
Regional

When ignorance begets confidence in higher ed

In this column two weeks ago I wrote about the numerous leadership failures in higher education. I heard from some readers who were surprised that institutions filled with so many “intelligent people,” as someone put it, could be so prone to so many fiascos. While they understand that when you hire people from outside academia those newcomers may find themselves at a disadvantage in trying to understand the unique undertakings of colleges and universities, they cannot comprehend why that is the case for people who have spent years in higher education.

The reality is that despite their insularity, campuses show many of the same management problems of other human organizations. No matter how intelligent some people may seem, the lack of training and good role models to learn from, as well as ignorance about good management practices and leadership skills in higher education, usually results in bad outcomes. Not only that, but we also have to contend with the fact that many of those mediocre leaders do not realize what a bad job they are doing. As Charles Darwin suggested in his 1871 book *The Descent of Man*, “ignorance begets confidence.”

But this passage is much more than a mere quote. In fact, this organizational problem has been studied for some time now and is well known among management and labor psychologists. It even has a name: The Dunning-Kruger Effect.

In 1999 David Dunning and Justin Kruger, psychology professors at Cornell University, published the results of their work studying why

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some people make so many bad mistakes. Based on a series of experiments they suggested that ignorance of standards of performance is behind a great deal of incompetence. Although, as the saying goes, to err is human, ignorance is at the bottom of what really separates good quality decisions from poor ones. And they are the result of the lack of appropriate criteria.

These circumstances result from people remaining unaware of their incompetence and, as a result, failing to take any measures that might remediate their ineptitude. Actually, a lot of the performance review processes we see in many organizations are aimed precisely at establishing these performance expectations to avoid managerial failure.

One of the experiments these researchers conducted was with a group of undergraduate students who were asked just as they walked out of a final exam to rate their performance for the class they had just completed. The researchers then compared those students’ self-evaluations with their tests results. What they found was that the worst students grossly overestimated their own performance (by roughly 30 percent), while top students somewhat underestimated their performance. No wonder so many weak students always complain about their grades. These results have

also been the same in other studies about other tasks such as logical reasoning, playing chess or tennis, reading comprehension, or operating a motor vehicle.

Thus, Dunning and Kruger concluded that in addition to poor performers overestimating their own skills, they also fail to recognize their inadequacy compared to the genuine skills in others. In other words, they were not only grossly unaware of how incompetent they were, but also unaware of how competent other people could be.

A direct result is that in addition to their own incompetence, poor performers will likely surround themselves with people like them, not with better people who could help to improve their performance. To make things worse, subsequent studies suggested that poor performers do not like to hear from others that they need to improve. Therefore, the person who is incompetent does not want to hear criticism. This leads the incompetent to fall into a vicious cycle by not recognizing their own incompetence and not taking measures to correct their failings.

Because of lack of training and good examples to follow, good management practices and leadership skills in academia tend to be exception and not the rule. And that is when the Dunning-Kruger Effect kicks in, making those people who are incompetent at what they do not recognize their weaknesses, surround themselves with other incompetent people and respond negatively to any criticism about their performance. Another typical reaction is for those individuals to eliminate any-

one who may make them look bad. This behavior serves to institutionalize mediocrity.

Although this conclusion seems a logical conclusion, what a lot of people do not understand is that there is a multiplying effect of incompetence in any organization. In order to ensure that an institution will work well, one needs to ensure that at the very top of it there are competent individuals who will have little patience for incompetence down the line of command. This idea seems simple, but given the numerous examples of leadership failures in academia what we see is the opposite.

One of the consequences of this situation is that competent individuals have to report to incompetent ones. They either leave the organization, or, in order to survive for either personal or labor reasons, adapt to the inadequacies of the leadership, resulting in the deterioration of the organization. At the end of the day it is the institution that pays the price for their incompetence.

If we really want the best for our institutions of higher education, we need to hire people who are better than us. And that is a message that has to be understood by boards of trustees when selecting campus presidents, because that leader will be the one who will either be or will tolerate incompetence.

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