

TOP LEADER AFFLICTION SERIES!

Today we introduce a new series, titled “Top Leader Afflictions”. I choose the title for two reasons. First, an affliction is a state of pain, distress or misery. We will explore a set of afflictions—painful “maladies” or “diseases” common to individuals at the highest levels of organizational life. In this sense, “top leaders” are often the “victims” of these afflictions, due, at least in part to two factors.=

(a) The drive, intellect, natural gifts, ambition, happy-confluence of circumstance, and maybe a little luck that fuel the leader’s ascent, are often the breeding ground for a set of personal afflictions—perspectives, attitudes and behaviors that upon arrival at their position of power and authority have great potential to undermine the welfare and progress of the organization, as well as diminish the effectiveness of the leader.

(b) The leader’s lofty position, combined with access to power, relative lack of accountability, and the deference shown them due to their personal and organizational assets (position and power) further develop and magnify these afflictions.

Second, to afflict someone is to bring pain and misery to their world.

Due to their position, power, and exceptional personal strengths—afflicted leaders are often highly charismatic and/or hyper-competent—they have at their disposal all they need to afflict entire organizations, in accord with the perspectives, attitudes and behaviors that constitute their particular affliction.

As such, top leaders act as both afflicted and afflicter, at one and the same time, victim and victimizer, possessor and purveyor of these maladies.

As we will discuss, these afflictions prevent leaders from valuing the contribution of others and getting candid and timely performance feedback. These leadership maladies diminish the leader’s relational functioning and perceptive capability, and create the conditions for poor, at times disastrous, decision-making.

And yet, in spite of these afflictions, we keep coming back for more. Organizations, even good organizations, rid themselves of one afflicted leader only to hire the next. There is a “mystery” here that we will explore throughout this series.

Here are a few additional thoughts to frame this series.

MANY TOP LEADERS ARE NOT “AFFLICTED.”

This series is not an indictment of leaders in general or top leaders in particular. Not every high-level leader afflicts their organization or the individuals in it. Thankfully, many lead well. In fact, there are a sufficient number of sound and productive leaders to remind us that we need not continue to afflict ourselves with afflicted leaders.

LEADERS ARE ONLY HUMAN.

The unique pressures of leadership expose and indeed magnify the human condition in all its complexity. Top leaders, like the rest of us, are an all-too-human mix of noble aspiration and selfish ambition, a sincere motivation to serve the common good, mixed at times with the base motive of self-service. This is merely to affirm that leaders are imperfect people, in imperfect organizations operating in an imperfect world. Consequently, the legacy of most, perhaps all leaders, is mixed.

Leaders are not “all good” and for the most part (though I can think of a few exceptions) “all bad.”

Join us next time as we further discuss the unique pressures of leadership and how to identify leadership afflictions at the highest levels of organization life.

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