



## **Anti-Stupid Pill for Leaders**

**by Robert Whipple: MBA, CPLP**

One of my leadership students laments that some of the decisions the leaders in his organization make relative to policies and size of workforce are just plain stupid. These decisions reflect a misunderstanding of their impact, so the leaders end up doing things that are at cross purposes to their true desires.

I told the student to buy some "anti-stupid" pills for the leaders to take, which will let them know when they do things that take them in the wrong direction. Then I realized that I already had discovered the "anti-stupid" pill several years ago and have taught leaders how to administer this magic potion for quite a while.

Leaders need a way to determine the impact of their decisions on the organization at the time of making those decisions. This knowledge will reduce the number of wrong-headed actions. Picture a leader of 84 individuals. There are exactly 84 people who are capable of telling her the truth about the impact of poor decisions before she makes them. They would gladly do this if the leader had established an environment where it is safe to challenge an idea generated in the mind of the leader. How would a leader go about creating such an environment?

If a leader makes people glad when they tell her things she was really not eager to hear, those people will eventually learn it is safe to do it. They have the freedom to level with the leader when she is contemplating something really dumb. It does not mean that all dumb things the leader wants to do need to be squashed. It simply means that if the leader establishes a safe culture, she will be tipped off in advance that a specific decision might backfire. Sometimes, due to a leader's perspective, what may seem dumb to underlings may, in fact, be the right thing to do. In this case the leader needs to educate the doubting underling on why the decision really does make sense. Here is an eight-step formula that constitutes an anti-stupid pill.

1. As much as possible, let people know in advance the decisions you are contemplating, and state your likely action.

2. Invite dialog, either public or private. People should feel free to express their opinions about the outcomes.
3. Treat people like adults, and listen to them carefully when they express concerns.
4. Factor their thoughts into your final decision process. This does not mean to always reverse your decision, but do consciously consider the input.
5. Make your final decision about the issue and announce it.
6. State that there were several opinions that were considered when making your decision.
7. Thank people for sharing their thoughts in a mature way.
8. Ask for everyone's help to implement your decision whether or not they fully agree with the course of action.

Of course, it is important for people to share their concerns with the leader in a proper way at the proper time. Calling her a jerk in a staff meeting would not qualify as helpful information and would normally be a problem. The leader not only needs to encourage people to speak up but give coaching as to how and when to do it effectively. Often this means encouraging people to give their concern in private and with helpful intent for the organization rather than an effort to embarrass the boss.

The leader will still make some stupid decisions, but they will be fewer, and be made recognizing the risks. Also, realize that history may reveal some decisions thought to be stupid at the time to be actually brilliant. Understanding the risks allows some mitigating actions to remove much of the sting of making risky decisions. The action here is incumbent on the leader. It is critical to have a response pattern that praises and reinforces people when they speak the truth, even if it flies in the face of what the leader wants to do. People then become emboldened and more willing to confront the leader when her judgment seems wrong.

A leader needs to be consistent with this philosophy, although no one can be 100%. That would be impossible. Once in a while, any leader will push back on some unwanted "reality" statements, especially if they are accusatory or given in the wrong forum. Most leaders are capable of making people who challenge them happy about it only a tiny fraction of the time, let's say 5%. If we increase the odds to something like 80%, people will be more comfortable pointing out a potential blooper. That is enough momentum to change the culture.

It is important to recognize that making people glad they brought up a concern does not always mean a leader must acquiesce. All that is required is for the leader to treat the individual as someone with important information, listen to the person carefully, consider the veracity of the input, and honestly take the concern into account in deciding what to do. In many situations, the leader will elect to go ahead with the original action, but she

will now understand the potential ramifications better. By sincerely thanking the person who pointed out the possible pitfall, the leader makes that individual happy she brought it up. Other people will take the risk in the future. That changes everything, and the leader now has an effective "anti-stupid" pill.

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