

THE DANGERS OF Positional Smugplacency

Is a wave of destructive incompetence gathering momentum in the South African workplace?

By **BASIL C LEONARD**



What is the ultimate destructive potential of a tsunami? While climatologists elsewhere research the phenomenon, a major wave of another sort may be forming below the surface of our own country's work environment that will have an equally destructive impact.

The tsunami, formed by an earth tremor on the ocean bed, travels at great speed, almost imperceptibly, over the ocean surface until it reaches shallow waters. On encountering the resistance of the coastal shelf, the wave suddenly swells to a terrifying height, before releasing its anger on everything in its path.

In a figurative sense, a wave of incompetence is currently developing in South Africa that will impact on the lives of those holding positions of employment or service; whether appointed or elected; whether in the private, public or non-governmental sectors. Nobody is going to escape the effects of positional smugplacency.

What is positional smugplacency?

Positional smugplacency is what results when people appointed to positions of seniority become smug and complacent – that is self-righteous and self-satisfied – simply because of the position they hold, without necessarily showing evidence of the competencies usually associated with people in positions of authority.

The debate regarding the most effective manner of assessing competence is far from over. However, there appears to be reasonable agreement that the following factors do **not** guarantee competence: family background, position, title, income level, ethnicity, political connectedness, religious affiliation, social status, racial classification and sexual orientation. Still, many of these factors are used in making appointments and this is contributing to the low levels of competence observed, as well as to the frustration of those reporting to positionally smugplacent people.

Many appointment practices – the same outcome

Playing the political game. Many previously disadvantaged individuals (PDIs) have accepted the challenge to develop marketable skills, thereby raising their competency levels. Many others have become complacent, and even smug, about their self-perceived or imagined competence. They have successfully applied for positions generated via political preference – more generally known as affirmative action or employment equity. Some companies play along and make appointments which turn out to be to the detriment of both the individual and the company. Why would this habit continue? Well, some companies simply want to tick all the equity boxes when reporting to government.

Outdated, and yet waiting. Positional smugplacency is also evident among previously advantaged individuals (PAIs). Some display an attitude of waiting for 'them' (the PDIs) to catch up with 'us' (the PAIs) at the top – not considering

that their competencies may already be outdated. If we wait for this so-called catch-up to happen, South Africa will soon slide into a greater state of incompetence than before. The reason for this is clear to see. By the time the so-called PDIs have caught up, the rest of the world would be streets ahead.

After all, do PAIs always set the standards to which others need aspire? On many occasions, given half the opportunity, PDIs have been found to set a much higher standard.

Manner of appointment. One of the ways to ensure incompetence in future is to allow nepotism or favouritism to influence appointments. Should this practice be allowed to carry on, employers will continue to appoint incompetent people. Sadly, many people appointed in this way may either try to give the impression of competence, often failing or having to appoint consultants at great cost to help them do their jobs.

Trying to transfer competencies. A situation where incompetency develops very subtly is where people are appointed or promoted to posts outside their spheres of competence. An example of this is where a well-qualified person, like a medical doctor, is appointed to a post requiring mostly administrative skills. A likely result is that we lose a competent medical practitioner, and end up with a rather incompetent administrator. We need to recognise that there is no guarantee of a translation of competency simply because the incumbent was competent in another post.

Smugplacency becomes very evident when people in leadership positions start speaking with authority on issues totally outside their areas of compe-

tence. A major concern is the many politically prominent figures who have now been appointed onto boards of companies simply because of their affiliations. Very soon people like these are misguidedly admired as business leaders, without having initiated any business of their own.

Confusing the position with competence. Authority needs to be vested in the *person*, not only in the *position*. In other words, people speak with authority because of who they are and not only because of the position they occupy.

Truly competent people will never have to use title or office to gain respect or enforce authority. They gain people's trust because they have shown themselves to be trustworthy. They validate their trustworthiness through character, vision and competence.

What happens when people are incompetent? Some will acknowledge their own lack of competency and choose to develop themselves to the required levels. Disappointingly, others will close their eyes to their own shortcomings and elect to use title or position to assert themselves. Furthermore, those in the latter group may surround themselves with people even less competent than themselves, thereby always appearing to be competent and knowledgeable.

Ways to avoid smugplacency

1. Carefully appoint people to fill equity demands. Unfortunately, the approach of companies when trying to comply with government equity demands often leaves much to be desired. Frequently there is little interest in screen-

ing candidates carefully and no clear intention to develop such appointees. Adding insult to injury, such appointed people are sometimes offered salaries beyond their actual qualifications, experience or competencies. This results in the marginalisation of such appointees by other employees. Furthermore, many of these appointees start playing companies off against one another and show no real interest in staying with any particular company for very long. They merely see their current position as an opportunity to negotiate a better deal elsewhere.

2. Use competency-based interviews. We must move away from the typical question-and-answer-type interviews and adopt competency-based interviews. While this is especially important when making senior appointments, the principle ought to be applied throughout. Imagine appointing secretaries with typing duties without asking them to type a single document as proof of competency. Until we become serious about the *process* of appointing people, we may simply continue to swell the numbers of the incompetent.

3. Go beyond qualifications and job competencies to EQ and MQ. A great concern is the practice of appointing people based on the details in their *curricula vitae*. Besides the suggestions above, we need to move toward determining people's emotional and moral intelligence (EQ and MQ). This is especially important when filling senior positions. Without fostering emotional stability and moral competence among its senior staff, companies may be opening the door to greater dangers. ■

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