

The Workplace Zombie

**One Bureaucrat's Path to Better
Understanding the Virus and Its Vectors**

A productive day is a happier day. When we get things done, it feels good. But disengaged zombie workers build up like plaque in society's arteries and get in the way. They must be stopped from spreading their virus, damaging our organizations, and harming the souls they touch.

David A Dolinsky

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To my closest friends who aren't mentioned above, know that I will start writing a sequel to this book soon. Plan to be enlisted to work on that next one!

based on the assets in the fund. As capital was returned, the amount their fees were based on, and therefore the amount of money the company operating the fund would earn for themselves, would decrease. The ratio was vital in forecasting the fund's rate of return to the management, especially when it came to covering their fixed expenses in future periods.

There is a great quote attributed to Albert Einstein about relativity and time, "Put your hand on a hot stove for a minute, and it seems like an hour. Sit with a pretty girl for an hour, and it seems like a minute. That's relativity." That is true with many things in life and work. A broader perspective helps us see the good in people and situations and can unlock positive aspects of time elasticity.

Where I went to Army basic training, at least for a couple of weeks on the range, we still had flush toilets where we slept in two-person tents, but they didn't have stalls around them. A hundred guys needing to use a toilet in the morning at about the same time, but only ten are available. You're sitting there, and guys are lined up in front of you, asking how long it will be before you finish. Call me a child of privilege, growing up with stalls around toilets and doors no less! The lack of privacy was simply an unsubtle way for us to notice that we were all in this thing together. Time couldn't go fast enough those mornings.

The stories within this chapter focused on seeing people as individuals, considering them, having perspective, and having an awareness of time relative to what is essential. All that will help us orient ourselves toward acquiring wisdom and acting on that wisdom.

SINCERE IGNORANCE AND CONSCIENTIOUS STUPIDITY

"Nothing in the world is more dangerous than sincere ignorance and conscientious stupidity."
- Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

An alum of our neighborhood high school gave their 2018 commencement speech. Rainn Wilson, quoted his character Dwight Schrute from *The Office*, and said, "If an idiot would do a thing, do not do that thing." That is, for sure, sage advice.

Writing about acceptance, tamping down the desire to fight bureaucracy, and following a path to greater satisfaction have helped me grow personally. That doesn't mean there aren't things that boil my blood. Grouped into a category, those 'things' would be classified as the title of this chapter.

In *Essence of Decision* (1971), Graham Allison, Dean of the Harvard Kennedy School of Government, outlined the Three Lenses Model of organizational decision-making: Model I, a rational model. The organization acts as a single rational actor in decision making and implementation; Model II, an organizational behavior model based on procedures, routines, constraints, and culture; and Model III a governmental-politics model. The organization acts based on negotiations amongst the principles. Some refer to this third one as a model of political realism.

This chapter posits a fourth lens. It is Model IV, the dunderhead model, which focuses on a lack of wisdom.

Ignorance Is the Absence of Wisdom

In the mid-1980s, only the largest cities had dedicated bomb squads. Every other police or fire department relied on the active duty soldiers from U.S. Army Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) units.

Our team arrived at a well-known Ivy League school in the Finger Lakes Region of New York to respond to a package thought to have been sent by the Unabomber, now known as Theodore Kaczynski.

The mail carrier delivering the package had accidentally bumped it against a wall, and it started buzzing. He put it down, the building was evacuated, and the police and fire departments were called. By the time they arrived, the package had stopped buzzing, so one of the firefighters, from a short distance that would be well within any blast radius, threw a heavy garbage can at the package to ‘confirm’ it was a bomb. It started buzzing again. Genius! Army EOD units didn’t have robots back then but throwing a garbage can at a suspect improvised explosive device (IED) to verify if it was hazardous was still not considered best practice.

We dragged the package out of the building using a hook-and-line kit, x-rayed it, and read the Polaroid X-rays to get an idea of what was in it. We couldn’t tell exactly, but there were batteries, a lot of wiring and circuit boards, and some other stuff all jumbled together. As we prepared to disassemble the package violently, the school tracked down the sender. This graduate student confirmed that the box held, among other things, a portable door alarm, a toaster, and a mannequin’s hand. The box was opened, the incident marked complete, and no mannequins were harmed.

A Distinction Without a Difference

“To the corpse, in general, the distinction between manslaughter and murder is likely irrelevant.”
– David A Dolinsky.

The term “worried well” is used in healthcare to refer to people who are in decent health but due to anxiety related to a specific event, like a sudden public health emergency, believe themselves to be ill or likely to get sick. They can overwhelm a healthcare system and prevent people with actual physical needs from receiving prompt treatment.

Related to “Garbage Can Theory” and “Brooks’ Law,” concepts that will be discussed shortly, there are responder organizations and response personnel who feel the need to deploy to the site of any emergency or disaster receiving national media coverage to provide aid, whether they are needed or not, and whether or not their presence will degrade the response effort. One such event was the detonation of a pressure-cooker-type bomb at a large event in a major city.

For this story, we’ll focus on one organization and one individual. The organization wanted to deploy a specific mental health expert. Not that the city involved didn’t have access to many great ones but this was the decision of the ‘leadership’ of the organization. The problem was the doctor lived on the opposite coast and, to complicate things further was already traveling within another state.

Travel wasn’t hard to arrange. All that doctor had to do was go to the major airport he was near, board a

plane, and get to where the organization wanted him to be. There was only one problem, the doctor didn't have enough clean underwear with him for the trip. Raymond Babbitt, the autistic savant character in the movie *Rain Man*, fixated on buying his underwear at K-Mart and had at least a rudimentary understanding of how to do so. Raymond Babbitt was unfortunately unavailable that day to help resolve the problem.

The matter was pushed to the organization's Chief of Administration and Finance for an immediate solution. Multiple courses of action, "COAs," for those familiar with military terminology were provided: 1) the doctor could wash his underwear at the hotel once he arrived; 2) purchase new underwear using his own funds since he was getting around seventy dollars per day for food and miscellaneous expenses; 3) his wife could ship some underwear to his hotel by overnight delivery, or 4) for the love of G-d and all that is holy in this world, they could find someone with more higher level brain function than a dead hamster who could figure this out themselves and perhaps have some hope of contributing to the response effort as a result.

The Chief of Administration and Finance was polite in all his emails. They're a written medium that lives on forever. Besides, he understood Hanlon's Razor which states, "Never assume malice when incompetence will suffice as an explanation." The operations and logistics teams made a decision. Overnight delivery of the undergarments from the doctor's home would be the best option. They didn't want the doctor or his wife to pay for what could be more costly than buying new underwear and asked how that could be done. They

were told to send the wife the account number for the organization's overnight shipper, it would be billed directly to the office at a reasonable price, and everyone could get back to doing meaningful work. What happened next was shocking. They asked how the number could be "transmitted" to the wife. That request for how to provide a ten digit number to the doctor's wife was sent in an email to multiple parties, none making less than a hundred thousand dollars a year in 2013.

There is a corollary to Hanlon's Razor referred to as Fred Clark's Law. It states that "Sufficiently advanced incompetence is indistinguishable from malice." At a certain point you have to actively work to advance to such an elevated level of incompetence.

A uniformed public health service officer and trusted reprover was asked by the Chief of Administration and Finance to come with and keep him grounded when going across the street to the operations center to educate the tiny brain folk on the department's communication capabilities, including landline, cellular and satellite phones, fax, email, the emergency broadcast system, and various secure communications modes should the underwear matter rise to that level.

Within a couple of days, reports were coming in from people at the site of the response. One that stood out was the report of a single individual, just one and no others, at a meeting of responders to the incident who reported "actual or potential" sleep loss as a result of their participation in the effort. It wasn't even clear to anyone present, including the individual reporting the issue, that someone had lost any sleep! The Chief of Administration and Finance had lost plenty of sleep.

Yes, the people on the ground were making a ‘difference.’ Beyond converting worthless taxpayer funds into solid waste through the reimbursement of travel expenses, the difference made was difficult to quantify. Yet the effort was undoubtedly aided by the availability of underwear that was unlikely to bunch.

Was incompetence or malice at the root of the underwear debacle? That’s a distinction without a difference.

“To succeed in the world it is not enough to be stupid, you must also be well-mannered.” - Voltaire.

Wisdom is a fusion of knowledge, experience, and good judgment. Acting with wisdom takes intention. Working with intention takes thought. The stories of the suspect Unabomber IED and the challenge of transporting underwear were all too real. Why did these experienced people fail to act with even a minimal level of intention and thought? Learning was involved, but it was learning in the wrong direction.

An article in *Harvard Business Review* (Nov 2015), “Why Organizations Don’t Learn” (F. Gino and B. Staats), is on point. The authors ask why companies struggle to become or remain ‘learning organizations.’ They note four harmful biases as causing the issue. They focus too much on success, a tendency toward action, an inclination toward fitting in, and rely too much on experts. Within each of the biases are several associated challenges. We’ll focus on two: a lack of reflection and a narrow view of expertise.

With the IED story, we see a tendency toward action

unchallenged by anyone taking time to reflect. Firefighters are generally viewed as the most trustworthy profession in terms of honesty and integrity. That has been my personal experience as well. I’ve worked with many people with firefighting experience, and my youngest brother is a retired firefighter/battalion chief. I have seen the tendency to want to act immediately, especially with those in emergency management, overriding the need for reflection. You see it in office situations as well.

An issue is brought to a supervisor, who immediately blurts out an answer. That answer may be correct, but that isn’t the point. Not taking time to reflect, for even a moment, or to ask a clarifying question makes it more likely for the answer to be incorrect. Worse, the person asking the question might not feel heard. General Colin Powell said, “The day soldiers stop bringing you their problems is the day you have stopped leading them. They have lost their confidence that you can help them or concluded that you do not care. Either case is a failure of leadership.” Who are you when you’ve stopped being a leader in a leadership position? You are either a workplace zombie, a virus carrier, or both.

The issue of blurting out an answer too quickly isn’t about when somebody calls to ask you for a specific phone number or something similar. If your team constantly comes to you as a leader for those simple things, other issues must be addressed.

Taking time for reflection involves breathing. Oddly related is one of the critical factors for good rifle marksmanship: you always strive to pull the trigger at the bottom of an exhale. That is when your body is most relaxed. It is essential to learn to do that in any

work setting. No, not shooting people, learning to breathe! Hurriedness leaves people susceptible to the workplace zombie virus. There is so much to do but not enough time, like a rubber band with a weight at the end that gets twisted up tighter and tighter. When that rubber band finally unwinds, it spins in a different direction and tightens up again. There is a short pause just before the rubber band turns fast again the other way. Those little moments are important. They are a sort of oasis all on their own and a chance to reflect. You can't stop the external forces. You can find moments for reflection.

“Whatever failures I have known, whatever errors I have committed, whatever follies I have witnessed in private and public life have been the consequence of action without thought.” - Bernard Baruch.

That pause to reflect does two things that can prevent the spread of the virus. First, you show the person asking the questions that they've been heard and are being considered. Second, it gives an additional opportunity for them to provide further information.

Having a “three laws” attitude regarding the virus is essential. The Three Laws of Robotics were written by Issac Asimov in his 1942 short story “Runaround.” They had to do with robots not harming a human. You can look them up. Paraphrasing them as applied to workplace zombies fomenting bureaucratic friction yields the following: First, don't allow yourself to injure a person or, through inaction, allow a person to be harmed simply by following bureaucratic frameworks.

Second, adhere to bureaucratic frameworks except where such frameworks would conflict with the first rule. Third, we must accept bureaucratic frameworks as an ineradicable foe, as that is the only way to win the battle against bureaucratic friction.

Stephen Hess describes his book, *The Professor and the President* (2017), as “What happens when a conservative president makes a liberal professor from the Ivy League his top urban affairs adviser? The president is Richard Nixon, and the professor is Harvard's Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a future Senator. Of all the odd couples in American public life, they are probably the oddest.” The book is a great story and a great read. A couple of ideas from the book will be highlighted later in this one. Related to our three laws framework, at one point, President Nixon is quoted as saying, “Having a policy in [x] is no more a guarantor of success than having one in [y], but it is a precondition of success.” Whatever policy you make up, at least have one. It acts like an internal shaker, an alert system, something in your brain that says, “What are you thinking!” It keeps you from translating bad thoughts into wrong actions.

Speaking of wrong actions, the second challenge to look at here is organizations having an overly narrow view of expertise. Some might say that people have biases, not organizations, but in the same way that systemic racism is real, so are systemic biases. They get baked into the bureaucratic frameworks of an organization. In the federal government, you often see the acronym SME as a subject matter expert. The bias comes in when only relying on titles, degrees, and years of experience. So and so did this job for thirty years. They theoretically know a lot. Sure, they may have

learned a lot. Just as often, you see people who tout their years of experience but realize it was simply decades of thirty-day failure cycles without learning. Some are derogatively referred to as SMEdiots.

What I've witnessed subject matter experts often do, whether working as a consultant, in a leadership position, or on staff, is rummage around the garbage cans. Not literally, well sometimes, but as described in "A Garbage Can Model of Organizational Choice" by Cohen, March, and Olsen (1972). They write that an organization "is a collection of choices looking for problems, issues and feelings looking for decision situations in which they might be aired, solutions looking for issues to which they might be the answer, and decision makers looking for work." Like a zombie looking for the next victim to bite. What else goes into garbage cans? People like to place bombs in them.

When a bomb threat is called into a workplace or school, the local bomb squad will get a call. One problem is that unlike the types of devices procured by Wile E. Coyote from the Acme Corporation in the Looney Tunes cartoons, IEDs generally aren't labeled as such. Who can tell if something is out of place in your office? Hint: It's not the bomb tech who has never been there before. Does a bomb tech know more about bombs than the people in your office? Sure. Does that help them find something out of place? No.

There was an incident at a Nevada casino in 1980 where an improvised explosive device was brought in as part of an extortion plot. No need to search. It was also booby-trapped. This, too, demonstrated the overreliance on titles and degrees. Having dinner with the guy who recruited me into EOD one evening, I

learned about it. Army EOD arrived and had a plan of action. Far 'smarter' people from nearby government facilities devised a different action plan. The new plan had a flaw that was plain to see, but those commenting weren't Ph.D. physicists and didn't get heard. End result? In 1980 dollars, it cost more than eighteen million dollars to repair the hotel when the render-safe procedure failed. Happily, no one was killed or injured. They caught the guy who built the device. Incidentally, he wasn't an expert at building bombs. He wasn't reportedly a gambling expert either. Gambling losses were behind his motive. He died in prison. So much for the experts. Having more of them didn't help.

The workplace zombie in a leadership position will forever blame a lack of resources for their project shortfalls. While that is often a reality in government, it is important to be careful what you wish for. The tendency is for others in leadership positions to take advantage of your request for additional people to offload their infected to your team. You may be able to cure the workplace zombies re-assigned to your team. It isn't easy, but they'll be some of the best employees ever if you're successful.

Two things to keep in mind. Don't be overconfident. We watched a video in EOD school about ejection seats titled *When in Doubt Just Punch Out*. The lesson was that overconfidence made it too late to eject when a pilot realized they couldn't regain control of their aircraft. The second thing to consider is Brooks' Law. Do you really need additional people? In *The Mythical Man-Month* (1975), Fred Brooks wrote, "Adding human resources to a late software project makes it later". There is an incremental person who, when

added, makes the project take longer. Illustrated by the fact, at least pending future advances in reproductive science, nine women can't make a baby in a month.

"We are all inclined to judge ourselves by our ideals; others by their acts," according to British diplomat Harold Nicolson. Over the last several years, I've heard differing views on who can give birth to a human baby, but none differing over gestational times. Do I intend to offend anyone by using the word women? Nope. Intent matters. At least in the courts, there is still a difference between murder and manslaughter.

Have good intent in your heart. Walking down the street, it is so easy to look at someone and think - Oh, that person is ugly; I don't like how they're dressed or some other fleeting negative thought. Work to look at people, even the ones you'll never see again, and see something positive. It trains the brain. That mindset acts as a vaccine against the workplace zombie virus.

One way to build a culture that inoculates a team against the workplace zombie virus is to ensure that the team member or the team as a whole knows the name of an individual who is counting on them to solve an issue or complete a task and what the larger benefit will be of getting it done. It only takes 30 seconds. That connects them to a specific person, someone they are directly helping, which provides a positive feeling. It also helps them see where their work fits into the bigger picture, another positive motivator. Do it often, and people will make those connections intrinsically.

Acting with wisdom takes intention. Working with intention takes thought. Those may seem like little details, but the effects can be huge.

I'M DONE WITH GREAT THINGS AND BIG THINGS

"I am done with great things and big things, great institutions and big success, and I am for those tiny, invisible molecular moral forces that work from individual to individual, creeping through the crannies of the world like so many rootlets, or like the capillary oozing of water, yet which if you give them time, will rend the hardest monuments of man's pride." - William James.

You may never have heard of John Szilagyi, a federal bureaucrat who started working at the Internal Revenue Service in 1961 and stayed more than thirty years. He personifies the value of doing something that appears as a tiny, invisible moral force but, over time, has a massive impact. His actions resulted in millions of children no longer being dependent on their parents.

I read about him in *Freakonomics: A Rogue Economist Explores the Hidden Side of Everything* (2005) by economist Steven Levitt and journalist Stephen J. Dubner. That book and its sequel are fascinating.

Szilagyi is the guy who in the 1980s came up with the requirement of having social security numbers for dependents listed on tax returns. Millions of children and other dependents disappeared, and tax collections increased by fourteen billion dollars over the five years after that. Were millions of children emancipated that year, and now filing their own tax returns, or had millions of people been lying on their tax returns about their true number of dependents? We may never know.