STUPIDOLOGY: THE STUDY OF STUPIDITY

Being stupid is one of the main characteristics that distinguishes humans from animals. Animals have an instinct for their own best interests. Humans, by contrast, occasionally act in a way that is contrary to the evidence – and contrary to their own best interests.

There is a lot of attention to "best practices" in business studies educational courses. Perhaps we need more attention to stupidity. There should be more "stupidology" – the study of stupidity.

In my weekly session on Sydney Radio 2GB's "Brian Wilshire Show", we often discuss examples of stupidity. There is a market for such studies among the cynical listeners. They know from bitter experience that mistakes are being made in business and politics.

I initially got this idea from Professor Manfred Max-Neef, vice chancellor of a Chilean university, a former candidate for the Chilean presidency and one of my colleagues in the global think tank The Club of Rome. He was so intrigued by what makes humans stupid that three decades ago he taught courses on "stupidology" at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and Wesleyan University in the US. Unfortunately, his other commitments (including running unsuccessfully as the president of Chile) precluded his following up these pioneering courses.

I think that more attention should be given to this subject in Australian educational institutions, especially business schools. There are some books already available – but there needs to be a more systematic academic approach, virtually to create a mini-discipline.

The American historian the late Barbara Tuchman in effect did a book on stupidology with her best-selling "The March of Folly". She examined why governments continued to persist with policies that were obviously failing, such as England's attempt to hold on to the 13 American colonies in the 1775-83 War of Independence and the US's war in Vietnam 1965-75.

At the national government level, there is a tendency to repeat in one country what is already showing signs of failing in another. For example, the privatization of government assets, though it has brought some successes, has also some failures. There are, for example, moves to reverse some of the public transportation sales in Britain and New Zealand because they have not lived up to their promise.

Finally, at the individual level, there is the example of some people (even in the medical profession) who continue to smoke. There is now a great deal of evidence that shows the harm that smoking does to a person's health. And yet people smoke somehow expecting that they will not suffer the same adverse consequences as those who have become ill. People continue to drink alcohol and drive, even though it is clear that such actions are risky.

For example, I am intrigued by the way that public health campaigns (which I support in principle) seem to go on making the same mistakes. For example, the people who most need to hear the message are the ones often who do not get to hear it. For example, tobacco health warnings are in English but not everyone can read English.

A definition of "stupidity" is "doing the same thing again and again - and expecting a different result". People continue to do, over and over again, the same thing in the hope that eventually there will be a different outcome.

For example, governments conduct anti-smoking campaigns. They repeat the same types of campaigns and get only limited results - and yet somehow they expect to do better next time.

Organizations (governmental and commercial) get locked into a momentum of doing the same thing. Instead of standing back and asking whether a particular policy is being effective, the tendency is simply to repeat the policy but with more gusto. Perhaps too many careers are tied up with the original policy to call for a questioning of it. Instead of "lateral thinking", people and organizations just dig themselves deeper into the same hole.

Therefore here are three recommendations:

First, educational institutions that currently teach "best practice" courses in the hope that students can detect a formula for success, would perhaps also gain from looking at the failures. What is the "worst practice"? What are the lessons in the failures?

Case studies should be produced of what were the major failures. There is now no shortage of material, such as the collapse of Enron, WorldCom, and Ansett. What are the lessons to be learned from these events?

Second there should be the study of "non-role" models. People are often encouraged to follow positive role models. But they could also be invited to think of the worst examples they have encountered and to reflect on why they thought the non-role models were so bad and how they ought also to avoid behaving as badly.

For example, Jean Lipman-Blumen has written a helpful book "The Allure of Toxic Leaders: why we follow destructive bosses and corrupt politicians – and how we can survive them" (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2005). "Toxic leaders" have the following

characteristics: they leave their followers worse off than they found them, they violate the basic standards of human rights of their own supporters, they erode the followers' capacity to act independently, they play on the basest fears and needs of the followers, they mislead their followers, they identify scapegoats and castigate them, and they ignore or promote incompetence, cronyism and corruption.

This book starts with the ordinary needs of the followers: the yearning for certainty in an uncertain world, for self-esteem, heroism, access to centres of action, opportunities to engage in noble enterprises and the promise of immortality. Toxic leaders know how to exploit these needs.

The book examines types of followers. Some "benign followers" are anxious: they want the leader to reassure them through grand illusions that they will find safety by participating in the leader's noble vision. Other "benign followers" are pragmatic: they are driven by such practical concerns as economic and professional wellbeing. The "leader's entourage" follows the leader and may eventually become so influential that the leader ends up following them. The "malevolent followers" are driven by greed, envy or competitiveness. They look out for themselves and may actually undermine the leader eventually if it is in their own interests to so.

Finally, within each company there should be the recognition that mistakes are an opportunity to learn. There should not be an organizational culture that punishes mistakes.

Instead, if a mistake has occurred there should be an open culture where the mistakes can be admitted, an exploration made of the lessons learned, and a desire to move on. Instead of quietly burying the mistakes, there should a desire to learn from them.

After every project, a company should sit back and ask: what were the lessons to be learned? What did we do right and what did we do wrong? But how "open" is your company's culture to enable staff to admit that mistakes have been made?

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