The Power of Stupidity

by Giancarlo Livraghi

Chapter 29 – *Errare Humanum*

There is some wisdom in the old saying, "to err is human." It would be stupid to believe that it is possible to never make any mistakes. Even the most effective combination of intelligence, experience, knowledge, care and discipline can't be infallible. No solution, decision or behavior can be perfect every time. Mistakes aren't always stupid. When the advantage of learning from errors is greater than the damage that they cause, the result is in the intelligence quadrant of the "stupidology graph" (chapter 8.) Making mistakes and understanding why is an essential part of any learning process – just as being prepared for unexpected mishaps is a necessary element in effective planning (as explained in chapter 4 about Murphy's Law.)

Quite often a mistake or misfunction reveals some fault in behavior, process or thinking. If we don't just fix whatever went wrong, but we also understand how and why, that can lead to a more intelligent solution.

If we placed a newborn baby to grow in a perfectly aseptic environment, when later exposed to the outside world the child would probably die, for lack of an effective immune system. It's equally dangerous to believe that we never make mistakes. The delusion of infallibility is arrogantly stupid.

If we fall into the habit (chapter 15) of repeating the same behavior that, in past experiences, had achieved good results, the problem isn't only that we stop learning. It's also that situations and circumstances are never exactly the same. With habit and routine we become less perceptive, over time we lose touch with reality.

A widespread form of stupidity is to be unable, or unwilling, to admit mistakes. Not only to other people, but also to oneself. The courage to say, or think, "I was wrong" isn't only honest. It's also an intelligent way of reducing the power of stupidity.

It's important also to know how to handle other people's mistakes. Arguing and scolding are seldom the right way. It's more civilized to forgive, but it isn't enough. We need to understand if, how and why something that we have done (or failed to do) caused someone else to be mistaken.

We must also try to understand if that person is irremediably stupid (or maybe just inept in a specific role) and, in that case, find a way of removing the problem. But, more often, there is another solution: we can help that person to understand the origin of the mistake – and so reduce the probability of it being repeated.

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Is this obvious? Yes, in theory. But in practice it's more common to try to "pass the buck" – or look for a scapegoat to shift the blame – instead of learning from mistakes.

In an open, fair, dynamic environment, where responsibilities are shared and there is a genuine sense of community, it can be very effective to be together in understanding mistakes, from the origin to the consequences. Not to dilute responsibilities, weep on each other's shoulder or cry over spilt milk, but to enrich the shared resources of experience.

This is rarely achieved with formal meetings or bureaucratic procedures. As Paul Foley said, *«Large meetings are often used to share the blame.»* [1] It takes genuine cooperation and lively teamwork to share the experience and jointly learn from mistakes.

It's an old notion that mistakes are a source of learning. There are lots of possible quotations. Here are three, from different angles. *«A man's errors are his portals of discovery»*, James Joyce. *«All men make mistakes, but only wise men learn from their mistakes»*, Winston Churchill. *«Anyone who has never made a mistake has never tried anything new»*, Albert Einstein.

We can do much more, and much better, than simply "learn from mistakes." As explained by Karl Popper's metaphor "Einstein and the ameba" (in *Of Clouds and Clocks*, 1966) both the ameba and Einstein solve their problems by trial and error, but they do it very differently. The ameba does not realize the process, its errors are eliminated through the elimination of the ameba itself. On the other hand Einstein deliberately uses errors to test his theories and improve his knowledge.

In other words, it's not enough to learn from mistakes when they happen. It's useful to deliberately test ideas, behaviors, methods and solutions to understand which lead to mistakes – and how. This isn't only a basic concept of scientific research, education and technical experiment. It's a valuable tool in all sorts of endeavors and in the experience of daily life.

What is really stupid isn't making mistakes, but not understanding (or admitting) that we do – and not knowing how to use them as a source of improvement.

A commonsense notion, and a sound management criterion, is a "calculated risk." We can find (or deliberately set up as an experimental field) a situation where it's possible to make mistakes with less worrying consequences – and so learn how to avoid, or cope with, more serious or unexpected problems.

It has been said, and practiced, by the most inspiring leaders, that "the biggest risk is to take no risks." Taking no risks, or making no mistakes, is impossible. It's much more effective (and interesting) to understand which risks we are taking – and to be aware of our mistakes, even when it's embarrassing.

The stupidest (and most dangerous) fools are people who don't realize that they are stupid – and so are those who think that they never make mistakes. But it does no good to fall into an opposite pitfall. One can be so obsessed with the fear of being mistaken that the anxiety becomes pedantic, meticulous routine. A formalistic attitude that often causes more problems than it can solve or prevent. (We discussed the stupidity of bureaucracy in chapter 12.)

Charles de Talleyrand was a treacherous power-monger. But he wasn't stupid. He taught his disciples: *«Surtout pas trop de zêle.»* Discipline, dedication, care in every detail are intelligent and can substantially reduce the power of stupidity. But being overzealous isn't only boring and irritating. It can also lead to embarrassing mistakes.

To err is human, to persevere isn't "devilish" – it's just stupid. This was understood over two thousand years ago, when Cicero wrote: *«Cujusvis hominis est errare, nullius nisi insipientis in errore perseverare.»* [2]

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1 See his *Adages* (gandalf.it/m/foley2.htm) where he also wrote
«It's easy to get a unanimous vote for doing nothing.»

2 *«To err is human, to persevere in error is only the act of a fool»* (Marcus Tullius Cicero, Phillippics, XII, 2.)

It has been repeated many times in different words, summarized as a proverb from a statement attributed to Seneca: *«Errare humanum est, perseverare autem diabolicum.»* Somber as it sounds, when it's said that way it becomes an awkward approach. We shouldn't be afraid of errors, or get nervous when they happen. We should learn to understand them. Intelligent management of errors is one of the effective antidotes to stupidity.

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Could "to err" be not only human? This idea has been around for millennia. Not only the gods of Olympus, with all their surrounding demigods and other mythological creatures, often reflect the weaknesses of human nature. Also in several other traditions there are divinities, and other "supernatural" entities, that behave in bizarre and capricious ways.

There are also examples in recent literature. It's interesting to note that in some of the best science fiction stories there are intriguing suggestions of how stupidity can be found in a variety of hypothetical worlds and "extraterrestrial" environments.

For instance (in addition to those quoted in chapter 13) there is Isaac Asimov's brilliant novel *The Gods Themselves* (1972) where he develops a complex interaction with remote alien entities and, starting with the titles of the book's three parts (*Against Stupidity… The Gods Themselves… Contend in Vain?*) he explores the possibility that the power of stupidity may extend beyond human dimensions. This concept is inspired by Friedrich Schiller *«Mit der Dummheit kämpfen Götter selbst vergebens.»* [3]

3 *Friedrich Schiller, Die Jungfrau von Orleans (1801) III, 6.*