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Learned Helplessness

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Our Universities: Learned Helplessness

Leadership creates hope, or hopelessness, one or the other. You can't lead by what is or what might be, but out of the alchemy of what is and what might be. That is the nature of the art. Without that alchemy, neither leadership nor art is present.

"It is hardly possible to build anything if frustration, bitterness and a mood of helplessness prevail."

Lech Walesa, Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech, 1983

Tu canis. Lorem canis semper. Canem mortuum natus es, et canis. (You're a dog. You've always been a dog. You were born a dog and will die a dog... It sounds little better in Latin.)

Imagine yourself in a small room wearing a harness that restrains you from meaningful movement. You hear a bell. Soon thereafter you feel an electric shock in your paws. You strain at the harness to escape. Your muscles tense up. But you can't move. The shock goes away. You are relieved. But soon the bell goes off again, and again an electric shock follows. Again, again, and again: the bell, the shock, and the harness.

Eventually a "whitecoat" comes in and removes the harness. He leaves, and soon another shock heats your paws... you tense up... immobilized, even though there is a low wall -- over which you can step to be free of the pain -- formerly unavailable as an escape because of the harness. Instead, you tolerate the shock.

You are a dog that has learned helplessness.

This layman's description of Martin Seligman's 1965 experiment probably falls short, but it describes how we often see ourselves in relation to the circumstances of our lives.

Now, imagine yourself at your home, a university, a house of worship or corporation, military unit, or as a citizen of Poland. You are responsible to someone and, in turn, someone is responsible to you. Like it or not, that is how groups of people work, from two to two billion. You receive direction. The direction is uncomfortable. Loyalty guides your response to respect the authority of the organization and even find ways to justify mindless requests. You strain at what you're asked to do. Your muscles may even tense up.

But you're not a dog.

You make a suggestion, or offer counsel, but it doesn't seem to make any difference. The organization is apathetic and indifferent. You may accept the "harness" of indifference, but probably one of two things will soon occur. You will leave the position with your ideas, wisdom, energy and insight; or you will quit offering them for their lack of impact or perceived value. *Donec in agendis dare, et si ipse.* (You give up on the enterprise and possibly yourself... It doesn't sound good even in Latin.)

The June 2012, **Harvard Business Review Blog Network** carries a reflection by Ron Ashkenas on the nature of "*Learned Helplessness in Organizations.*" Ashkenas reviewed a study at General Electric suggesting that proposed changes to leadership and management were impossible because GE was

dealing with nuclear energy, and government regulations control the processes out of concern for human safety: a perceived government harness made not of leather or indifference, but policy or fear.

Leaders, managers, and bureaucrats of GE were wrong. After careful analysis, it was discovered that many changes could be made, and only a small percentage of the operations claiming to be constrained by government regulations actually were. No harness existed except the most damning human harnesses of all: lack of vision; absence of initiative; comfort with familiarity. Learned helplessness.

A culture of helplessness is born in a hot-house of frayed vision, obfuscated purpose, and the mindlessness of discontent assembled behind the counterfeit facade of discipline and order, glued together by apprehension.

Our universities and other complex organizations should understand Martin Seligman's discovery. Lech Walesa did. Ignorance of it produces reward and punishment independent of effort and results, leading to fruitlessness soon followed by helplessness.

How deeply saddening for any human organization, from two to two billion, or anywhere in between.