

***The Predictable Fate of an Organizational Shipwreck: A Theoretical Case
Analysis of the Morro Castle and its Relevance in Schools Today***

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Abstract

This paper studies the historical shipwreck, The Morro Castle, and the many reasons for its impending doom. A comparison is made between the organizational mishaps on board this sea vessel and how it relates to schools as organizations today. The paper outlines three main problems: bureaucratic corruption, poor leadership, and unethical behavior—all of which could be present in schools and could in turn cause dysfunction for students, teachers, and society as a whole. Organizational theorists are examined in order to better understand the fate of the Morro Castle and the lessons to be learned for educators of today's youth.

Numerous organizational theorists from as early as 1916 through to as recently as 2006, could explain why the voyage of the Morro Castle was doomed before it even left port, and how this senseless tragedy was not only foreseeable, but avoidable. McFee (1934), titled his sea story “The Peculiar Fate of the Morro Castle”, but perhaps it would be more accurate to call it, “The Predictable Fate of an Organizational Shipwreck”? The very nature of organizations require the following: a common purpose, leadership, roles and responsibilities, structure, division of labor, accountability, management, and hierarchy—all of which were ridden in dysfunction, or complete absence on the ship. It is imperative that the many flaws aboard the Morro Castle do not make waves in today's schools; for our youth will become our future captains—sink or swim. In 1934, 134 lives were lost due to bureaucratic corruption, daft leadership, and employee incompetence; in schools today there are innumerable more passengers.

Bureaucratic Corruption

The Morro Castle catastrophe was a sad consequence of American vanity gone terribly wrong. Other nations were competitive, successful, and efficient in terms of transatlantic trading, however the United States were not only capsizing in the industry, but responsible for knowingly having defective ships that lacked due maintenance and code adherence. American-made ships, bow to stern, and patriotic in each and every fault. McFee (1934) described a desperate Merchant Marine, void of any fiscally-sound judgement. The Shipping Board in the United States of America leaked public money dry in search of some kind of arrogant presence on the seas of the Atlantic.

Corruption occurs when bureaucrats, who had dual roles as managers and investors in the Morro Castle era, use public funds dishonestly and have the capacity to succeed at advancing their immorality. However corrupt the Bureau became, it was only itself to which it was accountable, for which, to no surprise, it found itself without flaw. Deplorably, when bureaucratic decisions were questioned they were quickly silenced. Safety of vessels was assured through lies and non-compliance of standards. Innocent lives were lost due to a fraudulent and corrupt naval bureaucracy.

Where were the rules and laws and the adherence to them in the bureaucracy of the Morro Castle? Weber (2011) suggested that bureaucracy involved an appointed official having the authority to make sound decisions, and having the power to give commands, while ensuring that there was compliance. In this case, the Merchant Marine had unearned authority, ensuring only non-compliance, in order to cover up its pillaging ways of public money squandering. Fayol (2011) argued that how well an organization runs depends on 14 principles, and how skillful personnel are at using them; both the principles and skill of the US Merchant Marine were lacking. Fayol (2011) specifically mentioned “subordination of individual interest to general interest” (p. 56) as one such principle. This principle stressed that the organization was more important than the individual. He cautioned to be wary of greed, as this human flaw overpowered general interest. When it came to US ships and shipping in 1934, individual investments were protected, above all else. Janis (2011) would find the bureaucrats in charge of the Morro Castle guilty of several symptoms of “groupthink” (p. 189). US conceit served as the anchor of the symptom Janis described as invulnerability, by recklessly disregarding safety and obvious bankruptcy. Janis’ other symptoms were also apparent, such as: rationale, pressure, morality, self-censorship; all of which led the organization to continue to fuel its corruption and lack of critical thinking (2011).

The immoral politics intrinsic in marine bureaucracy at the time are evident, and choices were made using what Pfeffer (2011) stated as a “bureaucratic model of decision making” (p. 283), where financial and safety decisions were made based on memory of past judgements. Those before said the Morro Castle was a safe vessel so why check again? Before she even set sail, bureaucrats in power had developed a climate of toxicity leaving an unethical wake behind. Bureaucracy is not a ‘sallywag’ as such, but when it is corrupt it can only be a dirty word.

Appelbaum and Shapiro (2006) would view the deviance on the Morro Castle as expected, because the leader of shipping, the Merchant Marine, showed a mutiny of such deviance itself. Had sound and safe decisions been made and compliance to rules followed, corruption would not have existed and needless deaths avoided. The corruption in the bureaucracy of the Merchant Marine could be tried and found guilty of 134 counts of murder. Many with authority should have been made to walk the plank. If the Merchant Marine could have managed without conflict of interest, been accountable to someone other than

themselves, and abided by the rules and regulations of safety, this tragedy would not have been. No one had a common purpose other than self-interest.

Bureaucratic Corruption: How it has and could affect our Students

One of the most important players within society's bureaucracy is the Ministry of Education. Teachers are often seconded to the ministry because of who and what they know, and because of relationships they have with those in power. As aforementioned, bureaucracy is not a bad word if it is honorable. Many in authority positions are making decisions based on what is believed to be good and best, through mindful experience and knowledge. Authority to decide what is important, and what will be taught, lies in the hands of those involved in the Ministry of Education, which I will remind, is publicly funded. If corruption were to occur in terms of mismanagement of funds, such as occurred on many ships governed by the Merchant Marine, tax payers would be outraged and ultimately students would suffer a lack of resources and opportunities.

If we think back to history textbooks in schools we see blatant corruption and dishonesty in the racist descriptions of Canada's first peoples. This corruption led to further perpetuate negativity and disrespect for a group of people who continue to fight to make a comeback. They are fighting in an educational system historically fraught with immorality from residential schools to the current inequities apparent in First Nations' schools today, both from governments and within the First Nation itself.

Who suffers from this corruption ultimately? It is the students who are affected by this mismanagement. We want, and need students, the leaders of tomorrow, to think critically about what is just and sound, and to behave in a moral and respectful way. The ability for all students to grow and learn in both their knowledge and morality is fundamental to the success of society as a whole. We cannot lead by deviance, for it is what we will instill in our youth. If we continue to design curricula based on Pfeffer's (2011) idea of "a bureaucratic model of decision making" (p. 283), we will do what was done in the past, because it is quickest and habitual, but we know that this is not best for our students. If we cannot learn from our history and make a better history for our children we too have fallen victim of being bilged on our own anchor. We must embrace healthy bureaucracy and the strengths that it can provide within schools today. Functional bureaucracies (ministries) have strong leaders (administrators) who lead strong teams (teachers in schools), and as such have strong followers (students).

Daft Leadership

Bureaucratic corruption may have navigated the Morro Castle into "dirty weather" (McFee, 1934, p. 313), but it is its horrific leadership that is responsible for the squall. The leadership, or lack thereof, of dead Captain R. Wilmott created a functionally defective culture aboard the Morro Castle. Shein (2011) stated that, "when we examine culture and leadership closely, we see that they are two sides of the same coin;

neither can really be understood by itself” (p. 352). Shein (2011) emphasized that culture was not a concept, it was like a personality to a group. It would not be over board to say that this group had a personality disorder, which was perpetuated by the captain’s tolerance of it, contributions to it, and complete lack of effort, although responsible, to fix it.

Scientific *mismanagement* was evident under Captain Wilmott’s leadership, according to Taylor’s (2011) four principles. Firstly, leaders had to be skilled and knowledgeable, which Wilmott may have been, but in order to be efficient they must impart this knowledge. Captain Wilmott’s knowledge selfishly died with him and in Taylor’s words, “the gathering in of this great mass of traditional knowledge...can be called the science” (p. 69). Secondly, it was Wilmott’s, “duty to set out deliberately to train the workmen in [his] employ to be able to do a better and still better class than ever before”, (Taylor, 2011, p. 70). The third principle was also unfulfilled as the crew was never made to learn the science of sailing, nor got to practice it. Cooperation between captain and crew failed as the fourth principle of teamwork was absent. Had Captain Willmott simply taught his crew and allowed them to practice their actual work a different outcome may have been.

The problems according to Fayol (2011) corresponded to several principles: defunct authority and responsibility, lack of discipline, social disorder, instability of tenure of personnel, and a general deficiency of “*esprit de corps*” (p. 63). On the Morro Castle quality of work begot no sanctions nor rewards. Captain Wilmott lacked skill in delegation; perhaps indicating his fear of shared responsibilities? There was no discipline as evidenced through the disobedience and disrespect of the crew; for there weren’t any established rules to respectfully obey. Social order on the ship was an example of an utter lack of skill on the part of the Captain to organize his men or to select the right personnel to build a quality team. With extremely high turnover rates (20%) neither time nor practice allowed a crew to achieve any sort of stability or earn tenure. There was an ‘*esprit de soi*’ as it were, rather than an “*esprit de corps*” (Fayol, 2011, p. 63). Each man, including its skipper, was disjointed from the whole and self-interest rather than teamwork was at the forefront. It was as though Captain Wilmott had no means of giving his crew the KITA they needed, for he was in need of a KITA himself.

There is much that we do not know for certain about the late Captain, but we do know that a Captain is the boss on a ship and that he did not fulfill the roles and responsibilities that his position in the hierarchy would deem necessary. Jacques (2011) explained that bosses needed to be accountable for employees, setting the direction of the work, and getting his subordinates to willingly and enthusiastically do this work. The sobering fact was that the employees were only enthusiastic about getting drunk and making money from the illegal smuggling of drugs. Hierarchy is needed. People need someone to lead them and leaders need followers. What is most important however, is that the right people are in the right seats and that the right person is driving the ship in this case.

It is obvious that habits, bad habits, had formed and had become norms on the Morro Castle. It could be said that the toxic culture that existed on the ship was the captain's responsibility to change. "Unless you change the habit-patterns of people, you have not really changed the people", (Follett, 2011, p. 156). Practice makes permanent, not perfect in this case. Training and practice are needed. Perhaps the crew would have listened to orders, had there been any from their superior. Sometimes people who seem like they won't, just can't, because they don't know how.

Principals with Principles

The entire culture of a school is affected, both negatively and positively, by whom is in charge. If leadership is questionable in a school, one knows, having entered it if only for a few minutes. Guest teachers can attest to this truth, as being a substitute teacher grants one the unique opportunity to read the pulse of many buildings. Principals play a critical role in school climate and culture. When staffs have effective leadership, teachers, parents, and students want to support and cooperate in the realization of the valued school plan. Students and teachers want to share in the rule following, whether it be expectations, assessments, or assignments. Teachers, who value their leader, want to please, and little discipline is needed for both teachers and students. When principals have input into choosing quality personnel based on the needs of the team, strong staffs with many varying gifts ensue. Principals who know the value in finding these gifts and delegating and sharing responsibilities are among those who may make fewer direct decisions, but actually have more power.

Principals in schools change often, and so it is important to pass on important cultural information about the parting school to the new leader to increase efficiency and to allow the corporate knowledge to be communicated. Communication is essential in schools. Clarity of delivery of that communication is also critical. Information can be shared by email, telephone, or in person, but knowing which is appropriate is a skill that many great administrators possess. The art of knowing how to have courageous conversations, with parents, students, and staff, with both parties leaving feeling empowered and respected, is the true sign of a quality leader. Principals are at the top of the hierarchy within a school and so, if they are of good character and sound judgment, often so are the rest of their subordinates. In the case of strong leadership, deviance is almost absent as it is not the example given, nor followed. Good principals, with principles, are looked up to by students, teachers, parents, and community members. Possessing that authority cannot be taken as trivial. Leaders must have a noble goal in order for staffs to fulfill that goal and ultimately students to reach it.

Employee Incompetence

It has been evident that bureaucratic corruption and daft leadership were responsible for the demise of the Morro Castle, so how were the staff to act competently when they lacked all that was necessary from their

leaders? Perhaps had employee competence super seceded the atrocious leadership the ship would have had a chance, but this was not the case on the Morro Castle. The knowledge necessary to become effective in their roles was marooned with the crew's dead captain. It is uncertain whether he had not been dead that there actually would have been a different outcome, as a captain is only as good as his crew. It is no wonder the crew resorted to "soldiering" (Taylor, 2011, p. 66) for it was the culture (drinking excessively and running drug operations) and was far more financially lucrative than the true work.

The night-time skeleton crew had no experience in staying calm in stressful situations or how to behave; they had never been taught. The crew of the Morro Castle had no code of ethics or principles as demonstrated by their immoral actions to save themselves above all else. They were new and inexperienced. They showed no morality or loyalty. There were no rules written or recorded and therefore very few expectations to follow. Their only expertise was in deviance; knowing how to perform illegal activity with efficiency and the many other duties and activities that took them away from what it was they were hired to do. They were motivated to be delinquent because it paid. The secret knowledge of what it really was to run a ship was hidden inside the mind of their dead captain. It is no wonder they were not motivated to work—they had no idea how. There was no time to become competent at the actual work; for the deviant behavior consumed their time.

McGregor (2011) addressed the need to consider the human being in organizations, even his flaws. Theory X inherently believed that in order to get things done management had to depend on others and motivate them to perform, which would explain why the Morro Castle effectively accomplished nothing. Behind this theory were the thoughts that man was lazy, relatively dumb, and easily swayed by liars and cheaters. In the case of the Morro Castle most of the crew did seem to fit this description. How were they to be anything else? They were not given the opportunity to learn or provided any guidance. They were presented with means to gain money through illegal activity in order to meet their needs. These employees were actually motivated, but they were motivated to meet their needs in the only way they knew and saw how to. Applebaum and Shapiro (2006) presented many causes for deviant behavior. They explained that bonding with other deviant people, lack of education and tenure, being new on the job, being part of a toxic organization, having immoral leaders, and lack of organizational justice all contributed to increased deviance. Each of these causes were prevalent in the crew of the Morro Castle. The solution to this deviance lies in building a culture based on ethics. Employees must co-construct clear values and beliefs and contribute to the positive climate of the organization and see that their needs can be met in a humane and moral way.

Teacher Leaders inspire Future Leaders

Distinguished teaching often looks from the outside like it is being led by the students themselves. The classroom runs seamlessly, with vigor, a flexible structure, and clear roles. Hierarchy does exist in this classroom, it's just thriving so it is more difficult to identify. The teacher knows their role and the students know theirs. The two depend on one another and learn from each other in harmony. The teacher is accountable to the Ministry of Education, their administration, to the families, and truthfully society in general. They are responsible for what is to be learned, but open-minded to the multitude of ways of how it could be learned. Students who are engaged in the learning, the real work—the work of thinking, problem solving, inquiring, are engaged because they know what it is they are seeking (a purpose/goal) and what it looks like to have arrived. Teachers skilled in imparting responsibility to their students act as facilitators cooperatively working alongside their pupil. They maintain order and peace as they watch students develop and grow in their knowledge and experience. Teacher competence is essential for learned competence.

Conclusion

All three components (organizational corruption, poor leadership, and inept workers) weave together a type of noose—a suicidal reef knot. Organizational theorists could have predicted, with almost certainty, the Morro Castle disaster, but what is most tragic is that so many lives were senselessly lost due to this organizational shipwreck. Schools, who are in the business of giving lessons, can learn one from this horrendous accident. The lesson being—that efficient schools need strong, ethical leadership who possess a moral compass at every level of management (ministry through to classroom teacher). Our crew are learning how to become leaders from their current captains. Our students are our passengers who will one day set the direction of society's sails—they are extremely precious cargo.

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