

Aug 24 • Written By Howard Gardner

Good Work, Compromised Work, Bad Work... And Ego

In late July, I received a message from the USIA. For a brief moment, I thought it might be from the United States Information Agency or Intelligence Agency, but it was actually from an organization that I had not heard of—The United Sigma Intelligence Association. USIA informed me that, along with linguist Noam Chomsky and mathematician-physicist Edward Witten, I was the winner of their annual prize. I don't consider myself to be modest but I was astounded—and humbled—to be grouped with two of the outstanding scholars of our time.

I googled the USIA. I learned little about the organization online but noted that it had many outstanding figures as advisers—including several whom I knew personally. I wrote back to the agency and asked whether there were any requirements in connection with the award. I immediately heard from the director, saying that there were no 'asks'—the organization hoped that my work would “inspire other talented people and help them further their love for humanity.” I notified a few organizations to which I belong that I had received this recognition and considered that the end of the matter.

Howard Gardner	Home About Howard	/ colleague and friend Steven Pinker (I
	A Synthesizing Mind MI Theory	with entrepreneur Jeff Bezos and historian
	Events <u>Howard's Blogs</u>	s year. He made light of this recognition
	The Good Project Contact	his name to support organizations.

This past week—an unexpected twist. I had inferred that the USIA award went only to three persons each year. But two individuals whom I also knew were informed that they had also received the USIA award for this year. And undertaking more due diligence than I had, they had begun to wonder what was the USIA, where was it housed, how and by whom was it funded, and did it in fact issue the books, podcasts, and other forms of publicity that are mentioned on their website. And not quickly receiving satisfactory answers, my colleagues so far have not accepted this recognition.

As someone who has studied and written about work—and particularly ‘good work’—for many years, I am left with a conundrum:

Could this be good work—in which case, the organization indeed has undertaken legitimate activities, actually makes appropriate use of its advisers, and reaches young people whom they seek to inspire?

Could this be compromised work—in which case the organization may have good intentions, and hopes to achieve its goals, but has gotten off to a slow start and exaggerated its achievements thus far?

Or is this basically a scam (aka ‘bad work’)—an effort to bring attention to an organization which is not legitimate and which may exploit well-known names in ways that are not sanctioned, not legitimate?

From my grandson, I have subsequently learned the ‘sigma’ is often used online in a frivolous way—which did not give me confidence in this particular brand of sigma! Perhaps we are being stigmatized!

And I have to ask myself: Did my own ego prevent me from doing the due diligence that I should have done?

Reference

<https://www.amacad.org/publication/compromised-work>

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Hi, Dr. Gardner,

I was wondering if there's a 'thinking disposition' that might serve as a tool to safeguard oneself against such scams? Does Emotional Intelligence provide any clue? I've often found that well-meaning people at times are unable to detect 'bad intents' and sometimes even fail to recognize their own (unconscious) biases. As far as individual's decision/inference is concerned, I think a useful tool could be to equip oneself with one of the principles of Qualitative research method: "How might the results and conclusions be wrong?"

Howard Gardner 3 years ago · 0 Likes



I agree very much with what you have written. As someone who has been involved in human interactions for many decades, I always endeavor to walk a line between giving people the benefit of the doubt, on the one hand, and being duped (or, worse, aiding and abetting bad work) on the other. That's what I should strive to do and to consult with trusted others as much as possible. And of course, if and when that trust is violated, it is very painful.

In the case that I wrote about, the stakes are quite low. And yet, I would like to alert the scholarly community to this organization and not unwittingly to aid them before finding out more about them. And if the organization can give a convincing 'apologia' (explanation), by all means it should do so. So far, USIA has been silent-- which, alas, is sometimes the loudest message of all.

with best wishes,
Howard

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