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Getting Good Help These Days

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Abstract. This article describes psychological factors mitigating against competent advice to political leaders.

One might have expected one-time multibillionaire Mobutu Sese Seko to have the best of help, a veritable brain trust in making strategic moves during his doomed effort to maintain power in Zaire. Yet most journalistic accounts have described advisers hesitant to speak their version of the truth and grateful for outsiders, e.g., representatives of foreign governments, who speak it.

But perhaps we should not be surprised because there are many psychological features affecting advice to leaders that may render it of poor quality if it is given at all. Even if the best and the brightest make up the advisers, they may often be seen to exhibit a seemingly mental impotence.

(1) Some leaders do not want competent advisers around. They view the competency as a forerunner of a grab for power, as an unflattering reflection of their own abilities, as a potentially “loose cannon” outside a span of control, and as a point of vulnerability or attraction for the power designs of opponents.

(2) Some competent advisers do not wish to be perceived as competent. See (1) above. Also, they may realize that if they use their competence to advocate a position which proves to be unsuccessful, they may find themselves with little credibility for future Issues, removed from the advising group, or fearing for their lives, depending on the political system and the predilections of the leader and other advisers. It’s almost as if it pays not to be “out front” on an Issue. In addition, many leaders seem to act as if they do not enjoy being told that an action engaged in is incorrect. Thus, going down loyally with the ship or jumping off like rats seems preferable, from an adviser’s perspective, to trying to keep the ship from sinking. (The psychodynamic and other psychological approaches to explaining this phenomenon are many but are beside the point at the moment.)

(3) While much of the first two psychological groupings may be conscious, there are many other phenomena that may be conscious or unconscious, especially on a group level, and hinder adequate advising. Social psychological terms--such as group think, self-justification, deindividuation, risky shift, cognitive dissonance, substrates of personal attraction, attribution errors, heuristics of social cognition, elaboration likelihood models of persuasion, correspondent inferences, self-fulfilling prophecies, hindsight biases, defense mechanisms, and conformity--have been posited to explain disasters of advising the leader. (See Aronson (1995) below for definitions of these terms. Of special note are studies which delineate compliance mechanisms wherein followers voluntarily and often spontaneously do what they think their leaders want them to do.

(4) As might be expected, there are also postmodernist explanations for the dilemma of the leader and advisers based on the social constructions of leadership and followership. The very ways participants create their own notions of what a leader and follower are may be recipes for success or disaster.

International Bulletin of Political Psychology

Although appropriate in specific cases, e.g., Post (1993), psychopathological states do not have to be posited within or outside of people as the primary causal factor in poor advice for the leader or in the poor taking of good advice by the leader. For it will not be often that a leader will exhibit both a significant mental disorder and still accomplish the many psychological tasks that must be accomplished to stay in power. On the other hand clinical concepts such as a season or developmental stage of a leader's life (Post, 1980) and the complex, often dysfunctional dynamics affecting the quality of medical care provided a disabled leader (Kucharski, 1984; Post & Robins, 1990) can be very useful. That the latter is still of import is clear from an article written about the recent illness of Vaclav Havel (Berman, 1997.)

Mobutu Sese Seko may be many things, but crazy he's not. As different a personality as Laurent Kabila (the apparent successor to Mobutu) may be, he will also face problems in obtaining advice in support of his agenda. (See Aronson, E. (1995.) *The social animal*. 7th ed. NY: W.H. Freeman; Berman, P. (May 11, 1997.) *The philosopher-king is mortal*. *The New York Times Magazine*, pp. 32-37, 47-48, 56, 59; Kucharski, A. (1984.) *On being sick and famous*. *Political Psychology*, 5, 69-82; Meindl, J.R. (1995.) *The romance of leadership as a follower-centric theory: A social constructionist approach*. *Leadership Quarterly*, 6, 329-341; Post, J.M. (1980.) *The seasons of a leader's life: Influences of the life cycle on political behavior*. *Political Psychology*, 2, 35-49; Post, J.M. (1993.) *Current concepts of the narcissistic personality: Implications for political psychology*. *Political Psychology*, 14, 99-121; Post, J.M., & Robins, R. (1990.) *The captive king and his captive court: The psychopolitical dynamics of the disabled leader and his inner circle*. *Political Psychology*, 11, 331-352; Searing, D.D. (1995.) *The psychology of political authority: A causal mechanism of political learning through persuasion and manipulation*. *Political Psychology*, 16, 677-696; Shamir, B., House, R.J., & Arthur, M.B. (1993.) *The motivational effects of charismatic leadership: A self-concept based theory*. *Organization Science*, 4, 577-594.) (Keywords: Leadership, Psychopathology.)