

Stupidity Can Be a Successful Career Strategy

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New hires enthusiastically hope their new jobs will give them ample opportunity to put their best efforts and intellectual gifts to work. But they're frequently in for an unpleasant surprise.

They soon discover that, although they've been selected for their skills and intelligence, they're not expected to use them! They're assigned routine tasks they consider stupid, and they quickly learn the employees who get ahead are the stellar practitioners of corporate mindlessness.

These are the shocking findings in the new book, *The Stupidity Paradox: The Power and Pitfalls of Functional Stupidity at Work* by André Spicer and Mats Alvesson. Organizations hire smart people, but then positively encourage them *not* to use their intelligence.

Why Stupidity Reigns

Those who learn to switch off their brains are often rewarded. Escaping the kind of uncomfortable questions thinking brings to light allows employees to side-step conflict with co-workers. By toeing the corporate line, thoughtless employees are seen as leadership material and are promoted. Talented employees learn to use their skills and intellect only in the most narrow and myopic ways.

The authors found many large corporations over-run by stupidity. The stupidity wasn't the accidental result of a few corporate buffoons but was often intentionally created by purposefully creating a kind of collective mindlessness.

They saw firms going out of their way to block employees from reflecting on their assumptions or asking for justification of decisions and actions. By doing this, organizations often create functional outcomes both for individuals (career progression) and the whole organization (the ability to avoid conflict and focus on common goals.)

While these favorable outcomes may dominate in the short term, collective stupidity can create major disfunction in the longer term, including a lack of learning and an imperviousness to mistakes.

Encouraging Stupidity

The authors discovered several ways organizations positively encouraged intelligent people not to fully use their intellect.

1. Bureaucracy

Many rules and routines—even if they're completely counterproductive—prompt employees to focus on complying with bureaucracy instead of doing the meat of their jobs. You don't have to look too far in HR (and other departments) to find staff bogged down in administrivia, leaving little time for higher-value, strategic contributions.

2. Leadership

Leaders talk about 'vision', 'purpose' and 'authenticity' with great verve. However, when you take a close look at what leaders do, there's little, if any, leadership to be found. Most executives spend their days attending meetings, filling in forms and communicating information. In other words, they're bureaucrats.

3. Brand power

Some organizations assume that, just by changing the signage, it's possible to transform the entire company. This is almost always wishful thinking, and the fascination with branding can be a dangerous distraction. Launching branding initiatives means that executives can focus on the easier work of manipulating surface images and avoid the more challenging realities of organizational life.

4. Imitation

Many companies adopt the latest management fads, no matter how unsuitable they may be for that organization. Leaders hope their firms will be world-class if they copy well-known organizations, but often there are very weak reasons for following industry best practice and it rarely has the intended impact.

5. Company culture

Cultures can imprison employees into narrow ways of viewing the world, such as the common obsession with constant change. Change programs are launched with great fanfare, but not much

happens next. Leaders then drop the initiative and move on to the next fashionable change program without learning anything new. This approach means managers spend their days trying to claim responsibility for projects that have succeeded and dodge responsibility for failures.

A culture of unflappable positivity is also popular. "Don't bring us problems, only bring us solutions." Being positive all the time meant that when genuine problems without an obvious solution appeared, they were ignored—leaving significant issues festering and unsolved.



How to Act Stupid.... Successfully

Acting stupid at work is a subtle art. If you underdo it, people will suspect you're putting on an act. If you overdo it, they'll think you're a liability. Here are the tactics skilled practitioners of corporate stupidity use to

1. Do what everyone else is doing

If your competitor introduces a new strategy, do the same—no matter how wrong-headed it might be. Copy iconic companies even if you're in an entirely different industry. If you call it 'best practice,' you might be hailed a genius. When it goes wrong, you can say: "Everyone got it wrong."

2. Look good at all costs

Advanced practitioners of corporate stupidity often spend less time on the content of their work and more on its presentation. They realize most stupid ideas are routinely accepted when they're presented well, and decision-makers will likely forget much of the content by the time they walk out the door. And when things go wrong, you can say: "They didn't read the fine-print."

3. Assume boss always knows best

This means doing what your boss wants, no matter how idiotic. What's even more important is that you do what your boss's boss wants. You'll look like you're loyal and it'll save time arguing for your position. When things go wrong, you can blame the boss.

4. Spin wins

An effective way to get out of doing anything real is to rely on a flurry of management jargon. Develop 'strategies,' generate 'business models,' engage in 'thought leadership.' This will get you out of doing any actual work and it'll also make you seem like you're cutting edge. When things go wrong, you can blame the trendy management concept.

5. Keep moving

It's vital to avoid being tagged with your own mistakes. Take the glory that comes from short-term success and move on before you're saddled with any longer-term costs. When things go wrong, someone else is left to clean up the mess. "Always try to outrun your mistakes" was one manager's career advice.

Although corporate mindlessness comes with some big pay-offs, it can be very costly. When smart people stop fully using their intelligence, they often overlook mistakes, and large organizations offer plenty of places to hide mistakes. What's more, people have short attention spans. Perpetrators of blunders will likely have moved onwards (often upwards) before their mistakes become obvious.

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