

## “AWARENESS” to Assure Competent Leaders

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*In the land of the blind  
the one-eyed man is king.*

Erasmus (circa 1510)

The benefit of good leadership has been demonstrated many times, as was the devastation brought by incompetent leaders. [The Leadership Enigma: Assuring Competence in Diverse Roles](#) discusses what *is* and what *is not* leadership — and cited empirical data that ¼ to ¾ of leaders are incompetent. Therefore, it is the duty of hiring agents to judiciously evaluate — *on the job* — performance of their charges to assure competence.

Three other pieces on my [Web Site](#): (1) [Weeding out Incompetent Leaders](#), (2) [Twenty-five—Fifty—Twenty-five: Competent—Good Enough—Incompetent Leaders and Mangers](#), and (3) [Governance on Nonprofit Boards: Why is it So Hard to Accomplish](#), identify the need for **AWARENESS** by board members. Not everyone that has oversight authority over leaders “sees” that their charge is incompetent or that they can do something about it.

Albeit, not every trustee is *unaware* of sub-optimal performance of hired leaders. Some persons and groups have selfish motives to maintain an incumbent in power. Political parties support their own if they gain power and reap financial gain from jobs and earmarks. A power elite may be born into an aristocracy or gain entrance by attending certain prestigious colleges. They feel they are intellectually superior and have a right to rule. Members of this group may divide into factions, but support those in their network and discredit “pedestrian” outsiders.

A less obvious group is the executive elite, or clones, that idolizes people in high positions, as they aspire to high corporate office, themselves. They rarely criticize the establishment. Business jargon prevails and the latest fads and fashions are followed. Also, supportive corporate board cohorts are highly paid and often owe their position to the CEO. Driven by money, they justify high salaries and golden parachutes. There is little oversight, as stockholder control is theoretical and rarely actual.

This article will address the psychological restraints that inhibit honest people in the exercise of their fiduciary responsibility. Positions such as board membership in some groups and nonprofit organizations is often done for service and not economic advantage. **AWARENESS** is how responsible parties keep an *eye* on the staff to assure good performance. Preconceived notions about situations may need to change to assure a well-run operation.

Our interest, herein, is in nonprofit organizations that *unintentionally* fail to provide needed oversight over leaders. Trustees not only need to have one eye focused on serving the organization, the other eye needs to “see” that staff serves well. *Psychological reasons*, however, may keep honest people from realizing their authority and power or feel capable to question leadership.

## Cognitive Schemas

How we cognitively interpret events is dependent upon our prior experience and thought process. We have preconceived ideas, called schemas, determining what meaning to place upon what is experienced. Pictorially:



Thus, our experience of an event does not have meaning until we interpret it in light of our schemas or beliefs.

Fortunately, we can change our schemas to determine how we think about things. Changing belief systems has successfully been facilitated by cognitive psychologists for years. Some change can be accomplished in persons by providing helpful information. Of course, entrenched psychological resistance to change may need individual professional intervention.

With as many as half or more leaders being incompetent, there is potential to reach many people who have significant effect on providing for the greater good. My [rule-of-thumb](#), (2) above, is conservative in that it assesses the empirical data and only declares 25% incompetent. This is balanced by 25% that investigators consider competent, with 50% a tossup.

I attribute the 50% between the extremes as an inability to always determine good versus bad leaders. I classified this middle group as “good enough” in the hope that they have sufficient abilities to occupy a position without being toxic, *if sufficiently monitored*. Leaders are in short supply and not every organization needs an exceptional futurist that can transform an organization.

I cite examples of incompetent leaders in the above referenced papers on my Web Site. Another situation is described by Peter Drucker in *The Leader of the Future* (1996). While in high school during the mid 1920s the students in his class were told to read several recently published books on World War I. A fellow student asked:

Every one of these books says that the Great War was a war of total military incompetence. *Why was it?* Our teacher did not hesitate a second but shot right back, “Because not enough generals were killed; they stayed way behind the lines and let others do the fighting and dying.”

A copy of the part of the book where this was published is on the [Internet](#), where Drucker also summarized his take on leadership.

Norman F. Dixon’s book *On the Psychology of Military Incompetence* (1976) is often cited by the limited number of scholars who study failed leaders.

Poor leadership is a relatively new academic field. An early (1994) article in is the *American Psychologist*, by Robert Hogan and his associates, “[What we Know About Leadership: Effectiveness and Personality](#).”

Group’s survival depends upon competent leadership. People who do the hiring need to be **AWARE** that they also responsible for the ongoing actions of their charge.

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