

The Power of Stupidity



by Giancarlo Livraghi

Chapter 18 The Vicious Circle of Stupidity

Another disturbing case of blundering stupidity is the unpleasantly widespread belief that people should be treated as stupid. This has nothing to do, of course, with the good practice of making things “foolproof.” Not because everyone is a fool, but because the brightest people can be absent-minded – and making things practical, safe and easy to use is an advantage for everyone.¹

But trying to exploit stupidity is a very different matter. It’s too often said, and carelessly repeated, that “the public” (an audience, or a reader, or a customer, etcetera) has the brain of “a silly eleven year old.” Quite apart from the fact that there are some very bright kids, there is something basically wrong with this stale and shabby theory – and its practice.

It does, unfortunately, happen that some results can be obtained in that manner. But it is also, unquestionably, proven by facts that better results can be obtained by treating people with respect, appealing to their intelligence, common sense and understanding.

Where stupidity prevails, the entire system becomes stupid. There are greater openings for fraud, lies and complacency. There is loss of quality, reliability, relationships and trust.

There is, of course, an easy objection. Why should an individual person, company or organization carry the burden of general well-being? Business ethics are unnecessarily expensive. It pays to be selfish. Let society as a whole (whatever that is) worry about what’s right or wrong, intelligent or stupid, while each of its components pursues its own private advantage. If profits or other benefits can be gained by treating people as stupid, that’s what is to be done.

¹ It isn’t done as well, or as often, as it should. But that’s another story – as we shall see in the next chapter, *The Stupidity of Technologies*.

The strategies based on stupidity and deceit are self-defeating. They spiral downwards in an endless vicious circle. There is no time to think, to plan, to look into the future. Everything is short term and hasty (see chapter 16.) When the effects of stupidity begin to be felt, new twists are found to blur the picture and do something even more stupid. As the old saying goes, “if you can’t get it right screw it up so nobody else can.”

The circuit of stupidity is self-destructive. When we treat other people as stupid, we are, or appear to be, as stupid as we think they are. Stupidity becomes a habit. There is a widespread perception that everything is silly, nothing really matters, thinking is a waste of time.

Even before it gets in the way of relations with the rest of the world, this attitude poisons the inside of a business – or any organization. Where short-term, nearsighted personal advantage is the only goal, why should anyone be concerned with the company’s objectives, well-being and success? It’s safer to stay entrenched in some bureaucratic hideout, avoid responsibility, indulge in gossip and worship intrigue.

This is even worse when the basic role of an organization is to provide information – or entertainment. In spite of hypocritical statements to the contrary, many people in the communication industry believe that the public is stupid. And that, therefore, their dumb audiences are to be lulled with banalities, cluttered with superficial news, pompous rhetoric and cheap sensationalism.²

It’s true that there is a lot of stupidity. But this doesn’t mean that it’s to be encouraged, nurtured, celebrated, imitated or set as a standard for human behavior.

The exploitation of stupidity tends to backfire. Even the most superficial and gullible people have occasional sparks of lucidity – and so they notice that they are being treated as fools. So they get into the habit of thinking that information and entertainment are essentially stupid. Also power, that often seeks “spectacular” appearance, falls into the same pitfall.

In this vicious circle there is a sort of “reciprocity.” Sometimes deliberately, more often not, the game is played on both sides. They are treating us as stupid, but we know that they are stupid, so let’s see how we can be amused and entertained by stupidity, as the serious stuff isn’t there – or, when it is, it’s boring or depressing.

The merry-go-round is further complicated by the confusion of “being” and “appearing”, as we shall see in chapter 21 – and by the sly, deceptive combination of stupidity and cunning that is explained in chapter 17.

One of the problems is “fame”, or “celebrity.” All sorts of people become “famous” – for reasons that sometimes are meaningful, often irrelevant. The results can be bizarre and devious. Such people can be admired for qualities that they don’t have, imitated in any silly thing they do, offered as “authorities” on matters that they don’t understand. And all sorts of stupid, sometimes awful, things can be done for the sake of being “popular” – or merely of being noticed.

² As Theodor Adorno noted «*The culture industry not so much adapts to the reactions of its customers as it counterfeits them.*»

Stupidity infects the “famous” as well as their followers. Even very bright people can be confused by celebrity. In a letter to Henrich Zangger, in December 1919, Albert Einstein wrote: «*With fame I become more and more stupid, which, of course, is a very common phenomenon. There is far too great a disproportion between what one is, and what others think one is, or at least what they say they think one is. But one has to take it all with good humor.*»³ Ninety years later, with the expansion of broadcast media and the widening of the vicious circle, it’s much worse.

It’s a resource of intelligence to understand one’s limits – and stupidity. With good humor, because nobody is immune, but when we understand it we can keep it under control.

It’s always dangerous to underestimate the destructive power of stupidity. And it’s unlikely that by treating everyone else as a fool one can remain immune from the treacherous contagion of foolishness. Stupidity isn’t always defeated in intelligent minds, though it doesn’t fit comfortably. It’s like a clumsy, infectious parasite that drags the host into its own demise, especially when it’s undetected.

Intelligent communication doesn’t have to be pedantic, boring, difficult or complicated. The brightest thoughts can be made clear and interesting. With a healthy dose of humanity – and, when appropriate, with amusement and fun.

To communicate effectively it to explain things, even when they appear difficult or complicated, in a way that can be easily understood. But that doesn’t mean “talking down” to people or feeling “superior” just because we happen to be in control of a communication tool. There can’t be real intelligence without self-criticism, careful listening and a genuine respect for other people’s opinions and perceptions. (See chapter 30 – pages 9-10 of the pdf online – on the importance of listening.)

Clear and simple doesn’t mean banal, obvious, superficial or conventional. It’s important to make sure that we understand what we are talking about before we can try to “make it simple.” That’s why it isn’t easy, as we shall see in chapter 20.

Arrogance, pompousness and delusions of superiority aren’t intelligent. They are ways of being stupid. There can be no real intelligence without honesty, a sense of humor and true respect for other people’s attitudes, perceptions and opinions.

The dominance of stupidity is so overwhelming that there are increasing opportunities for going in the opposite direction. A single person or company that decides to treat people with greater respect can’t, on its own, reverse the tide. But by doing so, for the very fact of being different, we can gain considerable advantage – in addition to making ourselves, and our environment, more intelligent – or, at least, less stupid. And we have a better chance of looking at ourselves in a mirror without despising what we are and what we are doing.

A description of the book is online – stupidity.it

³ Published by Helen Dukas and Banesh Hoffmann in an interesting book, *Albert Einstein, The Human Side*, Princeton University Press, 1979.