
Alvesson, Mats & Spicer, André – The Stupidity Paradox

Profile Books, 2016, [Business] Grade ★★★★★

How is it possible that organizations filled with the best and brightest so often end up doing stupid things? Professors and organizational theorists Mats Alvesson's and André Spicer's explanation is that there are actually short-term benefits to stupidity both to organizations and to employees – although in the longer term the folly will often prove to be detrimental. Absolutely everyone that has been engaged in the inner life of large organizations will – with a sardonic smile – recognize numerous of situations from this book.

The key concept presented by the authors is what they call functional stupidity, by which they refer to the inability and unwillingness of organizations to let the staff utilize their cognitive and reflective capacity, apart from in relation to very narrow, technical and often repetitive tasks. But it also refers to the, presumably smart, employees' willingness to self-stupidify. This results in a lack of reflection on the assumptions behind what is being done, in not asking why things are done to start with and not seeing the wider consequences of actions.

It might sound inconceivable that this inanity would be tolerated yet alone often encouraged by companies and public organizations and likewise sought after by the employees. Still, organizations benefit from employees' stupidity since constant questioning creates doubt, uncertainty and conflict and by this is in the way of productivity. The authors even launch the concept of stupidity management as an organizational process of managing the balance between questioning and efficiency. In my meaning the expression probably gives an illusion of an explicit managerial control that doesn't really exist. The employees benefit from their stupidity as they by not challenging social norms free up time and energy, they show loyalty and fit in. So stupidity comes with pros and cons. Still over time the process creates alienated and cynical staff with numbed cognitive abilities, it creates loads of non-productive work and worst case sets the company up for disaster.

Mats Larsson, May 23, 2017

The book has some structural issues. Although functional stupidity is described as also having positive aspects there is an apparent underlying axiom throughout the book that organizations that utilize the cognitive abilities of their staff will yield superior results. Still, with some exception it isn't until the last chapter this is explicitly stated. The folly has gone too far and has to be combated! I think it would have been better to come clean with this up front. Similarly, the most comprehensive definition of the concept functional stupidity comes in the conclusion of the last chapter.

The start of the book is quite repetitive as the authors introduce the key thoughts in the preface, repeat them in the introduction and then again with a few examples throughout part one. Part two of the book, covering different types of stupidities, is more varied but also contains a fairly odd chapter on consumerism. The authors are clearly entitled to their opinions but the subject belongs to a different book and Naomi Klein has already written it. All in all there are 8,5 chapters of description and only 0,5 chapter of prescription – some more practical advice on what to do about the problem wouldn't have hurt.

These issues are however easily forgiven. The authors are in my opinion dead right in their key insights and it isn't often you bump in to new concepts that frames and explains a lot of what you intuitively know but additionally stimulates and provokes new thoughts. The book also has the extra attraction of making the reader feeling smart, of being one of those select few that have seen through the charade. Not least an intellectual snob like myself is easily seduced by this angle – I did buy the book. There are many texts on the biases of individuals or the madness of crowds in manias but fewer that explain the more mundane day-to-day irrationality of organizational processes.

This is an important and thought provoking book that deserves a wide audience among corporate managers and knowledge-workers alike.