

THE WOODENHEADED AFFLICTION

"The greatest of sins is to be conscious of none."

INTRODUCTION.

What is Woodenheadedness? In *The March of Folly: From Troy to Viet Nam*, historian Barbara Tuchman describes human history as the "unfolding of miscalculation," a litany of failure, mismanagement and delusion in the pursuit of disastrous national and organizational policies. She explores four historic conflicts—The Trojan War, the Protestant Secession from the Catholic Church, the American Revolution and the Viet Nam War. All four conflicts, she argues, share a common theme

In spite of alternative courses of action, and in the face of evidence to the contrary, top leaders chose to act counter to the best interests of their organization or nation.

Tuchman writes that this foolish (her words) leadership behavior is a "child of power," noting,

"the power to command frequently causes failure to think."

She labels this power-induced, unthinking state of mind woodenheadedness

A woodenheaded person is "dense," "thick headed," "thick-skulled," a veritable "blockhead," "dull," "foolish," and thus painfully slow to learn from experience, if at all.

Let's not miss Tuchman's point. She is not saying the woodenheaded leader is "stupid" or unintelligent. Rather, it is the possession and exercise of power that turns an otherwise intelligent person into a woodenheaded leader.

THE PERSONAL AFFLICTION.

The woodenheaded leader suffers from what could be rightly termed a

"leadership learning disability."

This "disability" finds its source in the emotional landscape of the afflicted leader, especially his or her lack of emotional realism. Additionally, the woodenheaded leader is afflicted by the arrogance of power, rendering them incapable of metabolizing feedback, and blinding them to the personal and collective consequences of their decisions.

THE ORGANIZATIONAL AFFLICTION: DOUBLING DOWN.

Woodenheadedness brings with it only one organizational affliction, but it is lethal. It is called "doubling down," or the "cycle of escalating commitment." Author and consultant Peter Block calls it "hope through repackaging." Whatever the name, the affliction is the same. Decisions made by top leaders are declared sacrosanct, above critique, beyond review, and worth the continued commitment—and recommitment—of the organization's people and resources, regardless of results.

Woodenheaded top leaders insist that the organization stay committed to self-destructive policies, ineffective strategies or failing products in the vain hope that their judgment will eventually be vindicated.

More resources are released to support the failed decision, and members are urged to work harder to support it, in spite of evidence to the contrary, which is ignored by the top leader.

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