The Psychology of Proactive and Reactive Leadership

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President Obama recently told us that Intelligence was late to recognize the risk of ISIS. Now, we have protests in Hong Kong. Today is China's National Day. Does our leadership understand what that means, both to China's leadership and the people of Hong Kong? How will we decide whether to also wait and watch in this crisis?

History is replete with examples of the dangers of waiting and watching, rather than the fight-or-fight response to perceived immediate danger. Nazi Germany is the most obvious. We didn't react until the threat started to get closer to our doorsteps.

We have had similar challenges in psychiatric leadership. The major one in recent years has been for-profit managed care. Leadership not only waited, but for a time even embraced it until it was too late to oppose effectively. In our clinical work, how do we decide to respond to the future risk of suicide and/or homicide when our ability to predict either is limited?

All these leadership examples involve a culture different from us, as I discussed in the first blog on beheading in this series, as well as in the article for Psychiatric Times on Psychology in China: Its Relevance for the US. Cultural differences lend another layer to the understanding. Leaders (and really that is all of us in one way or another) have the challenge of understanding and responding to future risk. Unfortunately, there is no way to do double-blind scientific studies of these situations that will tell us what is best to do, whether it is evolving international conflict, climate change, or saving for retirement.

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