

## **PAMPHLET 32**

# **INCOMPETENCE**

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@2000**

On the surface the senior vice president was a nice man, as many incompetent people are. He took secretaries to lunch. He even took retired secretaries to lunch. He strove to please his bosses over the years. He complied his way up the organization's chain of command for 30 years and reaped the rewards of his inauthentic behavior. He spoke often of his entitlement to his position and the rewards the job title bestowed upon him.

He was politically correct and said the right things. He had the modal personality of the industrial era: docile and subdued in the presence of the powerful but aggressive and even abusive toward competitors and subordinates. He pursued his agenda with little regard for good judgment, common sense, or long term benefit to the organization. This modal personality is familiar to anyone who works in an organization: the mindless, oblivious, and obedient bureaucrats and technicians who do what they are told and refuse to think for themselves.

The senior vice president didn't work hard. He never came in early or stayed late. He left early on Fridays and came in late on Mondays. He went to all the industry conferences and mingled with others like himself. He assigned all meaningful work to others, and he reacted to their efforts by playing the devils advocate, as he called his hostile challenges. The people who worked for him considered his devil's advocacy a defense that masked his ignorance of the particular project.

Good people labored to correct the errors of the senior vice president and accomplished the real work of the division. The company president nominated the senior vice president for an industry award. Division managers got a copy of the letter. Page after page extolled the

achievements of the senior vice president. When the managers read the letter of recommendation aloud, their laughter reverberated off the walls. The senior vice president had no involvement with any of the accomplishments. If anything his arrogance combined with his ignorance were obstacles. He went off and accepted his award and hung it on his office wall. He never said a word to his colleagues about the event or the award.

He made bad choices and poor decisions and didn't deal with the real problems around him. He denied them, ignored them, and blamed them on others. Denial allowed him to become indifferent, to ignore what happened right in front of him, and to create and sustain a false version of reality. As a result small issues became big ones. On several occasions unions tried to organize groups of employees under his direction. Others were blamed and lost their jobs or were transferred to other positions in the company. No one ever held the senior vice president accountable for his many failures.

On occasion the helpless senior vice president brought a smart, talented, and aggressive manager into the division to deal with problems he had created. Inevitably the capable manager solved the problems and began to gain broader acknowledgement. This recognition foreshadowed trouble for the successful manager. With appreciation came betrayal by the senior vice president and ultimate demotion, transfer, or departure from the organization. The senior vice president was not as nice as he appeared to be.

The senior vice president didn't want to deal with human emotions. The Cartesian split worked well for him, at least in the short term. He separated his mind from his body and drove his emotions underground and denied the feelings of others. He once said, in a panic, that he did not want to deal with emotions. Those who expressed themselves authentically were punished, neutralized, marginalized, or driven from the enterprise. Often this scapegoating took the form of fabricated personality conflicts that allowed the truth put forth by the courageous truth teller to be discounted.

The senior vice president had no idea of how others felt about him or the humiliation he caused scores of other people. He was unaware of how his poor decisions hurt the larger organization. As a result, he never apologized for his many mistakes. He was unable to say the simple words: I'm sorry, let's fix it. The refusal to apologize was a denial

of his impact on others.

His bosses colluded with him in this mindlessness. They knew for a dozen years that he was incompetent. Then reorganized around him, shifted him from one executive to another, and made excuses for him. After all, they had promoted him.

Finally after many good people left the organization the senior vice president was removed from his position. By then most departments had been assigned to other divisions. He was kept on the payroll for a couple of years and contributed nothing. He was then given a lucrative early retirement package.

Through the years the senior vice president seemed so confident. Often people wondered aloud if he had any clue as to how incompetent he really was. New research suggests he probably didn't.

Psychologists David Dunning and Justin Kruger reported that the incompetent lack metacognition: the ability to judge their own judgments. They found in a series of studies that incompetence often accompanies overconfidence. Asked to rate their skill on tests of logic, humor, and grammar subjects who scored lowest were also the most likely to grossly overestimate their performance. The incompetent need much help just to realize they are incompetent. Becoming competent is another matter entirely.

Organizational dynamics collude with the incompetence that pervades many organizations. Nice people don't want to hurt others or deal with embarrassment or emotional issues. So important issues, like incompetence, don't get talked about. Every senior and middle manager in the company knew the senior vice president was inept. But his ineptitude was not talked about except between trusted colleagues over lunch.

Research by the Gallup organization found that people don't quit companies; they quit their manager or supervisor. How many talented people quit the company because of this senior vice president? How much discretionary energy was withheld by employees because of this person? How many talented people have left your organization (or checked out mentally) because of incompetent managers and supervisors? What are the systemic, long term impacts of these departures? Can any organization afford to lose good people today because of the incompetence of others? Good leaders know the answers to these questions and, as good leaders do,

they take appropriate action.