Review of 'The Stupidity Paradox' by Mats Alvesson & Andre Spicer

Vaughan S Roberts
The Stupidity Paradox: The Power and Pitfalls of Functional Stupidity at Work by Mats Alvesson & André Spicer


Reviewed by Vaughan S Roberts

This volume had its genesis in a conversation between the two authors about a student who had done an internship with a powerful government department. She had to write a report which would set out a new policy area for government and was working largely on her own, supervised by a manager in his twenties. She asked him what was most important for a good report and he replied one or two impressive PowerPoint slides. The authors thought it was really stupid that something which would affect millions of people would be based on a couple of slides produced by an intern. As they reflected on this story they realised this was not a one-off case of stupidity but, from their vast experience of organizations, this was a widespread and largely unexamined phenomenon.

In particular, Alvesson and Spicer are concerned about what they call ‘functional stupidity’ at work, which is ‘the inclination to reduce one’s scope of thinking and focus only on the narrow technical aspects of the job. You do the job correctly, but without reflecting on purpose or the wider context’ (pp 8-9). This can come from within individuals or from the organization – either way employees are concerned about creating the right impression: ‘Someone in the thrall of functional stupidity is great at doing things that look good. They tick boxes for management, please the clients and placate the authorities’ (p 9) but those impressions make little sense to an outside observer.

However, the authors point out that what they identify as functional stupidity is not all bad, and here we encounter the ‘paradox of stupidity’. There are benefits to not asking hard and difficult questions since it helps individuals to manage their doubts, be happy, feel comfortable with ambiguity, get along with colleagues and superiors, even be more productive. Within organizations as well there can be advantages as it can reduce workplace conflict and friction whilst increasing harmony and efficiency. So how do we live within this paradox and make judgments about when functional stupidity and not asking searching questions is doing more harm than good?

To help answer this question Alvesson and Spicer identify five kinds of functional stupidity: (1) Leadership-Induced Stupidity, (2) Structure-Induced Stupidity, (3) Imitation-Induced Stupidity, (4) Branding-Induced Stupidity, and (5) Culture-Induced Stupidity. They examine these in detail over five chapters, which form the core of the book. Once again these components of organizational life are not bad in themselves. Leaders, structure, following the crowd, a strong image and organizational rituals are not unhealthy per se but they can lead to the closing down of critical questions and further reflection.

The final chapter examines how to manage and counter functional stupidity in the workplace, and begins by restating the stupidity paradox which presents managers and leaders with a trade-off: ‘Do they want more stupidity and functionality, or do they want more smartness and less functionality?’ (p 213) For Alvesson and Spicer the key to balancing this out is a virtue defined by the poet John Keats: negative capability. This is the ability to be in ‘uncertainties, mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact and reason’ (p 223). They see living critically with uncertainty as essential to any thriving organization and identify three skills for anyone seeking to do this. They need to provide: a) sharp observations, b) good interpretations,
and c) critical questions. In addition they provide some helpful strategies for dispelling stupidity but warn: 'Doing anti-stupidity management is not easy or uncontroversial. Often it can be dangerous and even career-limiting' (p 234).

I found this a stimulating and thought-provoking volume with some valuable insights into how organizations face the challenge of balancing stability and change. Of course, stupidity is a deliberately loaded term and it may not be the most helpful one here, but The Paradox of Ritual or The Paradox of Habit would not have the same eye-catching quality as alternative titles. At one level this is an examination of how the process identified in Ritzer’s thesis about the McDonaldisation of society has continued to multiply over the past twenty-five years. It is important to be reminded that challenge has not disappeared and the authors have several useful suggestions on how to resist this process (pp 229-40).

Religion and religious organizations do not play a significant role in the book itself, but certain ideas and vocabulary from the religious world do find their way into the text. At one point religious dogmatism seems to be equated with stupidity (p 40); the church can provide a counterpoint to occupational stupidity (p 79); the contemporary devotion to leadership has a religious quality to it (p 111); people exhibit faith in an organization’s myths (p 139); organizations have ceremonies (p 161) and brands are sacred (p 177); the process of de-stupidification will require the dropping of certain myths (p 222). In addition, we know from the work of writers like John Drane and Graeme Fancourt that the Church is by no means exempt from the pressures of McDonaldisation and branding. This volume renews the challenge to churches that they need to be open to what Alvesson and Spicer call ‘the paradox of stupidity’ and be ready to continuously question their own habits of organizational behaviour.

Vaughan S. Roberts is Team Rector of Warwick, and a contributor to M. Izak, L. Hitchin & D. Anderson (eds) Untold Stories in Organizations (Guilford Press) and J. Nelson (ed.) How to Become a Creative Church Leader (Canterbury Press).

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