

Insights on Ignorance

A conversation with Professor Mats Alvesson featured in the October 2020 issue of the Brainovation® newsletter.

Anders Hemre: Mats, thank you for taking the time to share your insights. A couple of years ago you co-authored *The Stupidity Paradox* in which you and André Spicer share your observations of organizations and their sometimes perplexing ways of behavior. Could you briefly describe the concept you refer to as “functional stupidity”?



Mats Alvesson: It refers to thinking quite narrowly, within clear boundaries and based on taken-for-granted assumptions. It means box thinking, where the box can be prescribed by bureaucracy, various policies and regulations, the management, the current fashion, what others say and do and so on, without much critical reflection. Functional stupidity means you do things ‘correctly’ and smoothly, but not necessary what is meaningful and lead to good outcomes.

AH: You have obviously done deeper and broader studies of behaviors, which many have casually observed in their own organizations. Does functional stupidity then exist independently or is it in some ways related to other well-known occurrences in organizations such as e.g. incompetence or Herbert Simon’s bounded rationality?

MA: Well, there is some overlap with other concepts such as bounded rationality and willful ignorance. But bounded rationality is a more rational response to cognitive limits and time constraints. Functional stupidity is more about adaption to others, to social norms, to what is comfortable and to lack of critical reflection.

AH: Good to clarify that. So if a certain level of stupidity is really part of natural human behavior and even to some extent useful in organizations, what can or should you then do – if anything – to make sure it doesn’t go too far and becomes harmful to the business?

MA: Actually, you can work with anti-stupidity management: institutionalize reflective sessions, create an anti-stupidity management task force, make surveys about counter-productive systems and practices, appoint, on a rotating basis, a devil’s advocate etc. See the last chapter of *The Stupidity Paradox* for many suggestions.

AH: Great, I’ll include a link to [Amazon](#). Now, due to its general nature, is it reasonable to assume that functional stupidity exists not only in businesses, but in most organizations, institutions, political parties and even societies at large?

MA: Yes, it certainly does. It is even more central in many public sector organizations, politics, mass media etc. Within business, large companies often demonstrate more functional stupidity than small ones.

AH: Oh, I'm sure there's plenty of evidence around. On another topic, in recent years Artificial Intelligence has come of age and many applications have been introduced in a variety of areas. Have you done any research on AI or AI ethics and organizational behavior and how do you think artificial intelligence and functional stupidity will coexist e.g. in decision making?

MA: This is not my specialty, but technical solutions may make people stop thinking and rely too much on technology. The general belief in and hope that AI will create so many positive and great things, may be one-sided, uncritical and thus in itself sometimes be an example of functional stupidity.

AH: That's certainly something to be mindful of. Finally, what are your current research interests and projects?

MA: We are doing many in-depth studies of organizations and how irrational arrangements and beliefs dominate. We for example study leadership at close range, where many have rather naïve beliefs, unrealistic hopes and limited deeper understanding of the complexities and tendencies that leader action and follower responses are not aligned. A problem is that while many aspire to be leaders, many are not that interested in being followers. Leadership is sometimes more an ego-boosting fantasy than a specific practice.

AH: That's an interesting conclusion. Mats, thank you for sharing your thoughts.

MA: You're welcome. And thank you for having me.

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