

“CLUELESS INCOMPETENCE:” THE CONSTELLATION OF INFLUENTIALNESS, INCOMPETENCE, AND CLUELESSNESS REPRESENTS AN INSIDIOUS PLAGUE IN LEADERSHIP AND ELSEWHERE

George S. Everly, Jr., PhD, ABPP, FACLP

ABSTRACT: *In his classic novel Anna Karenina, Tolstoy wrote, “All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way. Applied to leadership, there are certain core attributes effective leaders share, especially crisis leaders, but there are myriad ways to be an ineffective leader. This paper identifies what could be a temporally novel form of incompetence that would appear to have the potential to affect emerging leaders and those of more recent generations. This pattern is referred to as “Clueless Incompetence.” This is a cautionary tale rather than a currently descriptive one. Predicted by Alvin Toffler and others, Clueless Incompetence may have the power to not only stifle the growth of the leader, but wreak havoc in an organization and a community, paralyzing growth and development. It is described herein in an attempt to forewarn of what could develop into an insidious plague of ineffectual leadership that might portend a challenging future.*

KEY WORDS: *leadership; crisis leadership; resilience; resilient leadership; psychological crisis intervention; “Clueless Incompetence”*

INTRODUCTION

Second only to religion, leadership may be the most studied and written about topic in human history. Why? It is the “glue” that shapes a society from a crowd. It is the force that harnesses social energy into a social force. It creates an organization from a group of workers. And in times of turmoil, leadership brings order, direction, and hope. *“In every great crisis, the human heart demands a leader that incarnates its ideas, its emotions and its aims. Till such a leader appears, everything is disorder, disaster and defeat. The moment he takes the helm, order, promptitude, and confidence follow as the*

necessary result. When we see such results, we know that a hero leads” (New York Times, April 25, 1861, p. 4). Even Ralph Waldo Emerson once noted, *“What I need is someone who will make me do what I can.”* There are certain core attributes effective leaders share, especially crisis leaders, but there are myriad ways to be an ineffective leader. This paper forewarns of a leadership phenomenon having the potential to adversely affect emerging leaders, in particular, and those of more recent generations. It is a form of ineffective leadership consisting of an amalgam of previously identified dysfunctional

This is an Open Access journal. It adheres to the CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 Creative Commons licensing guidelines for copyrighted material. For terms and conditions of permitted uses, please see <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/legalcode>.

“CLUELESS INCOMPETENCE:” THE CONSTELLATION OF INFLUENTIALNESS, INCOMPETENCE, AND CLUELESSNESS REPRESENTS AN INSIDIOUS PLAGUE IN LEADERSHIP AND ELSEWHERE

behavioral components. This pattern is referred to as “Clueless Incompetence.”

Predicted by Alvin Toffler and others, clueless incompetence has the power to not only stifle the personal growth of the leader, but stifle innovation and paralyze growth and development of the organization (see Smith, Everly, & Haight, 2012), the team, or the community. Structural equation analyses have shown poor leadership in the forms of ambiguity and role conflict to increase stress, foster burnout, erode job satisfaction, and importantly increase turnover intention (Smith, Emerson, Boster, & Everly, 2020).

GROWTH PROMOTING LEADERSHIP CHARACTERISTICS – TRANSFORMATION IN THE WAKE OF CRISIS

Before exploring the proposed construct of clueless incompetence, let us begin with a discussion of what effective leadership looks like. Research suggests that effective crisis leadership is an important, if not the best predictor, of overall leadership (Everly & Athey, 2022, 2023). As a result of this revelation, this section will briefly review the characteristics of effective crisis leadership using it in the hermeneutical derivative tradition of phenomenology as a prime exemplar of all leadership. We are especially interested in crisis leadership with the specific intention of promoting transformation and growth in the wake of adversity. The emergent recommendations come from historical sources that have been hiding in plain sight for centuries in combination with more recent leadership research. None of these historical sources, however, have previously been interpreted in the context of transformation and growth,

which is often considered a significant challenge for leadership.

The 8th Century BC Homeric poems *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* tell the stories of the Trojan War and its aftermath. They tell the stories of heroic leaders. Hellenic scholars generally agree that these stories may be the earliest recorded leadership lessons in Western literature, especially leadership lessons in times of crisis. The story of Odysseus stands out as a tutorial of what characteristics make an effective leader whilst in crisis and otherwise. A careful reading of the *Odyssey* reveals the Ithacan king Odysseus to be loyal to the Greek coalition and its leader, courageous, decisive, tenacious, possessing integrity, and dedicated to the well-being of those who follow him. It is this combination that arguably allows him to return from the Trojan War and claim his throne to transform his kingdom, which had slipped into decline. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are seldom considered leadership texts because their lessons on leadership are a secondary theme.

Written in the 6th Century BC, Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War* is considered by many to be the most influential of the earliest texts on leadership in crisis as it is far more directly prescriptive than the *Odyssey*. Most authorities believe Sun Tzu to have been a Chinese general, strategist, and philosopher. His influential text offers specific suggestions on how to prepare for and lead in times of crisis with a goal of transformation to something better. Its lessons are deemed to have value in virtually all venues wherein leadership is exercised. Sun Tzu extolled the virtues of 1) vision and preparation, 2) decisiveness, 3) following a moral compass, and 4) clear communications. He chastised

“CLUELESS INCOMPETENCE:” THE CONSTELLATION OF INFLUENTIALNESS, INCOMPETENCE, AND CLUELESSNESS REPRESENTS AN INSIDIOUS PLAGUE IN LEADERSHIP AND ELSEWHERE

the leader paralyzed by over-analysis or excessive caution and promoted the practice of decisive leadership amidst turmoil. He wrote: “Be decisive, vacillation saps the strength of any army. If action is necessary, make it swift, act boldly, no one benefits from protracted conflict or ambivalent leadership.” He also extolled the virtue of morality as it builds trust and a dedicated followership. He wrote: “When one treats people with benevolence, justice and righteousness, and reposes confidence in them, the army will be united in mind and all will be happy to serve their leaders.” Lastly, concerning the importance of open communications, he wrote, “If words of command are not clear and distinct, if orders are not thoroughly understood, the general is to blame.” Over 2000 years later it was clear that lesson had yet to be learned. We recall the glory and the pathos of British Lord Cardigan’s disastrous charge of the Light Brigade on October 25, 1854, during the Crimean War. It still serves as one of the most egregious examples of failed communications leading 600 troops into the wrong place, the “valley of death” and at the wrong time, from which only about 195 returned ready to fight again.

Mention must be made of Carl von Clausewitz’s classic book *Vom Kriege* (On War), published in 1832. Carl von Clausewitz was a Prussian general who fought against Napoleon and in other notable campaigns. *Vom Kriege* is considered essential reading for any student of leadership as it is a key primer on strategic thinking. The key processes of strategic thinking, especially in periods of uncertainty, von Clausewitz argues, are to be decisive at the right moment, be focused and tenacious, and communicate the strategic vision. Von

Clausewitz believed that the combination of *integrity and strength* was the sine qua non of effective execution of strategy, transformation (“War is the continuation of policy with other means.”), and effective leadership in general.

Lastly, winner of the Pulitzer and Nobel prizes John Steinbeck once said, “We give the President more work to do than a man can do, more responsibility than a man should take, more pressure than a man can bear” (Wilson, 2007, p. 2). Arguably, the study of American presidential leadership serves as a virtual proxy for all leadership roles, but especially leadership under stress and adversity with a goal of transformation. Everly, et al. (Everly, Smith, & Lobo, 2013; Everly, Everly, & Smith, 2020; Everly & Athey, 2022) reported the results of analyses of the C-SPAN presidential leadership surveys released in 2000, 2009, 2017, and 2021. Selecting only those presidents whose administrations were defined by how they navigated crises, five factors ultimately emerged as characteristics of effective leadership: 1) performance/decisiveness, 2) vision/agenda, 3) morality, 4) effective persuasive communications, and 5) the ability to create collaborative, supportive associations.

To repeat the aphorism of George Santayana, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” History, from the time of Homer through the founding of the United States, suggests the value of certain leadership attributes in times of uncertainty, crisis, and transformation and these attributes can serve as derivative guides for all leadership. They are 1) a focused optimistic vision, 2) decisive and tenacious guidance, 3) supportive collaborative rela-

“CLUELESS INCOMPETENCE:” THE CONSTELLATION OF INFLUENTIALNESS, INCOMPETENCE, AND CLUELESSNESS REPRESENTS AN INSIDIOUS PLAGUE IN LEADERSHIP AND ELSEWHERE

tionships, 4) effective communications, and 5) integrity. They typify the most effective leaders before, during, and after times of uncertainty, crisis, and even failure. Such leadership appears to 1) reduce uncertainty, 2) buffer the attacks of adversity, and 3) foster resilience, even growth.

Having reviewed a few of the lessons history teaches regarding effective crisis leadership, it seems appropriate and instructive to introduce, in stark contrast, an antithetical amalgam of the characteristics just presented.

CLUELESS INCOMPETENCE DEFINED

Consistent with Tolstoy’s assertion, there are many ways to be incompetent. A thorough review of incompetence is beyond the scope of this paper. Rather, this paper will focus on a unique combination of characteristics that shall be referred to as “clueless incompetence.” Clueless incompetence is a construct proposed by the present author in an attempt to partially explain and subsequently forewarn of what could be an insidious plague of complacency and ineffectual leadership. It is a melding of two previously identified counter-productive factors: the Dunning-Kruger Effect and the Peter Principle, usually, but not always, residing within a bureaucratic organizational structure. When combined and possessed by a person in a position of influence they portend complacency and stagnation at best, catastrophe at worst. Such a combination may predict laissez-faire non-leadership or compensatory overbearing dictatorial leadership, or both in serial combination when the latter squelches dissent.

The Dunning-Kruger Effect.

The first factor in the construct of clueless incompetence is the Dunning-Kruger Effect (Kruger & Dunning, 1999). Simply said, in the present construct, the Dunning-Kruger Effect is a cognitive bias held by a person who demonstrates limited knowledge or competence, but is strikingly unaware of their own incompetence. In other words, they believe themselves to be far more knowledgeable or competent than they really are. They can be self-absorbed, dismissive of dissent or any contrary opinions, possess myriad of superficial unrewarding relationships leading to feelings of psychological isolation and perhaps a dysthymic mood, be ambivalent or be incapable of making difficult decisions, and even cognitively brittle. Once again, the Dunning-Kruger bias can be debilitating when it is possessed by people in key positions within an organization, community, or group. Enter the Peter Principle.

The Peter Principle.

It is the second factor in the clueless incompetence construct. Simply said, the Peter Principle (Peter & Hull, 1970) is a process rather than a set of characteristics per se. Yet the process itself can give rise to, or amplify, many of the characteristics extrapolated from Dunning-Kruger. The Peter Principle argues that in any organization, community, or group that is structured in a hierarchy, people will be promoted or advanced until they exhibit incompetence. In effect, they are advanced until the skills needed for further success exceed the skills the person possesses. And at that level, called their “plateau,” they remain until introspection and insight provide the

“CLUELESS INCOMPETENCE:” THE CONSTELLATION OF INFLUENTIALNESS, INCOMPETENCE, AND CLUELESSNESS REPRESENTS AN INSIDIOUS PLAGUE IN LEADERSHIP AND ELSEWHERE

motivation to recruit new information and develop new skills, or until stagnation and conflict prevail. Absent insight and introspection, at their plateau they remain stifling not only their own growth, but the growth of the entire organization, community, or group. They can fuel conflict. The problems associated with Peter Principle are most exemplified in the epitome of the hierarchy—bureaucracies.

As one might imagine, either the Peter Principle or the Dunning-Kruger bias can be debilitating, but when co-occurring within a rigid hierarchical system such as a bureaucracy, they can be devastating. Bureaucracies are the playground of the clueless incompetent. Collectively, the characteristics of clueless incompetence would include, but not be limited to: 1) short-sighted tactical foci, to the exclusion of strategic vision, 2) a failure to understand the need to nurture the inextricable intertwining of psychological with operational work factors, 3) ambivalent decision-making leading to laissez-faire leadership or a compensatory authoritarian, rigid leadership style, 4) operational or technical incompetence, 5) poor communications, 6) isolation, 7) defensiveness, 8) dismissiveness of dissenting opinions, 9) ineffective or conflict-ridden interpersonal relationships, and lastly, 10) a lack of introspection and understanding of one's limitations.

PUTATIVE ORIGINS OF CLUELESS INCOMPETENCE

What might be the origins of the proposed construct of clueless incompetence? Noteworthy authorities point to several potential trends from which extrapolations may be made: 1) information overload, 2) the

myth of fragility, 3) a shift in societal values away from meritocracy and self-esteem derived from achievement to self-esteem through external ascription combined with declines in affective and normative commitment to the workplace and perhaps collective society in general, and 4) the continuing rise of bureaucracies, especially governmental..

In 1970, futurist Alvin Toffler (1970) wrote a groundbreaking book entitled “Future Shock.” It described the dramatic transformations the United States, in particular, was going through and would experience in the future. Toffler predicted the tsunamic power of information technology. He warned of the “dark side” of the tsunami, however. He claimed the generation and release of information could be so rapid and enormous it would be disruptive to society. He called this a condition of “high transience” wherein interpersonal relationships would be numerous but superficial and wherein relationships would be temporary as people addictively sought out the next new thing dismissing ideas and practices not on merit but on currency. Isolation, alienation, and depression are the likely psychological consequences. Toffler went on to say, “The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn.”

Fragility may be defined as the potential to be easily damaged or broken. While it is wise to protect ourselves and our families from “clear and present dangers,” there appears to be a tendency to overprotect. It engenders a victim mentality, a false belief in fragility, and hinders growth. It can be especially harmful to children. According to two important books *The Coddling of the*

“CLUELESS INCOMPETENCE:” THE CONSTELLATION OF INFLUENTIALNESS, INCOMPETENCE, AND CLUELESSNESS REPRESENTS AN INSIDIOUS PLAGUE IN LEADERSHIP AND ELSEWHERE

American Mind, (2018), by Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt and *A Nation of Whimps* by Hara Estroff Marano (2008), over-protection is the greatest failure a society can commit toward its youth. It engenders a victim mentality, a false belief in fragility, serves as a deterrent to risk-taking, and inhibits taking of responsibility. And as Spencer wrote, the ultimate result of shielding men from their effects of folly is to fill the world with fools.

Former president of the American Psychological Association Martin Seligman (1995) notes, “Our society has changed from an achieving society to a feel-good society. Up until the 1960s, achievement was the most important goal to instill in our children. This goal was overtaken by the twin goals of happiness and self-esteem” (Seligman, 1995, p. 40). A meta-analysis revealed decreases in affective and normative commitment and increases in turnover intentions in successive generations (Costanza et al., 2012). A “work to live” philosophy has appeared to replace the traditional profession-oriented concept of self and role within community. The transgenerational decline of affective and normative commitment to one’s profession has been confirmed via structural equation modeling (Emerson et al., 2022).

The pursuits of self-esteem and competence are necessary pursuits and milestones in healthy human development as long they are built upon a foundation of something more substantial than the mere desire to possess them, or the desire to give them away. Seligman argues that we cannot directly teach lasting self-esteem or competence, rather he says, “self-esteem is caused by...successes and failures in the world” (Seligman, 1995, p. 35). He argues we

do not need an organization or a society of people who are encouraged to feel good, but rather people who are taught the skills of doing well.

Lastly, in 1921 the German sociologist Max Weber’s now classic text *Economy and Society* was published, one year after his death. The text describes Weber’s ideal social model—bureaucracy. Bureaucracy is predicated upon hierarchy, rationality, and rule-based decision-making. Bureaucracy was a sociologic theory, however, poorly suited for a wide variety of organizations which quickly adopted it. Bureaucracies are inherently weak in that they are inflexible when confronted with change, stifle innovation, delay and can stifle communications, and are generally slow to act. Incompetence at any key hierarchical level, even at entry levels or mid-level management levels can create a “no-oriented” organization resistant to change and incapable of effectively dealing with crisis, rather than a “yes, can do oriented” organization that, like the Greek god Proteus, can change to effectively meet both internal and external challenges.

SUMMARY

The 21st century has arrived. It appears futurist Alvin Toffler’s prediction has been realized. The flood of information and the change it causes has become endemic. But overwhelming information is not the only source of change. We are experiencing environmental change, economic change, political change, and even change in our interpretations of biology and health-related practices. We are engulfed in change. Change paralyzes clueless incompetents. The leadership practices history has taught are necessary to navigate change and adversity

“CLUELESS INCOMPETENCE:” THE CONSTELLATION OF INFLUENTIALNESS, INCOMPETENCE, AND CLUELESSNESS REPRESENTS AN INSIDIOUS PLAGUE IN LEADERSHIP AND ELSEWHERE

appear conspicuously rare. Table 1 compares the leadership styles discussed.

In order for any given person, or community, to prosper from change, they must recognize the need and ultimately embrace it. But change is not easy. President John F. Kennedy once noted, “Change is the law of life. And those who look only to the past or present are certain to miss the future.” It seems appropriate to close with the thoughts of Alvin Toffler who asserted if we

do not have the insight and courage to change the future we will be condemned to endure it. Societies since time in memorial have gifted their futures to their leaders. Leaders have an obligation to lead in the best interests of their constituents. The construct of clueless incompetence may be one explanatory construct that, if recognized and corrected, may lead to a reversion to the leadership practices proven to lead from the abyss to transformation (Everly & Athey, 2023).

Table 1 - CONTRASTING LEADERSHIP STYLES

CLASSICS OF TRANSFORMATIONAL CRISIS LEADERSHIP	PRESIDENTIAL CRISIS LEADERSHIP WITH FOCUS ON TRANSFORMATION	CLUELESS INCOMPETENCE
Optimistic Vision	Positive Vision/ Future Orientation	Short-term Focus, Poor Strategic Vision, Incompetent
Decisiveness	Decisiveness/ High Performance	Ambivalence/ Laissez-faire or Compensatory Authoritarian, Rigid
Integrity	Morality	Entitled/ Dismissive of Divergent Ideas, Lacks Introspection
Emphasizes Communications	Effective Communicators	Isolated, Poor Communications
Fosters Cohesiveness/ Supportive Relationships	Fosters Relationships	Superficial Relationships/ Spawns Conflict

REFERENCES

Costanza, D. P., Badger, J. M., Fraser, R. L., Severt, J. B., & Gade, P. A. (2012). Generational differences in work-related attitudes: A meta-analysis, *Journal of Business and Psychology* 27, pp. 375-394.

<https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1007/s10869-012-9259-4>

Emerson, D., Ennis, M., & Smith, K. J. (2022). Influence of transformational leadership on public sector employees’ organizational commitment and turnover intentions. *Journal of Contemporary Business Issues* 25(1), 57-79.

“CLUELESS INCOMPETENCE:” THE CONSTELLATION OF INFLUENTIALNESS, INCOMPETENCE, AND CLUELESSNESS REPRESENTS AN INSIDIOUS PLAGUE IN LEADERSHIP AND ELSEWHERE

- Everly, G. S., Jr., & Athey, A. (2022). Crisis leadership (resilience) predicts overall leadership effectiveness. *Crisis, Stress, and Human Resilience: An International Journal* 4(1), 26–31.
<https://www.crisisjournal.org/article/36375-crisis-leadership-resilience-predicts-overall-leadership-effectiveness/stats/all/pageviews>
- Everly, G. S., Jr. & Athey, A. (2023). *Leading beyond crisis*. American Psychological Association.
<https://www.apa.org/pubs/books/leading-beyond-crisis>
- Everly, G. S., Jr., Everly, A. N., & Smith, K. (2020). Resilient leadership: a partial replication and construct validation. *Crisis, Stress, and Human Resilience: An International Journal* 2(1), 4–9.
<https://www.crisisjournal.org/article/13322-resilient-leadership-a-partial-replication-and-construct-validation>
- Everly, G. S., Smith, K. J., & Lobo, R. (2013). Resilient leadership and the organizational culture of resilience: Construct validation. *International Journal of Emergency Mental Health and Human Resilience*, 15(2), 123-128.
<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/24558699/>
- Homer (n.d.) Translated S. Butler and S. Budin (2011). *The Iliad and The Odyssey*. Canterbury Classics.
- Kruger, J. & Dunning, D. (1999). Unskilled and unaware of it: How difficulties in recognizing one's own incompetence lead to inflated self-assessments. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. 77(6), 1121–1134.
<https://doi.org/10.1037//0022-3514.77.6.1121>
- Lukianoff, G., & Haidt, J. (2018). *The coddling of the American mind: How good intentions and bad ideas are setting up a generation for failure*. Penguin.
- Marano, H. E. (2008). *A nation of wimps: The high cost of invasive parenting*. Broadway Books.
- Peter, L. J., & Hull, R. (1970). *The Peter Principle*. Pan Books.
- Seligman, M. E. P. (1995). *The optimistic child*. Houghton Mifflin.
- Smith, K. J., Everly, G. S., Jr., Haight, G. T. (2012). SAS4: Validation of a four-item measure of worry and rumination. *Advances in Accounting Behavioral Research*, 15, 101-131.
- Smith, K. J., Emerson, D, Boster, C, & Everly, G. S., Jr. (2020). Resilience as a coping strategy for reducing auditor turnover intentions. *Accounting Research Journal* 33(3), 483-497.
<https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/ARJ-09-2019-0177/full/html>
- Sun Tzu. (1983). *The Art of War*. (J. Clavell, Trans.). Delacorte. (Original work published c. 500 BCE)
- Toffler, A. (1970). *Future Shock*. Random House.
- von Clausewitz, C. (1984). *On War*, originally *Vom Kriege* Princeton University Press.
- Wilson, R. (2007). *Power and the Presidency*. Hachette.