

How to avoid making stupid mistakes

By
John Graham

Most mistakes are just plain stupid. “I just wasn’t thinking,” we say. Stupid mistakes aren’t intentional. But the genie is out of the bottle. The damage is done.

Sure, we can try to “minimize the damage” by claiming “we’re only human” and dismiss it with “everybody makes mistakes.” Not today. As the news makes clear, there’s no place to hide. Everything is transparent. Both individuals and businesses suffer from the harm caused by stupid mistakes.

So, what do we do about it? Hope for the best? Ride it out? Or, pretend it wasn’t that important? Here’s how to avoid making stupid (and possibly harmful) mistakes:

1. Stop looking in the mirror

Maybe the troublesome attitude started with the company’s founder. It would not be surprising that someone with King as their first name might have an ego problem. And if you were King C. Gillette of the famed Gillette Company, it might rub off on the entire operation. For nearly a century, others in the shaving blade business tried to topple Gillette from its throne. It didn’t work, which may have caused the company to believe it was indomitable. If so, it was a stupid mistake.

Then, came the disruptors with little money, but with low prices and home delivery. These interlopers, Harry’s and Dollar Shave Club, were largely ignored, until they nicked the king. Finally, Gillette got in the act with a copycat “club” offering reduced prices and home delivery.

Point: If you keep your face glued to the mirror, all you see is yourself—and that spells trouble.

2. Face your limitations

The worst fate that can befall anyone is becoming *functionally obsolete*. It applies to structurally sound and safe bridges with too narrow lane widths and inadequate vertical clearances that fail to meet current traffic demands. When this occurs, a bridge is functionally obsolete. It’s a danger if it isn’t retrofitted or replaced.

It happens to individuals, departments, managers, and organizations, as well. They no longer have the skills, capabilities and knowledge to handle today's demands. They're functionally obsolete and, unintentionally, they make inappropriate decisions, stupid mistakes.

Point: Most of us rely on our past performance as a guide, failing to recognize that it's inadequate, rendering us functionally obsolete and prone to making stupid mistakes.

3. Challenge yourself

During a family discussion of current events, the father answered a question quickly and confidently. A few seconds later, his newly minted son-in-law spoke up (politely) with a different answer from his iPhone, shocking the older man because what he thought he knew was wrong.

This is what two researchers call "the illusion of explanatory depth," which means that we think we know more than we do, which is not only pervasive, but causes us to draw erroneous conclusions that lead to making stupid mistakes.

We're often irritated by those who seem to question everything, who burst our little bubbles. They slow things down and create confusion. But before being too critical, they may be doing us a favor by nudging us to ask the one question that makes a difference: "How do I know what I think I know?"

Point: Ignorance isn't bliss; it's a severe handicap.

4. Think it through

We all have our own ideas and because they're ours, it's inevitable we become overly invested in them. They're our "children" and should anyone dare to disagree or fail to warm up to them, we almost instinctively get our back up and get ready for a battle. And that's when we get off track. Instead of solving problems, we persist in pursuing ill-conceived solutions—and make stupid and unnecessary mistakes.

This is why thinking it through is so critical. In his book, *How to Think*, Alan Jacobs says thinking is "not the decision itself but what goes into the decision, the consideration, the assessment. It's testing your own responses and weighing the available evidence."

Then Jacobs adds, "It's grasping, as best you can and with all available and relevant senses, what *is*, and it's also speculating, as carefully and responsibly as you can, about what might *be*."

Point: In other words, thinking something through means considering the consequences.

5. Make it personal

Sales spiels, elevator speeches, presentations, and other messaging often cause unexpected problems. Even though their objective is to help us perform more effectively, they can do just the opposite.

For example, even the most carefully prepared and “polished” presentations can fall short of its goal. While we may think we “aced it,” those listening may think differently. It even happens with presenters on the premier storytelling venue, *The Moth*. Some are more gripping than others.

Here’s the problem: By putting so much energy into getting the words, tone, gestures and everything else right, we get all wrapped up with what we want to get across. When this happens, we unintentionally build a barrier that separates us from our listeners, readers or customers.

In his book, *To Sell is Human*, tells what an Israeli radiologist did to overcome the impersonal nature of his job. He imagined that every scan he looked at was that of his father. “You can borrow from this insight with this simple technique for moving others,” writes Pink. “In every encounter, imagine that the person you’re dealing with is your grandmother.” He calls it the ultimate way to make sure you’re making it personal.

Point: Unless we make it personal, it can end up as a stupid mistake.

All of us make enough mistakes without carrying the extra burden of downright stupid ones that get us in unnecessary trouble. We’re far better off if we know the triggers so we can avoid making stupid mistakes.

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