Don't you have fun when you're dealing with a situation full of incompetence? Let's face it, there are few circumstances more frustrating than needing to get something done and your path to the end is abruptly stopped by incompetence. And it seems there's more incompetence around than ever before, doesn't it?

So, how do we handle incompetence around us? Well, we start by identifying why incompetence happens. First and foremost, ongoing or structural incompetence is due to a basic lack of stewardship by the organization's leaders. That means that incompetence is a condition fostered and allowed by the enterprise itself, because incompetence should be handled by key leaders as stewards of both owners and customers. But that doesn't happen easily by a simple declaration of intent. Let's look at some key sources of incompetence, starting with influences outside the enterprise itself.

First is technological or technical obsolescence created by advancements invented by competitors. In the current era, this is a dominant reason for many enterprises to become incompetent at their stewardship. How about all the internet businesses that have collectively worked to deeply challenge and defeat many retailers who have never really jumped on the internet train? And how about pharmaceutical companies that invent new drugs to effectively replace the products and income of complacent competitors?

Second is your competitors' business processes that dramatically enhance the quality and reduce the cost of the customer experience, rendering your enterprise incompetent and perhaps even irrelevant. Amazon has done this effectively with a competent combination of savvy digital magic and sure-footed delivery. Bezos said, "It is difficult for us to imagine that ten years from now, customers will want higher prices, less selection, or slower delivery." That sums up Amazon's extreme stewardship for customers and investors.

A third influence is the now-voluminous government regulations and requirements that hamper the effective delivery of products and services. Have you dealt with a housing contractor who must get permits and inspections done for your project? Everything went just the contractor planned, right?! These three external influences are critical—they are the starting points for a lot of incompetence.

But now we get to internal issues that are far more in the control of the enterprise's leadership. How about number four on our list—the Peter Principle. We have talked about this principle in a previous episode: it's where the organization takes a person who is doing well in their role in the enterprise, so the leaders promote that person to the next level…where, sadly, that person is in over his or her head. This happens often, and few large organizations have established the processes and culture to minimize this.

And this occurs a lot in those enterprises where an ill-advised type of compassion is invoked. The result of that so-called compassion? Workarounds imposed upon that incompetent person's peers to cover for the deficiencies….and poor customer service that loses sales and then loses the customers themselves …and then the ultimate loss of owners' investment. That's bad stewardship done in the name of compassion. Of course, those leaders would be horrified to be informed that they are a poster child for poor stewardship for owners and customers. So why are these leaders not confronted with this truth? Because their bosses themselves have often chosen the same path of poor stewardship in the name of compassion.

Number five on our list? Settling for average in an era when just "average" will fail at basic stewardship. But HR departments and operations executives nowadays often have a list of economic and social agendas that conflict with high levels of competence. In fact, when you get to the nub of it all, criteria other than competence are often routinely mentioned as the *main* criteria, while a murky "range of competence" is presumed. Well, then, when other factors are strongly emphasized while competence is presumed, guess what suffers? That's right—competence suffers! But how about your personal choices? When you are planning a special dinner or scheduling brain surgery or simply want your clothes properly cleaned…in those cases, do you want a highly competent person on the job or are you looking for just a general *range* *of competence*? Of course, when an outcome is lukewarm, we all ultimately migrate to another path that produces better results. In fact, we all routinely try to preempt this very problem by getting astute recommendations from others before choosing! So, why would our enterprise process be less diligent?

Number six? Incompetence breeds more easily as a company expands its workforce. The owner of a small retail business who is at work with two employees every hour the shop is open is not likely to let service levels get low, thus preventing lost sales and lost loyal customers. You see, the owner is steward of his or her entire business and that owner can easily observe and experience the competence of the workers. And, in this case, each person represents a huge chunk of the workforce quality. In that small group of three, tolerating average in just one of these workers means the human component for the enterprise is now demonstrably average. So, the owner simply won't tolerate incompetence in a small operation.

But here's a typical contrast to that, an example scenario from a larger organization: take a Christian nonprofit with 1,000 employees, where, say, one very poorly performing worker represents just one-tenth of 1% of the workforce there (1 in 1,000). Here's what often happens. As long as that poorly-performing worker isn't totally disruptive, the others in the nonprofit simply pick up the slack and handle the problems that crop up—just simply ignoring the stewardship problem. That's *compassionate* Christianity, you know! But look at it this way: that Christian nonprofit would be excited to accept a $30,000 donation to their mission, trumpeting their stewardship to the donor…while routinely looking the other way when an ineffective worker costs all of that donated money and probably costs the enterprise even more! And that's not to mention depriving a fully competent person of the opportunity to fill that role productively.

And just how many low-performing people are really there in the typical 1,000-person enterprise? Tell me honestly that it's likely they are all high-performers. Famous radio personality Garrison Keillor always talked about his fictional hometown Lake Woebegone where "all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average." We all smile when we hear that—we get the joke.

The sad truth is, people tend to be compassionate when it's other people's money. But when it's *our* brain surgery…*our* dream vacation…*our* car purchase, well, not so much, right? Yes, it's compassion on other people's $30,000, but it's stewardship when it's our $30,000. That one very concrete example of sin, folks!

We have touched on only six dimensions of organizational incompetence for us to consider in order to constantly work towards strong stewardship. We could go deeper, but here's the principle: every one of these examples of incompetence can be effectively minimized with intentional striving after stewardship. I repeat this from earlier in this episode: structural incompetence is a condition fostered and allowed by the enterprise itself, because ongoing incompetence should be handled by key leaders in charge as stewards for owners and customers. Here's the deal: incidents of incompetence are unavoidable in every enterprise and blame for that can often be shared in some measure by worker and leader together. But ongoing, structural incompetence is a failure totally owned by leaders by means of their poor stewardship.

Jesus's exemplary teaching on stewardship is found in the Parable of the Talents (Matthew 25:14-30). In this teaching, the master charges each of three persons with individualized stewardship of talents. The first two doubled what they have been entrusted with—that's willing competence! But the third person buried what he had been given, and the master not only removed him from his appointed stewardship, the master actually transferred his resources to the first servant who had competently executed increase!

Throughout Kingdom history…as many churches fail at going forth and making disciples…God lifts up fresh, new churches willing and competent in the proclaiming of the gospel of the Kingdom. What's going on? God relentlessly, elegantly works to unite His full stewardship with the willing competence of serious Christians! Yes, God finds and fosters those willing to competently do His will! So despite our lapses, is our long-term stewardship for both God and humanity effectively united with strong, structural competence?

A&A: Application & Action

1. Read Matthew 25:14-30 now. What do you think about the master rewarding the increase achieved by the good stewards (the first two individuals)? Then, what do you think about the master not only removing the appointed stewardship resource from the third individual, but giving that resource to the first individual who served successfully? Discuss.

2. Who should we be more focused on accommodating: incompetent people who work for or with us or the people we are appointed to serve as customers or owners? Are there long-term circumstances where compassion for incompetence in the appointed tasks to be done should overrule such stewardship? Elaborate.

3. On a practical, everyday level, do we tend to take stewardship of our own bank accounts more seriously than stewardship of owners of or donors to our workplace organizations? Is this OK, especially when those owners or donors might have more resources than we do? Discuss.