

Practiced Incompetence

Stephen Harrison, PMP

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Abstract: As we settle into our personal and professional lives we tend to grow comfortable with what we know, and increasingly reliant on our existing set of skills and behaviours. Expanding into a new way of being requires us to engage with the chaos of new approaches, be exposed to our learning edge, and have the courage to be vulnerable.

Children play, are spontaneous, try new things and mistakes are an accepted part of the learning process. As adults the norm shifts towards maintenance of what we know, feeling safe and secure in our capabilities, with our security built on our competence. Ego demands that any threat to our emotional, mental or physical being be dealt with and encourages us to rely on fear-based survival modes – fight, flight, freeze or fabricate.

At every level of organisational life, ego-driven behaviours can be seen. Fiefdoms are created as individuals and groups seek control, desiring the means to ensure their security, and layers of protection are implemented. Authority (the right to do something) is often confused with power (the ability to do something), and unfortunately do not truly reside with each other as often as we might hope or expect. Too often authority leads to ever greater need for protectionism. Control becomes the key competence as fear runs rampant, and excellence suffers as only the tried and true methods are used, the only ones in which competence is held.

Such behaviours and approaches pose their own threats when we are in an unstable, changing environment. Recent events in the world's financial markets highlight how uncertain life really is. Organisations are crashing down around us. Job and financial security have deserted us. Old patterns, behaviours, and beliefs are being tested, often to breaking point. The rubble of such change leaves in its wake a cloud of confusion. This is seen at personal, business, societal and global levels.

Is there an alternative? When there is an over-reliance on appearing competent, the willingness to take risks, try new things, and engage with creativity is diminished.

I have spent my life largely reliant on intellect, isolation, and protectionist behaviours to feel safe and navigate life with a false sense of control. Now I choose to engage with life and the people I encounter with authentic, heart-felt connection. Feeling vulnerable is common as I hold this intention. Yet I also feel powerful, grounded and alive in a new way. I am releasing reliable patterns I have drawn upon in the past. I feel incompetent in situations where I have feigned confidence or used

Harrison International Ltd

PO Box 22-827
Otahuhu, Manukau 1640
New Zealand

Phone: +64 9 277-7756
Email: HIway@harrison.co.nz
Web Site: www.harrison.co.nz

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practiced behaviours. Sometimes (frequently) I fall back into old patterns. One measure of my embracing life in an authentic manner is that more frequently I feel incompetent, don't know what to do. I have to do something anyway. Sometimes it works. It is always real. I feel very much on my edge. I confront long held fears that my protections have masked. This is a form of incompetence I choose to embrace and experience as an integrated part of my life. I choose to live spontaneously, enthusiastically, authentically connect with myself and others, and fully engage my heart. Goodbye to protections used to offer false security, the maintenance of which robs me of life and energy, and debilitates my availability to love, care and connect fully and freely.

Now I am actively learning to step out into the unknown, encounter vulnerability, be with the new, the unknown, and the chaotic. I am discovering how being **competent in not knowing** opens me up to new possibilities, and provides greater versatility and capacity to deal with change. I am practicing incompetence, becoming better at it. While that does not mean I am abandoning what I do have competence in, it does open the door to greater versatility and being more capable in new ways that may enable greater resilience in the future. It enables me to be more spontaneous, better able to be adequate in new situations, or to take new approaches adequately in old situations.

Imagine managing a project where the team were comfortable giving new ideas and approaches a try; an organisation that recognised and rewarded innovative practices without penalising the learning process; or a partner in a relationship who welcomes and encourages a new, even if stumbling, approach to communicate. Such possibilities do exist, but not nearly enough.

Are you up to practicing incompetence and developing greater capacity personally and professionally? Will your organisation support you in such attempts? Practiced incompetence is one benefit of truly appreciating the fog associated with the new, the unknown and the chaotic, and choosing to develop personal and organisational power in such situations.