M.B.A., Ph.D.

*... it was in North Africa that the U.S. Army gained invaluable experience, from the lowest private to the highest commander. Leaders emerged at the noncommissioned officer, junior officer, and general levels. **Incompetents were weeded out**, while men who would lead the drive in Europe were discovered ...*   STEPHEN E. AMBROSE*

The opening quotation indicates that in World War II the American military command recognized the need to remove incompetent leaders. Officers at all levels, who obtained prominent positions through charm, credentials, charisma, contacts, longevity, tenure, politics, pedigree, and a host of other reasons in peacetime, have to be reevaluated when troops are to be led by them in combat.

During the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln found it was difficult to find a competent commanding general. To deal with the dilemma he kept replacing generals until he eventually appointed Ulysses S. Grant.

Performance and not Pedigree

In recent times, bad leaders are too often allowed to remain because fiduciary agents made the decision to hire him or her. Thus, the person remains in charge long after an unbiased observer should have determined that the particular job is outside their range of competence.

To counter this trend, my intent in writing these essays — beginning with the 25-50-25 rule of thumb — is to make trustees *aware* of the empirical data showing very many leaders are incompetent. Too often, the criteria for hiring do not translate to ability for *the job at hand.*

For example, by every measure George B. McClelland was a reasonable choice to lead the Union Armies. He graduated second in his class at West Point and came from a well-situated Philadelphia family. Subordinates liked him and he had successfully raised and trained troops. His prior military and civilian accomplishments were commendable. McClelland believed in himself and left the pre-war army for faster advancement in civilian pursuits. He returned when the war started and quickly advanced to be a Regular Army major general. Nevertheless, all his talent, traits, abilities, and accomplishment did not transfer to *combat* command.

Intelligence, promotion, past performance, personal arrogance, bearing, and confidence did not translate to his competence in waging of war. Lincoln put McClelland in charge twice and both times sure battlefield wins did not materialize. The general had plenty of excuses and supporters but the indomitable president prevailed.

We must recognize our means of prediction are not foolproof. Using performance of West Point Civil War generals, I analyzed how The United States Military Academy's long established *formal* ranking system for all graduates, until 1977, did not predict field performance.

Post-World War II Leadership Culture

Millions served in the armed forces during the Second World War. The nation learned to function in hierarchical structures and obey orders. Command was synonymous with leadership. Coordinated major operations, such as D-Day and Pacific island landings, were supported by thousands of infantry, sailors, and airmen. Many more provided support behind the scenes.

It was in this environment that soldiers adopted the acronym "snafu" (Situation Normal All F**ked Up). In practice the rank and file continually compensated for leadership foul-ups with their rifle, so to speak.

Military leaders use the term fog of war to indicate *ambiguity* of plans. Postwar, this humility began to disappear after the USA was victorious.

A group of analysts emanating from the Army Air Forces Office of Statistical Control successfully restructured Ford Motor Company under Robert McNamara, where they were called "Whiz Kids." These wartime behind the scenes *staff* advisors began to assume *line* command in industry, politics, and the Vietnam War. They were dubbed "the best and the brightest" and deluded many, including themselves.

Business schools adopted a "scientific" approach to management. Systems analyses became complex and an undeserved certainly was attributed to calculated output. Forgotten were war lessons of uncertainty and humility. Codified management approaches prevailed.

A good metaphor for the management and leadership was the introduction of paint by numbers kits in 1951. I was ten years old at the time and remember friends of my parents proudly hanging their handiwork on the wall. Our society became enamored with systematic results.

For the remainder of the century we produced a series of routinized approaches that became popular for a time, only to be supplanted by the next *solution de jour*. Page 2 copied a table of a hundred fads and fashions since WWII to illustrate the aphorism *one-size-**does-not**-fit-all.*

Although veterans were well aware of the term "snafu," the culture imbued unquestioned acceptance of military-type organizational hierarchies with command and control. Leader's competence was rarely challenged by those below *and* above them, allowing many disasters.

Leadership is Necessary

There is sufficient information to know leaders are necessary. I spent countless hours of training in "Bion leaderless groups," in which leadership participation is withheld and disorder evolves. In organizations, observe beneficial and detrimental effects caused by leaders.

Essays of this type spread *awareness* that many leaders — in practice — do not live up to expectations. Examples from the American Civil War and WWII illustrate the need to weed out those that cannot perform the job because misplaced acceptance of incapable leadership is harmful to the organization's mission.

One Hundred Management Fads and Fashions Since World War II

Acceptable Risk	Distributed Intelligence	Knowledge Management	Servant Leadership
Assessment Centers	Downsizing or Rightsizing	Learn Manufacturing	Social Responsibility
Automatic Factories	Diversification	Learning Organizations	Spin-Offs (Divestiture)
Baldridge Award	Diversity Training	One-minute Management	Stewardship
Balanced Scoreboard	Dress-Down (Casual) Friday	Organization Development	Strategic Planning Units
Benchmarking	Education Initiatives	Out-of-Box Thinking	Subcontracting
Broad-Banding	Electronic Data Processing	Outsourcing	Supply Chain Management
Business Ethics	Emotional Intelligence	Managed Health Care	Takeovers
Business School Offerings	Empowerment	Management by Objectives	Team Building
Cafeteria Programs	Ethical Leadership	Mgt. by Walking Around	T-groups
Centralization	Excellence	Matrix Management	Theory Z (and Theory X & Y)
Change/Creative Destruction	Experience Curve	Myers-Briggs Type Indicator	Time-Based Competition
Chaordic Organizations	Flat Organizations	Pay for Performance	Time-Motion Studies
Computerization	Flex Time	Portfolio Management	Time Sharing
Complexity	Free Information Exchange	Post-Capitalism/Co-Opetition	Total Quality Management
Computer Integrated Mfg.	Functional Teams	PERT (Prog. Eval. and Rev. Tech.)	Training
Conglomeration	Internet	Project Management	Transactional Analysis
Convergence	Intrapreneuring	Privatization	Transformational Leadership
Core Competencies	ISO-9000	Quality Circles	Value-Based Management
Corporate Culture	Issues Management	Reengineering	Value Chain Analysis
Critical Path Analysis	Japanese Management	Restructuring	Virtualization
Customer Driven	Job Enrichment	Sales Force Automation	Zero-based Budgeting
Data Warehousing	Job Sharing	Scientific Management	Zero Defects
Decentralization	Joint Ventures	Self-Managed Teams	Zero-Latency Enterprises
Demassing	Just-In-Time	Sensitivity Training	•••