

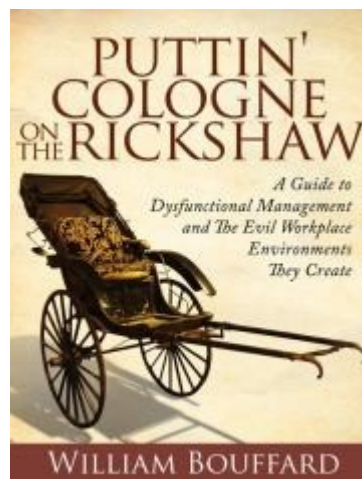
The Power of Stupidity



Quotations in

Puttin' Cologne on the Rickshaw

by William Bouffard – published on July 5, 2012



I am pleased that in William Bouffard's interesting book there are several quotations of *The Power of Stupidity*. Of course they aren't meant to be a "review" – but they explain clearly the author's opinions on my work.

Bouffard's observations are on mismanagement, not stupidity as such.

But obviously these subjects overlap in many relevant ways.

I find these different views, on the same issues, quite intriguing.

I hope readers will have the same feeling.

[g.l.]

Chapter 1 – *The Marching Morons* – pages 4-6

(the quotations are from chapter 25 of *The Power of Stupidity*)

Since the world is full of rude, un-caring and uncivil people, not only in the work place but everywhere, what's to do? Most people can't just take it in stride and turn the other cheek, instead they must retaliate in kind and so this evil chain of events keeps unfolding and intensifying.

I've come to the conclusion that this "me" generation thinking is probably not coming to an end any time soon. That's because it's not generational at all, it crosses all ages, race and demographics; all industries and backgrounds.

Therefore we must just accept the world for what it is – just plain full of rude people who don't care for anyone but themselves and are oblivious to the havoc they leave in their wake. What we can do, though, is understand the behaviors of this ilk so that we can fight fire with fire.

That being said, if the world is ever going to change from rude and uncivil to well-mannered, it's important to understand what drives rude behavior. I believe the answer is simple – just plain old stupidity. In fact, I think that in today's society we're seeing the results of what Giancarlo Livraghi calls "The Power of Stupidity." In his book by the same name, he details the widespread evidence of the fact that all people have a propensity to do stupid things despite how intelligent they and society may think they are.

As Mr. Livraghi points out: *«large and small events confirm, every day, the dismal effects of human stupidity. Many problems are going from bad to worse. But what may appear as "the good old times" wasn't as good as nostalgia, sometimes, is dreaming.»*

«Simplistic as this is, it's reasonably practical to assume that we are as stupid as we have ever been. The sheer fact that our species has, so far, survived and expanded, in spite of its appalling mistakes, proves that we are not completely stupid. But it's painfully obvious that our resources aren't good enough for the state of evolution in which we are now.»

There is nothing new in the abundance of presumptuous idiots. We are just more often aware of their presence (and what they are doing, not only saying).

«For lack of any better criterion, let's stay with the postulate that the stupidity factor is a constant in humankind. So stupidity is growing because there are more of us. And, just as infectious diseases and destructive pests travel on airplanes, the contagion of stupidity rides the fast waves of worldwide communication. In other words, we are not becoming more (or less) stupid, but the power of stupidity is increasing. The problem is in the vastness of the consequences, that has never been so large – and in the speed of their multiplication. We can't uproot stupidity. But, the more we understand it ...»

Livraghi also points out that he believes the world is caught up in what he calls “The Marching Morons Syndrome”. I tend to agree.

“The Marching Morons” is a science fiction short story written by Cyril M. Kornbluth, and published in 1951. The leading character, John Barlow, is a man from the past (1988) who had been put in suspended animation and is revived hundreds of years in the future. Barlow soon discovers that there is a problem with the people of the future: the world has become full of morons. It was explained to him that, due to the fact that while intelligent people weren't having children, excessive breeding by the less intelligent people left the world full of morons. There were only an elite few intelligent people who worked to keep order in society.

In the story Barlow eventually becomes the leader of this “intelligent minority.” He must provide a solution for the problem of moron overpopulation, so he develops an elaborate plan in which he tricks the morons into thinking they can partake in the vacation of a lifetime to the planet Venus. His plan is then to conveniently lose those spaceships in space. [It] works fine until he becomes a victim of his own scheme.

In the end, Livraghi observes that he believes there's still some hope for the future by telling us that, *«It's unlikely that we are heading for any such future, but we are facing some very serious problems caused by human stupidity.»*

However, I don't share Livraghi's optimism. Interestingly, Kornbluth may not have penned a work of fiction after all and he may prove to be the Nostradamus of the 20th century.

Of course I accept, with no antagonism, William Bouffard's irony. Though I don't think I am being “optimistic”. It would be very dangerous to underestimate the power of stupidity – but this doesn't mean that all we can do is whine and grumble on the edge of catastrophe or give in to depression while we head passively for doomsday.

[g.l.]

Chapter 4 – *Lord of the Flies* – pages 67-68

Financial obsession is the disease from which most modern organizations suffer. In his August 2011 article “Harpagon’s Miseries”, Giancarlo Livraghi calls this obsession Harpagon’s Syndrome.

The syndrome is derived from the main character, Harpagon, in the play *L’Avaro* (English: *The Miser*), a 1668 five-act satirical comedy by French playwright Molière.

In the play, Harpagon is a wealthy, money-mad old widower. He loves money more than reputation, honor, or virtue, and spends his time watching and guarding over it. It’s what destroys his relationships with the world. Fearful of being robbed and killed for his wealth, he buries his money in his garden. As for the real treasures – his children – he marginalizes and dominates them. He deprives them of independence by denying them money.

The best way to describe Harpagon’s condition is that he’s in such a constant state of fretting about his money that he becomes a tyrant. He commands absolute obedience of those around him and fences in his world to protect himself.

Organizations suffering from Harpagon Syndrome do the same fretting about the financial condition of their business. As we know, modern business is completely motivated by the short-term monetary measures that the [stock] market requires of them. I can’t blame them, I guess, but what does become a problem is when the harping on financial results affects every other aspect of the organization’s day-to-day activities. This is the condition that nurtures the atmosphere that allows all the behaviors we’ll discover to exist and thrive, especially the no-surprises mentality.

It’s this syndrome that determines whether an organization is being led, or being ruled.

We see parallels in Harpagon’s behavior to that of management in a modern organization, the fixation on money being the most obvious.

Also, the way Harpagon treats his children serves as a parallel to how employees are treated. And just as Harpagon withholds money from his children, we see the same behaviors in management, with the tight budgeting and constant search for cost saving.

Livraghi explains Harpagon's Syndrome as *«an insidious mixture of fear and mistrust. An initially mild affliction that increases over time, multiplies unreasonable anxiety, tension and stress that can cause also physical illness, unleashing a vicious circle in which some small doubt grows to become an obsession.»*

Harpagon's Syndrome probably isn't even recognized as a disease compared to the huge problems that have been plaguing organizations, but it's nonetheless infectious and spreading. Organizations infected with this condition become unbending in their belief that what they're doing, and the processes and beliefs they have in place, guarantee their success. As those processes and and beliefs fail to provide the necessary results, Harpagon's Syndrome worsens.

«This syndrome could also be defined as the art of hurting oneself while becoming unpleasant to everyone else. As well as worrying about irrelevant problems while losing sight of those that really need a solution. It also poisons human relations, erodes friendship and affection, destroys trust, blurs thinking and awareness,» says Livraghi. This explains why this condition is so damaging.

Chapter 5 – *Animal Farm* – pages 75-76

(the quotation is from chapter 12 of *The Power of Stupidity*)

In his book *The Power of Stupidity*, Giancarlo Livraghi asserts that bureaucracy is at the heart of all organizational demise.

«The root of the problem is that bureaucracy is dedicated to satisfying its own idiotic needs at the expense of the service that it's supposed to provide. And it's extremely conservative. It tends to repeat its routines even when they are useless or harmful, ignoring any consideration of practicality or common sense.»
«It behaves like those stupid parasites that continue to pursue their invasive growth even when by doing so they risk maiming or killing the host – and therefore themselves.»

I find this an interesting take on the sociopathic behavior that typically leads organizations.

There is a remarkable “convergence”. In this and other chapters, William Bouffard writes extensively about the “sociopathy” disease. And so did I, quite independently, in several articles in recent years. It's interesting that, from different perspectives, we are both seriously concerned about this obnoxious epidemic.

[g.l.]

Chapter 13 – *Together Everyone Annoys Me* – pages 170-171

(the quotations are from chapter 9 of *The Power of Stupidity*)

I'd like to add to what all the august experts believe are the reasons teamwork fails. My theory is that one of the basic reasons that teamwork doesn't work, or if it does get a foothold, it can't hold on for long, is our old friend plain old stupidity.

In his book *The Power of Stupidity*, Giancarlo Livraghi asserts that teamwork often fails due to the inability to meld the collective intelligence into one consciousness that can accomplish the team's goal. This is because in a group environment stupidity takes over.

He tells us, «*The combination of intelligence in different people is more difficult than the combination of stupidity. This isn't only because the power of stupidity is generally underestimated and its consequences are often unpredictable. There are multiple and complicated causes of this problem.*»

«*Stupidity is brainless – it doesn't need to think, get organized or plan ahead to generate a combined effect. The transfer and combination of intelligence is a much more complex process.*»

«*Stupid people can combine instantly into a super-stupid group or mass, while intelligent people are effective as a group only when they know each other well and are experienced in working together.*»

«*The creation of well-tuned groups of people sharing intelligence can generate fairly powerful anti-stupidity forces, but (unlike stupidity bundling) they need organized planning and upkeep; and can lose a large part of their effectiveness by the infiltration of stupid people or unexpected bursts of stupidity in otherwise intelligent people.*»

Since effective organizations need intelligent teams, this explains why teamwork is so hard to nurture. It's doomed because bringing together intelligent people into a cohesive group takes real work to effect. Mr. Livraghi has a good point regarding the magnetism of stupidity. It may completely explain the fiefdom syndrome.

Any group, or team, however intelligent they are or view themselves, will have members who say or do stupid things thus undermining the effectiveness of the team. And nowhere can stupidity flourish more than at the top of the organization.

Chapter 17 – *Chicken Little* – pages 215-216

(the quotations are from chapter 16 of *The Power of Stupidity*)

To be in a hurry when it isn't necessary potentially creates more (real) problems than it solves. Giancarlo Livraghi calls this "haste mania", a stupid behavior that, in certain circumstances, leads to a more damaging practice called "hysterical haste."

Livraghi claims, most organizations today *«are in the habit of believing that "quick" means clever and "slow" stands for stupid.»*

«Haste mania is an increasingly dangerous source of stupidity. More so now than at any other time in human history, everybody seems to be always in a rush, though quite often it isn't at all clear where they think they are going, or why.»

«Intelligence doesn't have to be fast, or slow. A quick intuition can be refreshing, when it works. Sometimes fast action is necessary. But in many situations, we would be less stupid if we didn't jump to conclusions and we spent a little time making sure that we have understood.»

«"Being in a hurry" has become a habit, regardless of any real need for speed. It causes unnecessary tension and anxiety. It's true that some things are happening faster, but not all and not always. Anyhow, even when they do, hysterical haste is not an effective way of coping with change (and even less so with unexpected circumstances.)»

«This isn't a matter of how long it takes, but of how it's done.»

«It can be quite stupid to waste time, to hesitate, to miss an opportunity by dithering when it was the right time to act. But it is just as stupid to rush into doing something before we have had the time to think, to be in a hurry when it isn't necessary, and so to make mistakes that it will take longer to correct, causing a further state of haste, leading into a vicious circle that could have been avoided by getting it right in the beginning.»

These collateral damage problems then cause a further state of panic. As Livraghi notes, this can easily lead into a vicious circle. Seldom, if ever, is one of the fabricated crises a true life-or-death situation for the organization.

Livraghi continues, «*There is so much of that going on that we have lost sight of what was the purpose (or the problem) in the first place. So the tail is wagging the dog and the opportunities multiply for the power of stupidity to wipe out any trace of common sense that may be lingering in the mess.*»

«*Haste, when not dictated by a precise need, is nearly always stupid. Not only because it causes mistakes. It also makes us nervous, jumpy, and uncomfortable, rushing ahead with no sense of direction, infecting other people with the same disease, chasing nobody knows what and going nobody knows where.*»

«*In Lewis Carroll's Through the Looking Glass, the Red Queen of Chess tells bewildered Alice that "in this place it takes all the running you can do to keep in the same place." This is no longer a little girl's nightmare. It's an effective description of the anxiety-driven haste syndrome, says Livraghi.*

There is more in this than just quoting quotations.

I am not going to let the Red Queen push me into trying to do any thinking in a hurry, but understanding stupidity is a never-ending task – obviously related to “dysfunctional management”, inefficient organization and “the evil environments they create”, not only in the workplace.

William Bouffard's book is rich in quotations of interesting sources – some of which, in addition to his own thoughts, are likely to help me in my endless pursuit of better awareness.

[g.l.]