



Murphy's Canon: Leadership in the Age of Uncertainty

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ABSTRACT

How might the nefarious “Murphy’s Law,” allegedly created by a disgruntled American aerospace engineer in the 1950s, apply in today’s chaotic world? Just how applicable is the law now in a new era that has been characterized by the descriptive label of FUD, or Fear, Uncertainty, and Doubt? This paper will explore the infamous Murphy adage, as well as describe who Murphy was and how he came to formulate his cheeky directive. Additionally, this piece will expand on Murphy’s original provocative rule, feature several versions of it, provide alternative formulations, and discuss how the law might be reinterpreted to more currently apply. It will also offer an updated set of canons that may be more appropriate to this historical time and place. This article will also provide like-minded parallels to the ongoing revolution in leadership thinking that has occurred since Murphy first offered his dark humor observations on the world of work. In addition, this paper will note some key “then and now” differences from a practicing leader’s perspective, and conclude with a discussion of key findings, strategies for improvement and consider the value of balancing optimism and realism in a time of pronounced uncertainty.

Keywords: canon, leadership, Murphy, uncertainty.

INTRODUCTION

Although the origins of the law are now somewhat veiled by time and distance Murphy is believed to have been an actual living person [1]. Given the available evidence, the Murphy of legend was most likely Edward A. Murphy [2.], Murphy was a Captain in the U.S. Air Force in the early 1950s and a trained aerospace engineer. He was also a graduate of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point and a pilot who had served in World War II.

Throughout his military career Murphy was intimately involved with investigating safety-critical systems and issues involving human error. In 1949 he was assigned to a combined military and civilian project team to conduct studies on the effects of extreme deceleration on human subjects for the U.S. Air Force. Reputedly, a somewhat hyper-critical personality, Murphy allegedly noted in his observations and interactions with others on his team, “that if things could be done wrongly that they would be.” [3.]

Murphy’s astute observation on the precariousness of human nature has since been transformed into the more generalized statement, “If things can go wrong they will.” [4.] Post-deceleration experiment interviews with Murphy’s study team indicated that Captain Murphy continually struggled with the challenging notion of how-to best balance realism and optimism in his work. Informal reports, attributed to members of his work group, described Murphy’s

pronounced concern with identifying and correcting human error and weakness. This apparent human proneness toward unintentional mistakes was informally labeled “Murphy’s Law.”

THE EFFECTS OF TIME

Over time, a number of challenges to Murphy’s law have arisen, mostly related to its overall validity [5]. Murphy’s adage has also diverged into a variety of humorous statements on the vagaries of human nature. These edicts can now be found in such diverse fields as warfare, medicine, research, administration, technology, business and leadership coaching [6]. In retrospect, Murphy’s original pronouncement has inspired whole new generations of frustrated individuals to reflect on their personal organizational experiences and develop their own authentic parodies.

Today’s world of ever-increasing complexity and hyper-velocity change features ongoing digital transformations, the disruptive rise of artificial intelligence and vastly increased diversity in a wide variety of areas. The convergence of all these conventional leadership confounding factors, acting together, offers significant challenges to. As a consequence, a revisiting of Murphy’s philosophical pessimism may provide a new perspective that is both appropriate and timely. At the very least, an examination of Murphy’s entertaining declaration serves to highlight the long-term value of balancing optimism and pessimism. Thoughtful consideration of both of these oppositional viewpoints is likely to be helpful for coming to the best critical personal and organizational decisions. This dual deliberation may be particularly useful while deeply immersed in the throes of a rapidly evolving environment.

CHANGES IN LEADERSHIP THINKING

Traditional leadership paradigms that were employed well into the late 20th century appear to have mainly focused on isolating the most effective hierarchical and risk-adverse practices. [7] Conventional leadership model reasoning has progressed through a lengthy series of stages. Accumulated experience gradually shifted the prevailing leadership paradigm away from an original concentration on the characteristics of the leader as hero. Leadership thinking then steadily moved toward identifying those distinguishing characteristics that were associated with successful leaders of all types. The subsequent leadership thinking stage progressed toward isolating possible uniquely distinguishing behavioral factors and then shifted into an extensive search to find the one-best way to lead.

Towards the end of the 20th century leadership theory transitioned toward an emphasis on finding and exploiting situational success factors. As the 1990s epoch concluded the focus moved to the leader as servant, then progressed toward the examination of successful collective leadership. The early years of the twenty-first century, characterized as an era of uncertainty, began with a definitive search for leadership authenticity and how to best reinvent organizations [8].

MIMICS OF MURPHY

Murphy’s initial attempt to describe some of the failings of human nature at work subsequently spawned a number of imitators and followers [9]. Many of these mimics were copycats seeking to gain fame for advocating their own particular version of an outlandish law related to human foibles. One such Murphy imitator developed an outlandish parody for children [9].

Perhaps the most notable rejoinder to Murphy was developed by Dr. John Stapp. Stapp was a U.S. Airforce Colonel and Flight Surgeon and who was once proclaimed as "the fastest man alive." [11] Allegedly Stapp's pointed comeback to Murphy was, "Murphy was an optimist." Stapp had previously created his own general law which asserts that, *"The universal aptitude for ineptitude makes any human accomplishment an incredible miracle."* [12]

Here are some author-selected Murphy-like examples from the multitude that are available [13], [14]:

- Rogers's Observation: In a bureaucratic hierarchy, the higher up the organization the less people appreciate Murphy's Law.
- Swanson's Law: When the water reaches the upper deck, follow the rats.
- Perrussel's Law: There is no job so simple that it cannot be done wrong.
- Vile's Law of Communication: No one is listening until you make a mistake.
- Hale's Rule: The sumptuousness of a company's annual report is in inverse proportion to its profitability that year.
- Boren's Laws for Bureaucrats:
 1. When in charge, ponder
 2. When in trouble, delegate
 3. When in doubt, mumble

IMPACT OF HISTORY

Promoted by the ruling elites, an underlying belief in the ineptness of workers was significantly encouraged during the Industrial Age. During this era manual laborers were often treated as a commodity and manipulated by the use of the carrot (reward) and the stick (punishment) into conformance. Additional incremental output might be gained by the judicious use of selected incentives. The operative theory of work seemed to be that managers think and workers do.

Even better work results were obtainable through Scientific Management or the detailed study, identification and implementation of the most efficient practices. An example method is the infamous time and motion studies developed by the former foreman, mechanical engineer and management consultant Frederick Winslow Taylor [15]. During this epoch management-labor union rifts were common and were sometimes resolved by violence or through governmental interventions. These manipulative practices were typically based on rational-logical, input-output, risk-reward types of thinking. These practices tended to divide the world into thinkers (management) or doers (laborers).

Driven by competitive pressures and a shift in strategic thinking, employees began to be seen as potentially greater contributors to the overall success organizations. Leadership approaches started to inexorably move from transactional to transformational in nature; from the workforce as a cost to be managed to an under-appreciated asset. This constituted a parallel movement from seeing the employee as "hands" to be exploited to "partners" contributing to the overall success of the enterprise.

Here and now in the mid-2020s, the organizational scene is dominated by additional substantial and often confusing trends: the movement from analog to digital information processing, remote working, stunning advances in biotechnology, materials science, and the wider use of

interconnected sensors of all types. Additional significant confounding factors include: system component miniaturization, higher levels of overall global connectivity, and the rapid rise of artificial intelligence

Today, in most first-world settings, possibly as a result of the influence of the younger generations, organizational life is more concerned with the social side of work. There is also more emphasis on social and emotional intelligence [16], [17]. Greater stress is being placed on how to become more adaptive and flexible in conditions of accelerating change. There also appears to be a broader recognition of and support for the various kinds of individual human diversity that influence work performance.

CRITICAL CONTRASTS FOR PRACTICING LEADERS

A then-versus-now historical comparison can serve to highlight some of the marked changes in critical leadership functions and practices that have occurred since Murphy first made his pronouncement. Four of these factors important to a practicing leader are highlighted below. They serve to spotlight some of the significant shifts from command-and-control to more adaptive, transformational, and agile leadership. Here are four highly relevant factors:

Policymaking Under Uncertainty

- Then: Dependence on rigid hierarchical roles, plans and procedures; emphasis on policy execution.
- Now: More focus on agility, iterative planning, and scenario-based decision-making.

Organizational Interactions

- Then: Greater emphasis on top-down, directive, one-way communication; limited contact between senior management and the workforce.
- Now: More accessible, frequent, broader and inclusive exchanges; additional willingness to go across levels and functions.

Collaboration

- Then: Primary attention given to higher level management viewpoints; important relationships largely confined to known and trusted peers and subordinates.
- Now: Leveraging multiple-level, diverse teams to capture broader expertise and knowledge; more willingness to go across hierarchal levels and functions.

Transformation Management

- Then: Extensive focus on top-down control, heavy use of rewards and punishments, strict managerial accountability, high emphasis on stability and predictability.
- Now: More team-based, fostering a member sense of ownership, understanding of the role of organizational culture and the importance of external context.

MURPHY MODERNIZED

Although influenced by the research and professional literature, the following laws are not considered to be all-inclusive. Most are derived from the author's own over fifty-plus years of experience as a practicing naval officer, business executive, academic, psychologist and leadership coach.

Here are seven proposed new Murphy-like declarations:

- **Law 1 - The Assurance Assertion:** It's relatively easy to confuse confidence for competence.
- **Law 2 - The Travel Travesty:** You may not know you have gone too far until you have gone too far.
- **Law 3 - The Chatbot Challenge:** Be careful what you say at home, Alexa may be listening and who knows who else.
- **Law 4 - The Procedural Perplexity:** Unanticipated resistance to the plan is prima facie evidence that it is actually working well and doesn't require changing.
- **Law 5 - The Diversity Distraction:** In any meeting containing diverse individuals, the loudest person will be perceived as having the best ideas.
- **Law 6 - The Fowl Fallacy:** If it looks like a duck, walks like a duck, and quacks like a duck, odds are it's an Artificial Intelligence-generated deep fake.
- **Law 7 - The Doyen Dilemma:** For every authority on leadership there is an equivalent and contradictory expert who has written a best-selling book on the subject highly praised by other well-known specialists.

While serving as a naive newly commissioned officer on a U. S. Navy warship in the early 1960s, one of my particularly observant and salty enlisted sailors proposed this frank corollary to the original Murphy's Law. Offered in the spirit of Captain Murphy, following a particularly trying morning with his Chief Petty Officer boss, the crusty seaman candidly noted, "All things being equal, you get screwed."

Understanding these seven modernized parodies of Murphy's Laws will not necessarily make you a better leader. They may, however, enable you to be a more informed, aware and less harried one. These new commandments may also indirectly serve to help improve your outlook on strategic planning, risk management and team cohesion. Additionally, these informal rules may provide some useful leadership wisdom artfully buried in their humor. And, they may provide helpful hints for turning unexpected challenges into gainful opportunities and improved team functioning. The new laws may also act to reinforce the leader's crucial behaviors of: continuous learning, engagement with followers, ongoing search for more agile methodologies, and application of more adaptive leadership practices.

SUMMARY

Murphy's Law can be considered as a colorful metaphor for many of today's leadership quandaries. In various revised forms Murphy has stood the test of time and continues to gather both mimics and adherents. Alternately, Murphy's original organizational insight can be considered as a form of inherent emotional intelligence based on lived experience.

This paper has identified the origins of the Murphy story, included a historically-based description of leadership thinking over time, provided a set of then and now contrasts, and identified an updated set of Murphy-type canons for today's world. It is important to emphasize the need for leaders, as they perform their vital work, to keep a sense of humor and maintain a blend of vigilance and optimism as well as a heightened awareness of being versus doing.

Best-selling author Malcom Gladewell, in his 2024 book *Revenge of the Tipping Point* [18] suggests that although the world seems like an immovable, implacable place, it actually may not be. Anticipating Gladewell by almost fifty years, American anthropologist Margaret Meade reputedly commented "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world: indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." Even more ancient advice about the power of even a single individual to make a difference comes from the Greek philosopher Archimedes, who allegedly commented, "Give me a lever long enough and a fulcrum on which to place it, and I shall move the world,"

Current social and epidemiological research appears to suggest that with the slightest nudge, in just the correct place, employing an extremely small number of people, the world can be tipped. Perhaps, relevant, and well-positioned humorous insight can help add impetus to the tipping point movement.

Practicing leaders and academics are encouraged to apply these insights and lessons to the real-world scenarios in which they daily find themselves. Or, alternatively, to construct their own memorable commandments.

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