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THE ANATOMY OF DUMB DECISION-MAKING

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Leaders can learn a lot from reading history. A book with much to offer is, "The March of Folly" by Barbara Tuchman (Tuchman, 1984). Tuchman is one of America's best historians, and in this book she offers her analysis of a problem that has occurred repeatedly in human history: the pursuit, by people who are in positions of power, of policies contrary to the interests of the organizations which they lead.

She draws on a variety of famous historical incidents – all of which were catastrophes, and all of which could have been avoided by a more rational approach to executive decision-making. While many factors lead to organizational disasters, Tuchman found one factor to arise again and again in the cases she studied: "woodenheaded-ness." Woodenheaded-ness means, "assessing a situation in terms of preconceived fixed notions while ignoring or rejecting any contrary signs. It is acting according to wish while not allowing oneself to be deflected by the facts." (Tuchman, 1984, p. 73)

It was said of Philip II of Spain that "no experience of the failure of his policy could shake his belief in its essential excellence" (Tuchman, 1984, p. 74)." King George III, whose woodenheaded-ness contributed significantly to the Revolutionary War, was "convinced of his own righteousness, which had at its basic assumption that because he wished nothing but good, everyone who did not agree with him was a scoundrel (Tuchman, 1984, p. 138)."

Dumb organizational decisions often arise when we shut out information that isn't pleasant – especially when it shows that our policies may not be working. I think we have all worked for people like George III; a little introspection might also reveal wooden-headedness in ourselves as well. Unfortunately, when unwanted information and irritating evidence is swept under the rug, executives feel like they must placate their subordinates. Suppression of analysis leads to public rhetoric in order to justify the policy, and as public rhetoric increases the organization finds it must back up its rhetoric with action; thus, the same policy is pursued even more intensely, and inevitably becomes "organizational doctrine."

Individuals that point out that "the Emperor's policies have no clothes" are seen by the woodenheaded as disloyal traitors bent on undermining policy, and are excluded from future decision-making. Such irrational behavior led to the fall of the Bourbons of

France. Tuchman characterizes Louis XIV as the "prince of policy pursued contrary to ultimate self-interest (Tuchman, 1984, p. 196). The result of his policies towards the Huguenots brought complete discredit to the concept of the absolute rule of royalty. The natural result of this persistence in error was a national revolution.

Wooden-headedness vs. clear thinking differentiates the true leader from the dictator and the bureaucrat. Tuchman believes that the duty of the executive – be it in business, government, military or religious spheres – is to "keep well-informed, to heed information, to keep mind and judgment open and to resist the insidious spell of wooden-headedness. If the mind is open enough to perceive that a given policy is harming rather than serving self-interest, and self-confident enough to acknowledge it, and wise enough to reverse it, that is a summit in the art of government."

To what degree are you and I woodenheaded? To what degree do we contribute to the failures in our organizations by heedlessly rationalizing away important input and information from subordinates, clients, and customers? If things are going wrong organizationally, do a reality check, because the enemy might just be you. Or, in the famous words of Pogo, "We have met the enemy and he is us."

REFERENCES

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