

More Psychology of Good and Bad Leadership

What are the cheap psychological tricks used by bad leaders?

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[In the last post](#), we were exploring tactics used by bad leaders, what I called "cheap psychological tricks," to control and subjugate followers. A variation on the abuse of requiring follower obedience to authority is when leaders call on the ultimate authority - God. Many despotic leaders throughout history have declared themselves gods, from the Egyptian pharaohs, to modern times, such as North Korea's Kim Il Sung.

Leaders of cults, such as Peoples Temple founder, Jim Jones, (leader of the Jonestown, Guyana mass suicide in 1978) declared themselves "god" so that followers who disobey the leader's orders are seen as blasphemers and can be punished or ostracized by other group members. Even leaders who claim that "God is on our side," are taking the dangerous path to bad leadership. Hitler, for example, said that he believed that his actions in Nazi Germany were "in accordance with the will of the almighty Creator." This is quite different than Abraham Lincoln's quote: "My concern is not whether God is on our side; my greatest concern is to be on God's side." So reliance on the ultimate authority - the Divine - is another cheap psychological trick or tactic that suggests bad leadership.

Tactic #3: The Dangers of Conformity and Social Proof. We know from a long history of conformity studies, such as Solomon Asch's "line studies" (participants will make wrong judgments of the length of lines if other participants make the wrong judgment), that too much conformity can be a dangerous thing. Leaders who capitalize on followers' conformity, or use followers' conformity as verification that they are right, are engaging in bad leadership.

Conformity, via the "bandwagon effect," can be dangerous. Followers are all too willing to "jump on the bandwagon" when other followers are seemingly lining up behind a leader's course of action. When we don't know what to do, we look to others for guidance (social comparison), and tend to conform to their actions and beliefs. Leaders who understand this try to give the illusion that everyone is behind the leader's decision. Thus, followers may not question that decision, but simply jump on the bandwagon.

As President John F. Kennedy said, "Conformity is the jailer of freedom and the enemy of growth." Martin Luther King, Jr., goes further: "Freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed." This suggests the "antidote" to blind conformity is for followers to be empowered to believe that they can challenge the leader. Good leaders allow this.

Leadership Tactic #4: Fear Appeals and Providing Protection from Harm. The easiest way for a leader to gain the unquestioning blind allegiance of followers is to create a sense of fear, and to offer followers the leader's protection (in exchange for loyalty). I am sitting in an airport as I write this and I noticed that the security level is at the near-highest level of "orange" [I think it's been orange for many years]. It was odd how during election time, circa 2004, it went to "red" although I don't think things actually changed. But we know that despotic leaders from the ancient to the modern - Hitler, Saddam Hussein - have raised the specter of fear and then offered protection from the evil if followers would simply obey.

President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, during the Great Depression and World War II took the opposite tact. He acknowledged real dangers and threats, but called on Americans that "the only thing we have to fear is fear itself." "The point in history at which we stand is full of promise and danger. The world will either move forward toward unity and widely shared prosperity, or it will move apart." This is a good leadership approach to real fears - acknowledging the danger but providing an optimistic course of action to prevail. This is in sharp contrast to creating dangers and fear, and using those to solidify the leader's power. Dealing openly and honestly with followers is the good leadership strategy.

Religious leaders who promise "salvation" if followers will only obey the leader's every command, are also good examples of the use of this fear tactic.

So, we know quite a bit about [bad leadership](#). Because of these basic psychological principles, bad leaders can fairly easily get the unempowered and unsuspecting followers to unquestioningly do their bidding.

Good leaders avoid these cheap tricks. They empower followers; they are authentic and transparent about their motives and desires; and they welcome followers' input and allow followers to question their course of action. But this is not easy. Good leadership is hard. Bad leadership is easy (and all too common, unfortunately).