

Why Smart People Do Dumb Things

Donalee Markus, Ph.D. & Lindsey Paige Markus, J.D.

Chief Learning Officer

www.clomedia.com

When smart people make dumb mistakes, it usually isn't because of stupidity, ignorance or apathy — smart people make dumb mistakes because they've been seduced by their own success. The rewards of success help them develop expectations about how things are supposed to be. Smart people are supposed to be competent, confident and in control. They have important contributions to make. They are valued and respected, optimistic about the future and proud of their achievements.

It feels good to be smart. So good, in fact, that smart people will do dumb things and make critical mistakes in an effort to maintain that self-image. They might become success junkies who cannot fail and will never admit to failure. There are always extenuating circumstances, unknown factors, misinformation or just bad luck that contributed to failure. Or as spin doctors would have us believe, failure didn't occur at all. The objectives simply have been reassessed. The original goal wasn't worth the effort. According to spin doctors, they've succeeded, even if their enemies say otherwise.

The concept of failure is difficult for some people to grasp because they never expect to fail. They have no doubt that they're on the right track, that they've got the situation under control, and they know exactly what to do. That's the way it's always been. Well, almost always. There might be times, some rare occasions, when a doubt might sneak in. Usually, it's when they're tired or under a lot of stress. But the doubt doesn't last long — after a good night's sleep or a vacation, their heads are cleared. Once again they're feeling smart and successful, and they know how to do things right.

Ironically, the compulsion to “do things right” causes smart people to make dumb mistakes. Not big mistakes but little ones that accumulate over time. Like a pebble rolling down a snowy slope, the initial mistake might seem insignificant. But over time, all the small mistakes can snowball into a sizable force capable of causing a great deal of damage.

It's been said that hindsight has 20/20 vision. Viewing the recent downfalls of domestic divas and telecom chieftains, we wonder how they could have missed what seems so obvious to the rest of us. The reason is they were so focused on doing things right that they failed to “do the right thing.”

We expect people in positions of power and authority to possess foresight, to know and do the right thing. We want our leaders to accurately predict what will happen. Since ancient times, humans have accepted or chosen leaders with the expectation that their abilities to foresee events would protect the rest of us from harm.

Studies in problem solving indicate that when leaders make poor decisions, it's because they fail to appreciate the complexity of the issue. Real-world problems — those that involve other people — inevitably are complex. But our brains evolved to solve simple problems, ones that give us immediate feedback and have no long-term

repercussions.

Simple problems might not be easy to solve, but they are easy to understand. If we're hungry, we know we have to find food. If we're tired, we know we have to find a safe place to sleep. We might have to fight off a bear or go to the supermarket for food, but the result we want is clear, and we know whether we've succeeded. We can bring closure to simple problems.

Complex problems don't always have closure. They might be active or dormant over long periods of time. The result we want might seem clear until we set about solving the problem or something unexpected happens that complicates the issue. Complex problems are dynamic systems with interdependent variables that might or might not be knowable, but they can change over time. Nuclear disarmament, overpopulation and terrorism are examples of extremely complex global problems. Most of us face more personal complex problems such as raising families, running businesses and planning for retirement.

Whether a problem is complex or simple is subjective. To a medical student, a patient's long list of symptoms — and some seem contradictory — is a complex problem. To a doctor who is an expert in the patient's condition, the problem might seem elementary. The specialist's training has taught her what to look for, which symptoms are relevant. But the specialist might err if she too readily discounts the unexpected as an anomaly. If the patient doesn't respond to the prescribed treatment the "right" way, the doctor's simple problem suddenly has turned complex. Complex issues require flexible thinking skills.

The good news is that our brains are quite capable of dealing with complex issues, provided we understand how organizing information in different ways produces various results.

"If at first you don't succeed, try, try again" — this adage encourages us to do what is counterintuitive. Usually success compels us to try again, and failure makes us want to give up. As emotionally satisfying as it is, success teaches us very little. Mistakes can make us stop to think. At least, they would if we knew what to think about. Before we can answer the question, "What went wrong?" we have to know precisely what result we wanted to produce. Knowing the result we want determines how we set about solving the problem and what elements are relevant to achieving success.

When people first confront complex problems, they tend to identify their goals in comparative terms. They want to make things better or safer. They want to be happier or richer. People want things to be different but are not clear on how or to what extent they'll be different. In other words, they haven't a clear vision of the result they want. Studies in decision-making processes demonstrate when we have precise goals, the visual cortex of our brains has been activated.

Goals that we easily can visualize and articulate serve us best when we're dealing with simple problems. Complex problems have elements or can produce results that are hard, if not impossible, to visualize. We just don't know what to expect. Therefore, when we deal with complex issues, we want to have specific goals in mind while recognizing that, as events unfold and information becomes available, we

might need to modify those goals.

For some people, modifying a goal is the equivalent of admitting failure, and they will never admit failure. Once they've set their sights on a goal, they will try to move heaven and earth to achieve it. They will run a business into the ground. They will risk divorce and alienation of family and friends. They will ruin their health with long hours at the office. Perseverance is the way they get things done right.

These people are "bottom-liners" — they focus all their attention on the bottom line. What will it cost? When will it be done? They want definite answers and guarantees. Don't bother them with details or raise issues after the course has been set because they'll interpret your concern as disloyalty both to the cause and to them personally. Although they make good team captains and excel at planning strategies, they ignore facts that conflict with their expectations because the goal is so clear in their minds that everything else is irrelevant.

"Left-to-righters" have a similar leadership style to bottom-liners in that they want guarantees from their staff, although the results they expect aren't always articulated. Personally, they appear well-organized and like to do things in a step-by-step, orderly manner. Any deviation from the norm makes them uncomfortable. While bottom-liners bristle at the suggestion of failure, left-to-righters just don't see how they could have done things differently. They had been so careful to do everything right that mistakes couldn't have been made. But if they were made, someone else was at fault for not providing the left-to-righter with precise information in the prescribed way. Unlike bottom-liners, who can consciously visualize their goals, left-to-righters are rarely aware of visualizing, but their behavior suggests their self-image is closely tied to their achievements and success.

Bottom-liners and left-to-righters are particularly good at solving problems that require established routines. People look to them as natural leaders because they seem to know how to get things done right. Their strength lies in achieving simple, short-term goals. But complex problems are dynamic in that conditions can change without warning and for no apparent reason. Rigid adherence to a long-term goal, however noble it might be, can lead to dumb mistakes.

Some Assembly Required

Pattern detection is the forte of "central shapers." If we could project an image of their minds at work, they would look like Swiss watches — complex, interactive mechanisms that are a delight in accuracy and detail. As with bottom-liners, central shapers can clearly visualize a desired result. They are less interested in the result, however, than they are in finding an elegant means of achieving it. Even after the problem's been solved, they will go back over the details, looking for a better way to solve it the next time. Their obsession with crossing all the T's and dotting all the I's is the way central shapers try to do things right next time.

As the name implies, "direction changers" do not adhere to a specific goal as strongly as bottom-liners and left-to-righters. As with central shapers, direction changers quickly can perceive patterns of behavior, but they do so on a subconscious level. They have an almost eerie ability to predict cultural changes or read the boss' mood. Their underdeveloped visual skills prevent them from acting on

their intuitions in a timely manner. Consequently, most of their efforts involve doing things right by not fully committing to anything at all.

Central shapers and direction changers are particularly good at defining problems — they are the “know-how” people in an organization. They can sense what is relevant and how the pieces work together, but they tend to get bogged down in details and lose sight of the goal. Because they recognize complex problems almost immediately, they might feel overwhelmed and their self-esteem threatened. They seek relief by focusing their efforts on minor issues they can control. But keeping busy without a specific goal in mind can lead to dumb mistakes.

Chaos Theory in Practice

Unlike central shapers, “random connectors” don't have to fill in all the missing pieces before arriving at a conclusion. They are result-oriented, provided the result is maintaining the status quo. They have more of a feel for how the pieces fit together than a conscious visual image. Masters at networking, they think they've done things right if they have the “right people” on their team.

As with random connectors, “disconnectors” have difficulty visualizing future possibilities. They might be highly knowledgeable on a specific subject — their minds are virtual data banks of information, just waiting to be tapped. But they cannot translate their knowledge into doable actions. Consequently, for disconnectors doing things right means keeping everything in its preordained place.

Random connectors and disconnectors are particularly good at explaining how things are. They'll say what other people want to hear and think that's where their responsibility ends. They easily can overlook missing pieces because they have a feel for the operation as a whole. But in a complex system, small changes can have major consequences, and ignoring a missing piece can lead to dumb mistakes.

In the Beginning...

“Outliners” have a knack for “flashbulb” thinking. Their minds work like cameras, snapping the big picture and capturing the moment, and they recognize opportunities when they see them. But by not having time to focus, the images are often blurred. Their visualizations and their verbal explanations frequently lack detail. They make up for their shortcomings, however, with great enthusiasm. Doing things right, for outliners, means getting everyone on board the bandwagon.

“Creators” are also “of the moment” people — nothing excites them more than a new opportunity. They are innovators capable of quickly sketching out the next big thing. Just don't ask them to get into the details or how they expect to get from here to there. For creators, doing things right means coming up with something new to do.

Outlines and creators are particularly good at ad hoc thinking. They have an intuitive sense of what might work at this particular time. But they are always fuzzy on specific details and the rationale for doing something. Provide them with too much information, and they'll go off on tangents that, in their minds, keep getting bigger and better. When dealing with complex problems, ignoring the goal or seeking new targets can lead to dumb mistakes.

Making the Most of Our Brains

Most personality theories offer no advice on how to change inappropriate behavior other than by being aware that we have such tendencies. A behavior is inappropriate only if it fails to get the result we want.

Recent studies exploring how our brains actually work demonstrate that they have a previously unexpected capacity for restructuring — the outer layer, the cerebral cortex, can be altered through intentional experience. This is good news because it means we're not doomed to making dumb mistakes when we're confronted with complex problems. By learning to organize information in different ways, we can do the right things at the right time and produce the results we really want.

The progressively structured visual puzzles are particularly effective at encouraging mental agility because they:

- Force high-functioning individuals to slow down their thinking.
- Focus the individual's attention on the process of thinking.
- Provide many opportunities for the acquisition and rehearsal of new thinking skills.
- Are culture-free and don't require any special knowledge.
- Encourage risk-free exploration, generating alternatives, thinking outside the box.
- Provide the foundation for higher-order thinking.

Donalee Markus holds a doctorate in administrative and management sciences, as well as a master's degree in curriculum development. She is the founder of Designs for Strong Minds, a consulting firm that provides neuro-cognitive approaches to training. Lindsey Paige Markus, J.D., holds a master's degree in international finance and economics. They can be reached at dmarkus@clomedia.com.

copyright 2002 - CLOmedia.com / Chief Learning Officer Magazine - MediaTec Publishing

Chief Learning Officer Magazine
<http://www.clomedia.com/>