Stupidity Explored – Mindful Leadership Amplified

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Objectives

- To explore various manifestations of stupid behavior, and arrive at a working definition, with particular application to outdoor pursuits and leadership.
- To introduce curiosity as the opposite of stupidity, and to illustrate and reinforce this concept.
- To provide a conceptual model of mindful leadership that builds upon this curiosity dimension – one with applications prior to, during, and after an event or episode.
- To encourage the development of professional development and staff training programs built upon this conceptual foundation.
- To affirm and nurture humility, both as a posture for optimal learning, and as an enviable leadership trait of worthy mentors.
- Ultimately, to foster safer and more enjoyable outdoor experiences for leaders, clients, teachers, students, and friends.

Introduction

We have all seen the YouTube videos or America's Funniest of the stupid in action:
- The racquetball player who hard-serves the ball 10 feet away from the wall, only to get his clock cleaned by the rebound,
- The box truck driver who piles up his rig against the low overpass,
- The bozo who rides his bike off the roof and face-plants in the front garden.

Needless to say, there are numerous examples in the outdoor adventure realm as well. People rappel off the ends of ropes, failing to check for length, or they fall to injury attempting to scramble and raid rappel stations for free gear. Then there is my personal favorite: "[*At Mesa Verde National Park], while playing a joke on their students, one instructor pretended to be pushed off a cliff by another instructor. The teacher jumped on to a ledge, but then actually fell 35 feet into the canyon. He suffered a fractured hip and arm, two broken shoulders, and closed head injuries.*" (***Death, Daring, and Disaster: Search and Rescue in the National Parks***, Charles R. Farabee, Jr., 2005)

Now we laugh, and then we pronounce them *stupid*. But here are a few troubling thoughts and questions I have been having recently:

1. *They didn't think they were stupid*. In fact, Zachary Ernst writes: "*Stupid people think they are being very smart. They would characterize themselves as unusually intelligent and insightful. They believe they have special knowledge of the way the world is. They often think others are naïve*." (***Inklings***, 6-16-12)

2. *It's only the result afterward that shows them to be stupid*. A Shin'a'in saying goes: "*If it is stupid but it works, it isn't stupid.*" And so Forrest Gump's mom is right – "*Stupid is as stupid does.*" But this only allows us to describe stupid after we see it happen – it doesn't help us to predict or prevent stupid.

3. *So, if they didn't think they were being stupid beforehand but they actually were, what were they thinking?* And if we can figure out what stupid looks like before it becomes painfully apparent, could we occasionally identify and prevent stupid behavior?

I would like to offer several different ways that stupidity might express itself, and then propose a tentative hypothesis or working definition.

What does stupid look like? How do we know when we see stupid happening?

Carlo Cipolla divides humans into four classes (***The Basic Laws of Human Stupidity***, 1986):
- The Helpless (suffering a loss while producing a gain for the other)
- The Intelligent (making a gain while yielding a gain to the other as well)
- The Bandit (making a gain while imparting a loss to the other)
- The Stupid (causing a loss to others while himself deriving no gain, and possibly even incurring loss)

So when everyone is losing (including in particular the one who caused the incident), stupidity is happening.

I tried to think about some real examples that we might label as stupid, and then extrapolate or work backwards to synthesize my own descriptions of stupidity:

1. Sometimes, it seems that stupid is clinging to an idea in the face of opposing reason and evidence. In fact, Zachary Ernst suggests that this is the defining characteristic of stupid people: "*They apply double-standards with regard to evidence. They may apply the highest standards of intellectual rigor to some questions, while endorsing the most asinine answers to others, with either no justification or with transparently ridiculous justification.*" (***Inklings***, 6-16-12)   Obvious facts do not require justification, and highly intelligent people that they are, they are gifted at discerning what is obvious.

The wife of Kelly James, lost mountaineer on Mt. Hood in December of 2006, told reporters that she was certain that her husband would survive because, "*We got engaged on that mountain, and he promised me that we would enjoy our next anniversary up there!*" Apparently the mountain did not get the memo, because Kelly James' body was found three days later, dead in a snow cave. The chasm here between premise and logical conclusion is clear. This is why, incidentally, prejudice, racial or otherwise, and superstition are always stupid.

2. Sometimes it appears that stupid is the one who decides that statistically, he is always the exception (when in fact, statistically, this makes no sense). By definition, statistics describe the likelihood of not being an exception. Cross, in polling faculty in American higher education about their own effectiveness, reported, "*an amazing 94% rate themselves as above average teachers, and 68% rank themselves in the top quarter on teaching performance.*" (***Not Can, but Will College Teaching be Improved?*** 1980). In my mind, this would qualify…

Someone observed that the lottery is a tax on the mathematically challenged. Regularly playing the lottery ignores the statistics. Or you could say it is stupid.

A corollary cohort here might be those folks who fail to draw the obvious conclusions, or who draw faulty conclusions about cause and effect. Often, this is done to protect the fragile ego from recrimination or inadequacy (redirect blame, etc.). Todd Schimelpfenig and Gates Richards, in presenting on ***Decision-Making and Judgment*** (WRMC, 10-6-11), referred to "illusory causation" – that illusion that a decision made was the cause of the positive outcome – in short, a false feedback loop. Sometimes, even our supposed rational choice model (gathering information and considering alternatives) is limited by biases in selection and observation, and

by the illusion of thoroughness. We go through the motions of cherry-picking data to confirm our pre-ordained decisions. The degree to which we are aware of these denial games while we are practicing them could be called our stupidity index.

3. Sometimes, stupid is the one who refuses to make changes based upon his own history or the experience of others. Albert Einstein's definition of insanity could apply here – "*trying the same approach over and over, hoping for a different result.*" (Incidentally, Einstein, the gold standard for genius in the human race, was at times thought quite stupid, so he actually had some fairly poignant observations about stupidity. He said, for example, "*Two things are infinite: the universe and human stupidity; and I'm not sure about the universe.*"). Earlier, Solomon observed that "*Stern discipline awaits him who leaves the path, and he who hates correction will die.*" (Prov. 15:10). America's Funniest Home Videos now takes this "stern discipline" and regularly turns it into entertainment for the masses.

So may I boil these down to my conclusion, and one that is at least a little bit operational in recognizing stupidity before the fact? (and hopefully more descriptive than derogatory)

I would offer that stupidity is *someone who refuses to learn*. If we define learning as behavior change growing out of observations and reflective thought, then a person breaking down at any of these points (failure to observe and attend, incapacity or unwillingness to reflect, resistance to changing course or modifying constructs, refusal to grow) is stupid.

John Dewey said, "*Learning is thinking about experience.*" We are not learned if we have merely had an experience – we are learned if we have experienced something and then reflected on it, extracted meaning from it, and applied it. George Santayana, the American historian, observed, "*Those who refuse to learn from history are doomed to repeat it.*" Learning is the corrective that we apply to past failure. *The past is always prologue*. So when we see someone repeating a destructive cycle for themselves or others, ignoring statistics, experience, and evidence, we can say, in tones more observational than insulting (and hopefully, **before** it all hits the fan): "*I think we are about to see stupid*!"

Our conclusion so far, after looking at several dimensions, is that stupidity has little to do with IQ. It is, rather, ***an unwillingness to learn***. This tentative definition has some predictive value. When we experience someone who shows a failure to observe and attend, incapacity or unwillingness to reflect, resistance to changing course or modifying constructs, or a refusal to grow, we can be reasonably assured that some form of stupid behavior is shortly to follow. Now we will delve a little more deeply into this topic, looking at situations that tempt to us to act stupidly, and then at how we might rise above stupidity.

When do people do stupid things? How and when do we become stupid?

Joel Stein attempted to understand why a brilliant man like CIA Director David Petraeus destroyed his career over an extra-marital affair. His analysis: "*Because Petraeus had extensive army training to withstand torture, sleeplessness, and contemporary hairstyles, he probably thought he could also steel himself against temptations he hadn't trained for. People who pride themselves on being super rational and super disciplined are uniquely at risk for this hot state/cold state problem. This is how hubris works… [George Lowenstein explained how Petraeus could make so many hot-state mistakes in the middle of the day, over email], 'Someone as upright as Petraeus was particularly vulnerable since he had little practice in dealing with sexual temptations. So he kept getting excited and doing stupid things, like writing inappropriate emails despite all that wasted time learning Morse code.'*" (<u>TIME</u>, 11-28-12, p. 62)

Here, we see two hints of situations that can drive us to stupidity: the first is situations of *intense emotion*. Laurence Gonzales relates that his father, a World War II Flying Fortress pilot, would say, "*When you walk across that ramp to your airplane, you leave half your brain behind*." (Deep Survival: Who Lives, Who Dies, and Why, 2003).

And the second is **hubris** -- overweening, or maybe oblivious pride. Arno Ilgner says: "B*eware! Few people actually admit to being or feeling close-minded. The Ego doesn't allow that. We trick ourselves into thinking we are objective and open, when in fact we may be judgmental and closed. Once again, the mind is full of subtle tricks." (p. 35)* Pride might be called self protective Ego. Exaggerated, it might be called hubris.

This might be why unbridled ego is such a reliable predictor of human suffering and misfortune in the outdoors (and probably, in human relationships in general). *My self-perceived superiority renders any input, feedback, or perspectives from others as unworthy of me; I have already decided that I have it all figured out. In short, why learn?*

Maybe here, we see suggested why highly accomplished people are capable of such stupid acts – their very achievements and the identity fostered renders them less likely to seek outside input. We might be talking about surgeons, head pilots …

One additional condition that seems to predispose people toward stupid actions is *isolation* – a lack of outside scrutiny of decisions and conclusions. Greg Lukianoff observes, "*Those with the highest levels of education [tend to] have the lowest exposure to people with conflicting points of view*." (Unlearning Liberty: Campus Censorship and the End of the American Debate, 2012) The result, he suggests, is a stifling form of thought conformity. This has been called "group-think" – conclusions arrived at in cloistered isolation, where group identity and cohesiveness are made to depend upon uniformity of thought (Janis, 1982). Group-think decisions can be quite stupid.

So if stupidity is linked to an unwillingness to learn, then, contrary to conventional wisdom, the opposite of stupidity is not intelligence.

The opposite of stupidity is *curiosity* – an inquiring mind, and a desire to learn and know.

Astro Teller, director of New Projects at Google, says: "*I see something, I hear about something, and it doesn't fit with the model I have for the world, and ... usually, the right answer is that I need to adjust my models. That's the learning moment.*"

Listen to Arno Ilgner, author of The Rock Warrior's Way (2006): "*Learning and growing is a process of modifying your beliefs. If you're too attached to your beliefs, you won't be willing to modify them (**stupidity**). When you identify yourself with your beliefs, you become attached to them. Without realizing it, you become defensive when they are threatened. Efficient learning requires an open mind. To be open-minded means you don't cast out new information before evaluating it, and if it's useful, making an honest attempt to incorporate it into your present way of thinking.*" (p. 35).

So a remedy? What about questions – questions of every kind?! Here are a few practical applications:

1. **We can cultivate a personal posture of curiosity, about our own thought processes, the validity of our conclusions and decisions, and our own capabilities.** John Powell (Fully Human, Fully Alive, 1976) suggests a posture toward each day of "letting life question you." "*A very different person from a background very dissimilar to mine asks me if I am capable of empathy and understanding. Success and failure ask me to define my ideas of success and failure. Suffering asks me if I really believe I can grow*

through adversity." (p. 92) Pausing long enough to let life question us gives us a meta-perspective on ourselves – a bird's eye view or level of objectivity that just might keep us from engaging in something stupid. It also introduces a pause in the action – time enough to insert, in Steven Covey's words, a proactive choice of action between stimulus and response.

2. **Leaders should foster an atmosphere in the group that allows any member to raise a question, about procedure, decisions already made or about to be**. Anyone should be allowed to voice a concern or an observation ("*That emperor has no clothes.*") If leaders are threatened with this and become autocratic, they might stifle the very voices that could be their or their group's salvation. That would be very stupid! Leaders modeling their own inquisitive processes is also very powerful teaching.

What about humility as a professional trait, and an enviable attribute of worthy mentors? Too often in this field, we are tempted to cover over our mistakes, under the false impression that, if we reveal them, we will be thought incompetent. I would urge, particularly the old guys like myself, that what our young leaders need are examples of older leaders who are willing to talk about their mistakes and close calls. When we are able to unpack our own stupid mistakes, we will help coach a younger generation of leaders who can learn from their own history and the mistakes of others, without fear.

3. **What questions might prevent the multitude of falls, explosions, projectile face shots, and groin-plants on pointed objects that we witness on YouTube?** What about: "*Do I really have the skills to pull off this stunt*? *What factors of physics am I not taking into account* (angle of incidence equals angle of reflection, force equals mass times acceleration, friction coefficient and viscosity, gravity, combustibility)? Or maybe, *what are the various ways that this could go terribly wrong*? Any one of these would do if it serves to stall the individual long enough to be curious.

4. Finally, when we encounter someone who demonstrates an unwillingness to participate in inquiry, we should give them plenty of space, because we can be fairly certain that we are about to see stupid!

Now let's talk about mindfulness. Look for the conceptual similarities with curiosity that we have already mentioned.

Ellen Langer pioneered the work on mindfulness. She describes being mindful as:
1. Being actively alert in the present
2. Being open to new and different information.
3. Having the ability to create new categories when processing information.
4. Having an awareness of multiple perspectives.

A Tentative Model to Train for Mindfulness

For my purposes, I envision training for mindful leadership as a parallel curriculum. Alongside teaching the hard skills of anchor building, navigation, backcountry food prep, stream crossing and shelter construction, I have an additional assignment -- teaching my students and my staff to lead with mindfulness and curiosity. How can we set it up?

One model is to think of the leadership needs chronological to the event or activity. There is mindful leadership before, during and after. It might look like this:

Before an event or incident, the expression of mindful leading is called ***pre-emptive awareness***. Your leadership radar is your awareness -- of everything: weather and conditions, group mood and tenor, who is eating and hydrating, who is not, and why, who might not be acting like their typical self. Are we getting

overly lackadaisical, or competitive? What's going on here, and why is it happening? Do you hear it – curiosity -- questions of every kind, to keep us aware and sharp?

My mentor used to say to us, "Be aware of what is happening around you." And oblivious as we were, we thought we were being aware, until we would get hit as if from nowhere with a storm, or health issue, or something.

Heightening our awareness before the fact should be happening as we hike into the crag with our client group -- as we converse, probe, listen, and watch. Who do I have here today? What are they bringing with them? How are they relating? What is their fitness level? Is there anyone who really doesn't want to be here? Etc.

During the day or session of activity, I have framed mindful leadership as *calculated intervention.* Steven Covey talked about inserting a pause between stimulus and response -- he called this *response-ability* -- the ability to choose our response instead of simply reacting on impulse or instinct. Viktor Frankl famously declared this to be the last of the grand human freedoms -- the ability to choose our response to any situation we face. Herein, he found a dignity that sets us apart from every other creature in nature. In leadership roles, here we demonstrate a level of sophistication and understanding of the situation. Paul Petzoldt called this judgment -- the ability to assess all the operative factors and make a wise and situation-specific decision.
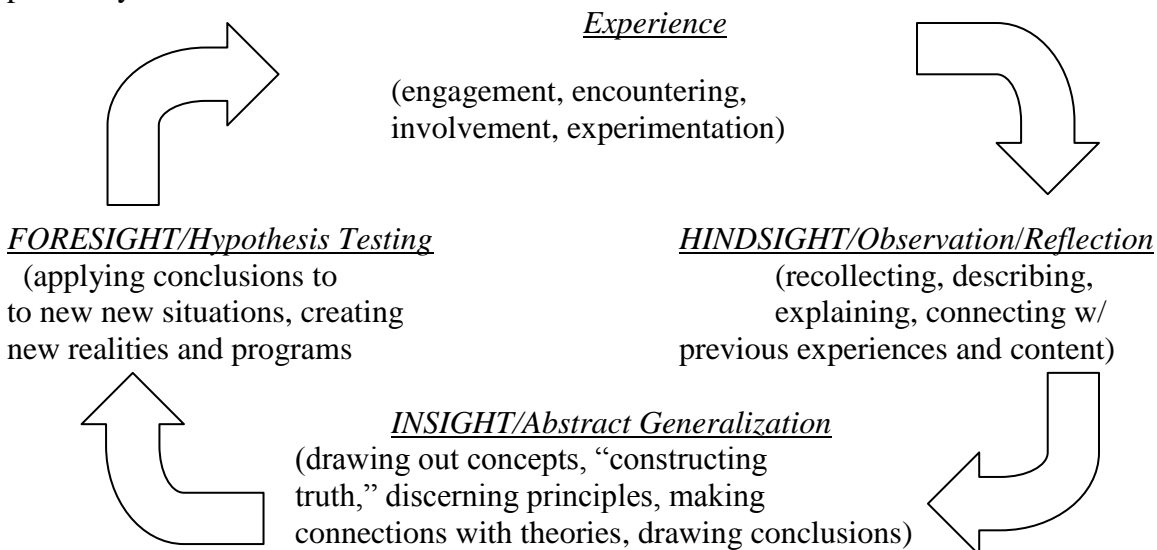
This is also where we might conduct the pre-mortem. What might be the consequences of the several paths of response we have? Are we prepared to accept the outcomes as we understand them? This might also be a chance to ask, how can I create a win-win here -- not my way or your way but a created and creative third way alternative.

Finally, after the day ends, or the incident recedes, mindful leadership takes the form of reflective and introspective learning.

Could any of these make for fruitful debriefing of a close call, an incident, or a staff discussion:

- "*If we do not change our direction, we will end up exactly where we are headed.*" (Chinese proverb)
- "*Errors promote growth and are critical to learning.*"
- "*Everything that happens to you is your teacher. The secret is to learn to sit at the feet of your own life and be taught by it.*" (Polly Berends)

Lewin and Kolb proposed that the progression of extracting meaning from a concrete experience is *observation and description, abstract generalization, and application.* Project Adventure uses "What?" "So what?" and Now what?" Personally, I like *hindsight, insight, and foresight.* The focus is on learning from the past to positively influence future action.

Experience

(engagement, encountering,
involvement, experimentation)

FORESIGHT/Hypothesis Testing
 (applying conclusions to
to new new situations, creating
new realities and programs

HINDSIGHT/Observation/Reflection
(recollecting, describing,
explaining, connecting w/
previous experiences and content)

INSIGHT/Abstract Generalization
(drawing out concepts, "constructing
truth," discerning principles, making
connections with theories, drawing conclusions)

One way to discern if we are truly drawing abstract generalizations or just looking at this situation as its own unique event is to ask: *are our conclusions generalizable beyond just this incident*? There is a tendency among some accident victims to view their situation as idiosyncratic (once in a lifetime), and hence, not to apply real depth of thought to root causes. See if you can tell the difference:

After a failed relationship with a selfish person:
"*Next time, I won't marry a tightwad.*"
Or
"*Next time, I won't allow my own passion, need for affection, and wishful thinking to run ahead of really getting to know the person before I commit.*"

"*Next time, I won't try driving 85 MPH again.*"
Or
"*Next time, I won't allow the pressures from friends inside the vehicle to tempt me to drive in unsafe ways.*"

"*I got an F in that class because I failed his exams; they are much too hard.*"
Or
"*I failed several classes this semester, and I have noticed that in each of them, I was intimidated by the prof, so I didn't go in for extra help when I started to struggle.*"

Another observation about each of the latter responses above (as compared with each of their former counterparts) is that the latter responses point a path to ***personal responsibility***, rather than evading or shifting blame to external factors.

Finally, this takes courage; if we are going to truly learn, we as leaders must be prepared to hear what we might not want to hear:

- "*You didn't properly prepare us for this situation. Our training never really covered this.*"
- "*You were showing favoritism, and that may have made ___ feel neglected and insignificant, and that's why they left without telling anyone.*"

In short, your own leadership may be indicted as part of the problem, and if you are insecure or defensive, it will sabotage the process. Incidentally, these kinds of conclusions are easier to swallow if you have come to these conclusions first yourself – another plea for honesty, and self-mastery.

Perhaps the wisest words uttered by Solomon were these, spoken after walking past the overgrown and neglected field of a man who lacked judgment: "*I applied my heart to what I observed and learned a lesson from what I saw...*" (Prov. 24:32)

So, to summarize, a model with which to build mindfulness into our staff training – to learn from and avoid stupid behavior -- might include pre-emptive awareness, calculated intervention, and then reflective and introspective learning. I would encourage you to create some of your own program applications

Applications and Takeaways:

1. Personal introspection: Am I closed to learning in any particular areas or settings? What do my co-workers and subordinates see? Do I behave stupid? What is my curiosity quotient?
2. Do I have any particular staff members who need to hear this sermon? How am I going to approach this?
3. What might be some creative applications of the Mindful Leadership model for our staff training (pre-emptive awareness, calculated intervention, reflective and introspective learning)?

4. Is there either a particular incident in my professional experience or in our organizational history that needs to be properly debriefed? Have we learned all that we can from our own history?

5. Any practical steps to consider, like symbolically representing your organization's commitment to learning:

- hang a sign
- adopt a quote
- include a reflection assignment after experiences and trips
- tell a story of your own growth and development through learning and mistakes
- collect several from your organization's history and start "creating a legend/myth"

6. Incorporate a learning discernment question/exercise into your hiring process ("Tell me about an incident that you learned from in your previous employ.").

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