

Why Smart People Do Dumb Things. [article]

Why Smart People Do Dumb Things

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People of exceptional intelligence are a prized business asset. But as any manager of a budding or full-blown genius knows, there are pitfalls. One of the most common cries of the anguished manager in this situation is: "How could he have been so stupid?"

Why do smart people do dumb things? Having studied a wide assortment of weird decisions and actions by highly intelligent executives, I have formulated a principle: Strong intelligence seeks to subvert it-self.

This theory might help to explain acts of bizarre self-destruction like that of Stephen Chao, the high-flying president of Fox Television Stations and Fox News, who arranged for a male stripper to perform at a high level conference. Among those not amused were Defense Secretary Dick Cheney, National Endowment for the Humanities head Lynn Cheney, and Rupert Murdoch, Mr. Chao's boss. Shortly after the stripper departed, Mr. Chao was fired.

This unfortunate episode illustrates the spectacular ingenuity with which the brilliant mind can subvert itself. Smart people sometimes turn their formidable intellectual armament against themselves - resulting in behavior so strange that it is virtually inexplicable. When logic dictates a certain course, most people follow that course, having no sensible reason to do otherwise. However, the exceptional brain seems to work beneath the conscious level, to find plausible reasons to bypass logic.

Three of the most prevalent self-subverting mechanisms are recklessness, isolation, and feedback deafness. Powerful dynamics, especially when they coalesce.

- **Recklessness:** There is something inside the super brain that keeps announcing, "Now for my next trick ..." Spurred on by a feeling of omniscience, brilliant people can develop into risk junkies. "Smart guys get used to knowing more than anybody else," says Brendan Sexton, vice president, the Rockefeller Group. "It's all too short a step from knowing more than anybody else to thinking that you know everything." When things come too easily, the mind looks for bigger challenges. Boredom combined with brilliance make an explosive and self-destructive mixture.
- **Isolation:** "Smart people tend to surround themselves with other smart people," says James W. Wesley Jr., president and CEO of Summit Communications. "That's good. But when the group starts relying on brilliance to the exclusion of experience, then bad things happen." From childhood on, high intelligence is an isolating factor. The bright youngster feels shut off from other kids. So, following the age-old patterns of the species, smart ones tend to cluster together.

When people of extraordinary brilliance form the palace guard of a company, the combined power of their intelligence can form an irresistible force, pushing the enterprise toward the pinnacle - or the precipice. One danger is their unwillingness to admit the need to change. "When smart people all agree with each other about a plan," observes Mr. Wesley, "they're apt to stay with the plan too long, even after others have seen that the direction is wrong."

- **Feedback deafness:** Most of us rely on feedback-although we may become impatient with it. ("Quit bothering me with facts!") Some bright people are so impatient with their slower associates that they find it impossible to listen to them.

"That impatience," says Robert Shiver, CEO of Senses International, "can be a dangerous trap. Feedback is essential, no matter how brilliant or respected the originators of the ideas may be, or how high they stand in

the organization."

Here's an instance of what Mr. Shiver is talking about. A highly gifted marketing executive for a beverage giant pushed through a product introduction that bombed. As top management sifted through the wreckage, it came upon copious warnings from the man's subordinates. "Didn't you get this feedback?" he was asked. "Feedback is for wimps," he replied.

How can you get the most out of your best and brightest while minimizing the effects of intellectual self-subversion? Here are some thoughts:

- **Focus on results rather than process.** Recognize that exceptional minds work differently. Give bright people assignments that leave room for the startling leap forward to success.
- **Review all the super-brain's ideas.** Very smart people generate some great ideas, but also some impractical or down right bad ones. They shouldn't have to choose between good and bad. Tony Cann, president of the British conglomerate TDS, observes: "Bright people don't always know the difference between a good idea and an inferior one. They can get their knickers in a twist trying to decide. Hidden in the ideas are often gems, but the sifting job is up to you."
- **Apply uniform criteria to all ideas.** You may have a tendency to be more receptive to recommendations of the highly gifted. But just because the thought comes from a smart person doesn't mean it's smart. Lord Melbourne, Queen Victoria's first prime minister, once lamented, "What all the wise men promised has not happened, and what all the damned fools predicted has come to pass."

Give your top brains leeway in the ways in which they come up with their ideas, but not in the ways in which those ideas are judged. This can be a problem. Brilliant people are not always tremendously mature. They may sulk at having their proposals reviewed by those they consider their mental inferiors. But don't be intimidated. Be firm in subjecting all thinking, whatever its origin, to the same standards.

- **Provide the genius with structure.** "I just let her do her own thing," says a boss of an unusually brilliant subordinate. "You, have to allow complete freedom to people like that." This 100% laissez-faire attitude toward managing brilliance is sometimes a well-intentioned effort at creating the proper environment for supersmart workers. Sometimes, though, it's a cop-out by a boss who doesn't know what else to do. Usually it's a bad idea.

Bright people may resist structure, but they need it. Suspending the rules for your top brains is no favor to them. Apart from the fact that it makes them the target of resentment by their colleagues, it may encourage their most self-destructive, loose-cannon tendencies.

When smart people are supported by sound structure and candid comment, they are, in effect, even smarter.

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