Stop Doing Stupid: An Essential Requirement For Effective Teaching, Management And Leadership

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Abstract-_There is an old adage that reads "the suffering of fools", which for this paper is the passive form of the "stop doing stupid" in the title. For either of these sayings the key concern when dealing with foolishness is not only the loss of resources, in time and money, that result from this indulgence and tolerance, but more importantly the direct impact that not objecting can have on morale and the long-term effectiveness of any decision-making process. Whether it is during the teaching of students, the management of people and business processes or more importantly the highly involved and visionary leadership process, the need to speak up and to try to mitigate stupid and wasteful interruptions has become an essential requirement if we are to continue to grow socially and economically. This paper has been prepared to make the case for taking the road less travelled, which has as a reward growing personal self-worth and enhanced social value. It also has the drawback of becoming identified as one of those few that just can't sit quietly with their mouths shut when some act of foolishness is in motion._

Keywords- _Management; Leadership; Relationship; Communication Skills._

1. INTRODUCTION

I have lived now for over six decades and during a majority of that time I have had the honor and privilege to serve in a variety of capacities as teacher, professor and at times as a technical and business mentor. To a lesser extent, I have also served as a business owner and decision-making executive for several technology start-ups. Sprinkled throughout all of those years, particularly in my teaching roles, have been the constant, and actually quite the normal, series of questions associated with student-teacher/mentor interactions. This is the normal learning process that I doubt will change soon, even with all of the social media and interactive technology capabilities currently being developed.

It should be noted that, while some of these new Internet teaching capabilities are more aligned with Socratic learning philosophies when compared to that of the current large lecture-style classroom, it will take some time to validate and develop these capabilities and their potential for enhanced learning. In most of these learning environments, in addition to the normal questions, there always seems to be the interference and interruptions resulting from the inevitable, and often dreaded, question that has no bearing on the subject at hand. These questions seem to serve at best as a distraction, or worse as a divergence, from the activity taking place; in other words the "stupid question."

I will admit that some, maybe a majority, of the myriad of questions that I get in the classroom are related to my often-unorthodox way of conveying the needed

information and its importance. The rest though can be chalked up to the inherent failure of the student to fully grasp the new concept or to connect the appropriate neurons to synergize their next great "ah-ha" moment. There might, of course, also arise the occurrence of the desire, or need, by some participants in the process to derail or stall the learning process. Such motives may spawn from apathy, a sense of being lost, or a concern that the learning differential might be accelerated for the more ambitious participants if the current rate of knowledge transfer is not slowed down just a little. While for me most of these learning peculiarities apply to the classroom-based, student-teacher relationship, they can also apply equally well to all interactions where someone is learning from someone or something. If there are failures within any of these interactions they can, for the most part, be attributed to inherent differences associated with communication skills, the age of the participants, or possibly the age differential between the conversing parties, as well as the number of participants in the exchange, and the actual or perceived roles of the participants, among the other reasons mentioned above.

As indicated earlier, it is within these questions and the exchange of information, along with the value of such in the handling of life's problems, where the true power of the learning process occurs. Proper questions clearly facilitate the transfer of information and thus the learning process. It also adds to the satisfaction experienced through feelings of success and accomplishment resonating in both parties, sometimes more so for the instructor. Unfortunately, it is too often the case that some

of these questions are of little or no value to the subject at hand, and as such they become a waste of effort and by any reasonable social measure, a waste of valuable resources like time and money.

Interestingly, this set of conditions and reactions are not only applicable to the educational process, they are inherent characteristics in all communication processes and can be particularly prevalent in management and leadership scenarios. For these latter cases it is not just the stupid or foolish question that causes the problems, it is also the actions, statements, strategies, proposals, etc. that occur during these efforts. It should be noted that they could occur amongst all members of the interaction including the leaders and/or the managers.

2. THE HUMAN SUCCESS STORY

One of the primary reasons we as a species have been so successful, in addition to our opposing thumbs, is our ability to learn and to take advantage of acquired knowledge to make decisions, solve problems, and from these efforts create a stronger economy and a better social order. These capabilities also allow us to aggressively protect ourselves from the varied and changing environment we choose to live in, amidst the diverse personalities that we choose to live around. It is in the success of that information and knowledge transfer along with the ability to make appropriate decisions that allows us to accelerate that process, which has made us as remarkably successful as a species, even if it has put our environment in peril at times.

In other words, it is in our ability to successfully teach, mentor, lead and manage what is needed to the next group of participants that helps to precipitate the next great something. This becomes a clear necessity in staying ahead of the problems the prior generation created by solving yesterday's problems. This seems to be the nature of the beast for any advancing technological society where the notion of simply stepping off of the progress merry-go-round in favor of an earlier, simpler time, is a train that has long since left the station.

In all of these human based processes there is the inherent need to learn what needs to be conveyed and to do so in a well-maintained environment. This applies as well, if not more so, in organizations large enough to require a management and leadership structure. While it may not be entirely evident, all effective managers and leaders teach effectively. In fact although the classroom setting may be seldom employed in the business world, the mentoring and modeling as well as the instructional aids and directives provided by the organization constitute and illustrate a most effective teaching methodology. This, of course, assumes that any or all of the participants have not fallen prey to the stupid question situation provided above. In this case, though, it isn't just the stupid question that is the culprit; it is the allowance of stupid as an acceptable operational model.

3. CONNECTING THE DOTS

Every generation, it seems, has identified in one way or another the common problems associated with maintaining a positive direction for social progress. In the current context of this paper the identified problem is the seemingly endless willingness to allow, or the open tolerance for, acts of stupidity. It should be pointed out that this is not a new problem. Each generation has had to deal with the few that tend to make life's progress just a little harder to navigate. Unlike the past where there may have been time to argue the point with little lasting consequence, the accelerating rate of our social development can no longer tolerate this allowance. There is an old adage that reads "the suffering of fools", which for this paper is the passive form of the "stop doing stupid" in the title. In most well run organizations there are several individuals who are frequently accused of not suffering fools very well. For the most part they are welcome additions to these organizations, albeit not so much when you are the subject of their attention.

The story though is not as simple as the three words of the title or the better-known "suffering of fools". In fact the need to define the situation goes much deeper than an old adage, although there is often a lot of merit to old sayings since they usually develop from a multitude of predictably annoying occurrences. In this case the active form, "stop doing stupid," requires an immediate response and often an action, if waste is to be reduced and increased value is to be acquired.

While the inability for this select group to simply stay quiet, when things become stupid, might be chalked up to an aberrant chromosome or a problematic childhood, it turns out that of all of the possible and often identified annoying habits this particular one may have significant social value. It is clear to a growing number of participants that we as a society have sat too long letting people, who have perfected the art of acting stupid, continue to add ever increasing levels of crap to our already busy existences, either through accident, oversight, ignorance, laziness or just plain self-entitlement. Actually, the particular reason has little importance. The reality is that foolishness has to be fought at every turn or it will, as it has, start to dominate our lives.

To be fair a few definitions and explanations are in order. Note that this paper will define, but not justify, the failure to get past a clearly foolish or stupid comment, or action. This is true even when one of us might be the willing participant or originator of the same. The rolling of the eyes, the loss of attention or a change of subject is just never enough of a response for the ever vigilant and intellectually present participant. These violations of the common sense mandate must be dealt with immediately and handled abruptly since Mother Nature, or the Darwin Edict is often hit or miss or it is too slow to weed out the truly stupid participants and their stupid contentions.

The reference to stupid is not to be confused with ignorance where the un-informed can get a free pass,

unless the people in question want to stay ignorant because of laziness or as a means to mitigate possible future liabilities. For example, ignorance of the law now seems to represent a probable courtroom plea and sometimes even a free pass especially for the more innocent looking. Eventually early retirement or in some few cases termination can take care of the culprit if repetition is the best teacher or even better the Darwin effect may eliminate them and the problem altogether. As for ignorance being bliss, we should have no respect for those individuals who bury their heads in the sand, since they know they are not heeding the signs and thus choose to play dumb.

This paper is also not referring to stupid from an intelligence standpoint. The spectrum of intelligence among humans, like all living creatures, is wide and we are all equally qualified to "step in it," as the saying goes, no matter where we fall on the intelligence scale. I suspect the lower end of the scale is far less guilty of contributing to foolishness or stupid actions because of their lack of reserves, both financially and personally, to cure the consequences. This segment of the intelligence spectrum may, in fact, pay more attention to the world around them and the role they play in it.

The average to moderately intelligent are probably the most used to getting away with "stupid" because they often have the financial reserves to cover up their accidental or deliberate oversight. Plus, they most likely have the refined and often-practiced abilities to manipulate the system so they can, again, repeat that stupid act that Darwin hasn't quite taken action on, yet. For this paper the stupid that is being referred to is a little more complex and involves at least two active parties no matter the intelligence, the position or the intention: the actor, and the observer. It really takes both.

If for example you step in it, no matter what the "it" is, and there are no witnesses and/or you did not realize or cause any lasting effects then, quite logically, it really didn't happen, at least that is how we tend to internalize these occurrences. It has something to do with "if a tree falls in the woods …" and all of that philosophical mumbo-jumbo. Going around telling people about all of the stupid things you may have done, just today, is clearly not a favorite pastime, would be boring to most everybody and possibly put the value of the professing person in real question. Most likely there isn't enough time in anyone's day to do both the act and the play-by-play and still get anything useful done.

What we are down to in this discussion, are two specific groups and the people they affect around them. The first are those foolish acts perpetrated by individuals that can best be classified under lack-of-attention, absent-mindedness, or just plain laziness; a kind of induced or indulged ignorance. Darwin can judge these and rule later. On the other hand are the people who do things that are clearly stupid and expect to continue to get away with it because they are entitled, above reproach or simply smarter, at least they think they are, than the individuals

around them or they are higher in the hierarchical pecking order, and so no one better take notice.

In all of these cases it is the lack of the observers' willingness to call the foul that continues to perpetuate the problem. In other words, there is a direct inverse correlation between the growth in the number of stupid acts and the ones that are identified as such, particularly when there is a large differential in the social or job-related pecking order.

We easily see this relationship where we work, and sometimes where we play, but we see them most often within the ranks of our appointed and elected officials. For whatever the reason we seem to select, or they self-select, individuals who are completely clueless and clearly not up to the expected or required tasks, plus they can't or won't learn the needed capabilities. It is bad enough to not have the knowledge or the skillset to do a job, to then expect everyone around you to kowtow to your inadequacies and/or lack of any measureable intelligence is another situation altogether.

Most of the people who fit into this descriptive group pick one of two paths in their operational styles. The first is to appeal to the mercy of their associates or subordinates, learn what is needed and use the combined skill set of the group to most effectively move the effort forward. This would seem to be the preferred path and the one that eventually removes the party from the aforementioned group. Let your past experiences judge the percentage that chooses this option. The second is to ignore the realities, and micro-manage the capabilities and skillset of the human and financial resources that are available, given, or assigned to them. Note that they normally will also ask for time extensions and additional resources. Finally, they will find a way to blame everything and everyone around them for their failure to move the effort forward at a reasonable pace and if they plead their case well enough they will most likely be rewarded with an advancement with even greater responsibilities that they can't or won't handle in the future. This is often called the "Peter Principle" or some derivation thereof.

This latter situation is clearly too prevalent in our society at all levels of corporate America, and, of course, within the government: local, state, and Federal. It is also prevalent in our social programs and the very activities we subject ourselves and our children to. For a lot of these activities people literally get fed up and leave, but the rest are mandated by societal, employment and governance rules and expectations to put up with the worst of it. Sometimes we simply become jaded or overwhelmed and simply settle for less than adequate: mediocre or less.

Letting "stupid" continue with no relief or recourse is affecting our social climate where we live and work, our creative and innovative talents, and the governance we are expecting and subjecting ourselves to. We shouldn't have a problem with ignorant people who are willing to learn and to do the best they can. The problem is with those who are unwilling to learn, or to develop new skill sets but still

expect to be allowed by silent assentation to do as they please.

This non-reaction on our part has perpetuated a growing degree of hopelessness and complacency, which has an additional downside. What you get from all of this is a breeding of incompetence where equally incompetent people are recruited at all management and leadership levels to insure the "stupid" isn't exposed or jeopardized. More importantly what you also get is a lowering of the bar that reduces or removes the challenge and the need for excellence.

4. THE HUMAN CONDITION

This slowness in the reaction of Mother Nature to cure stupid or reduce our foolishness is very fortunate for a lot of us since, like most, this author often frequents the stage for stupid comments and actions. We all do things that cause us a moment of pause. It is part of who we are and clearly a part of the human condition. For most cases it is not the act so much as it is our failure to identify and to seek a remedy, and to take heed for the future that causes us all the cascading problems.

We all do foolish and stupid things, probably more often than we would like to admit, or even want to know. Fortunately the Universe, Mother Nature, luck, or some divine and gracious intelligence simply chooses to let it pass. Not taking that second look at the stop light or not looking where you are stepping has caught us all and for some it has resulted in painful lessons learned: a trip to the hospital, or possibly the morgue or, more often than not, simply nothing at all. Interestingly this seems to be how the human process works and since we seem to somehow survive our actions, or in-actions, maybe we shouldn't be quite so critical, or should we?

Not that many decades ago we had a US President speak to us about a kinder and gentler society for America. I don't believe that saying was the start of the current situation, since clearly stupid has been around since little Jimmy decided to poke the sleeping bear with a stick. I do believe, though, that we as a population have decided that it is just plain easier to let things continue as they are. This, of course, would be in contrast to stepping up and announcing that something is just plain stupid, or being handled by some fool that is overdue for a Darwin strike. Kinder and gentler seems to have become confused with stupid and foolish. We have become a nation of busy people who believe that the way things are was mandated on high, furthermore, who are we as individuals to question the wisdom, or lack thereof, of the masses.

I don't believe the current masses had any real input into the present situation although they are contributory through their silence. Everywhere I go and in most everything I read and hear as formal pronouncements, I get this uneasy feeling that what is being pontificated is being listened to by people who are either clueless, uncaring or feel obligated by self-imposed, or job and socially related, expectations to sit there and take it. I also believe there are

a growing percentage of those same participants that do not believe or accept what they see, listen to, or read. The question then is why don't they speak up and do what I do and just say THIS IS STUPID!

Unfortunately, I don't have the answer to this question and in everything I hold sacred I wish I had at least a glimmer. Maybe what is needed are for just those few who have the presence of mind to say something to continue to step-up their pronouncements. Possibly it will require a ground swell from the general public to get noticed. All I know is we have a lot of individuals in this world who are still plugged-in enough to know when things are not right, or not right enough. Yes, I know we all, especially me, will see and call it wrong every once in a while. I didn't say I don't make mistakes. The reality is that if we haven't made a few mistakes today we probably haven't done anything good either, or we are still in bed with the covers pulled over our head. Isn't it time for each of you to identify a small piece of our human foolishness so you can improve the same? Until nature takes notice, I believe we need to become its voice for reason.

Author Biography
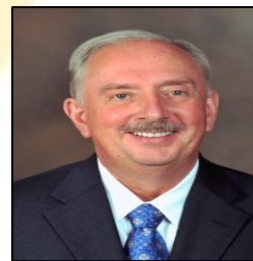
James E. Smith received his Bachelor of Science and Master of Science degrees in Aerospace Engineering and Doctor of Philosophy degree in Mechanical Engineering from West Virginia University (WVU), Morgantown, West Virginia, in 1972, 1974, and 1984, respectively. He is currently the Director of the Center for Industrial Research Applications (CIRA) at West Virginia University, where he is also the Innovation Coordinator and a Professor in the Mechanical and Aerospace Engineering (MAE) Department. He has taught at the University since 1976, before which he was a Research Engineer for the Department of Energy (DOE). He was the 2009 SAE International President and Chairman of the Board of Directors, which afforded the opportunity to travel to the mobility centers of the world.

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