Why Smart People Defend Bad Ideas

We all know someone who's intelligent, but who, occasionally, defends obviously bad ideas. Why does this happen? How can smart people take up positions that defy any reasonable logic?

by Scott Berkun

Having spent many years working with smart people I've catalogued many of the ways this happens, and I have advice on what to do about it. I feel qualified to write this essay as I'm a recovering smart person myself and I've defended several very bad ideas. So if nothing else this essay serves as a kind of personal therapy session. However, I fully suspect you'll get more than just entertainment value ("Look, Scott is more stupid than we thought!") out of what I have to say on this topic.

SUCCESS AT DEFENDING BAD IDEAS

I'm not proud to admit that I have a degree in Logic and Computation from Carnegie Mellon University. Majoring in logic is not the kind of thing that makes people want to talk to you at parties, or read your essays. But one thing I did learn after years of studying advanced logic theory is that proficiency in argument can easily be used to overpower others, even when you are dead wrong. If you learn a few tricks of logic and debate, you can refute the obvious, and defend the ridiculous. If the people you're arguing with aren't as comfortable in the tactics of argument, or aren't as arrogant as you are, they may even give in and agree with you.

The problem with smart people is that they like to be right and sometimes will defend ideas to the death rather than admit they're wrong. This is bad. Worse, if they got away with it when they were young (say, because they were smarter than their parents, their friends, and their parent's friends) they've probably built an ego around being right, and will therefore defend their perfect record of invented righteousness to the death. Smart people often fall into the trap of preferring to be right even if it's based in delusion, or results in them, or

their loved ones, becoming miserable. (Somewhere in your town there is a row of graves at the cemetery, called smartypants lane, filled with people who were buried at poorly attended funerals, whose headstones say "Well, at least I was right.")

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Until they come face to face with someone who is tenacious enough to dissect their logic, and resilient enough to endure the thinly veiled intellectual abuse they dish out during debate (e.g. "You don't really think that do you?" or "Well if you knew the <insert obscure reference here> rule/law/corollary you wouldn't say such things"), they're never forced to question their ability to defend bad ideas. Opportunities for this are rare: a new boss, a new co-worker, a new spouse. But if their obsessiveness about being right is strong enough, they'll reject those people out of hand before they question their own biases and self-manipulations. It can be easier for smart people who have a habit of defending bad ideas to change jobs, spouses, or cities rather than honestly examine what is at the core of their psyche (and often, their misery).

Short of obtaining a degree in logic, or studying the nuances of debate, remember this one simple rule for defusing those who are skilled at defending bad ideas: Simply because they cannot be proven wrong, does not make them right. Most of the tricks of logic and debate refute questions and attacks, but fail to establish any true justification for a given idea.

For example, just because you can't prove that I'm not the king of France reincarnated doesn't make it so. So when someone tells you "My plan A is the best because no one has explained how it will fail" know that there is a logical gap in this argument. Simply because

no one has described how it will fail, doesn't necessarily make it the best plan. It's possible than plans B, C, D and E all have the same quality, or that the reason no one has described how A will fail is that no one has had more than 30 seconds to scrutinize the plan. As we'll discuss later, diffusing bad thinking requires someone (probably you) to construct a healthier framework around the bad thinking that shows it for what it is.

DEATH BY HOMOGENY

The second stop on our tour of commonly defended bad ideas is the seemingly friendly notion of communal thinking. Just because everyone in the room is smart doesn't mean that collectively they will arrive at smart ideas. The power of peer pressure is that it works on our psychology, not our intellect. As social animals we are heavily influenced by how the people around us behave, and the quality of our own internal decision making varies widely depend-ing on the environment we currently are in. (e.g. Try to write a haiku poem while standing in an elevator with 15 opera singers screaming 15 different operas, in 15 different languages, in falsetto, directly at you vs. sitting on a bench in a quiet stretch of open woods).

That said, the more homogeneous a group of people are in their thinking, the narrower the range of ideas that the group will openly consider. The more open minded, creative, and courageous a group is, the wider the pool of ideas they'll be capable of exploring.

Some teams of people look to focus groups, consultancies, and research methods to bring in outside ideas, but this rarely improves the quality of thinking in the group itself. Those outside ideas, however bold or original, are at the mercy of the diversity of thought within the group itself. If the group, as a collective, is only capable of approving B level work, it doesn't matter how many A level ideas you bring to it. Focus groups or other outside sources of information can not give a team, or its leaders, a soul. A bland homogeneous team of people has no real

opinions, because it consists of people with same backgrounds, outlooks, and experiences who will only feel comfortable discussing the safe ideas that fit into those constraints.

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If you want your smart people to be as smart as possible, seek a diversity of ideas. Find people with different experiences, opinions, backgrounds, weights, heights, races, facial hair styles, colors, past–times, favorite items of clothing, philosophies, and beliefs. Unify them around the results you want, not the means or approaches they are expected to use. It's the only way to guarantee that the best ideas from your smartest people will be received openly by the people around them. On your own, avoid homogenous books, films, music, food, sex, media and people. Actually experience life by going to places you don't usually go, spending time with people you don't usually spend time with. Be in the moment and be open to it. Until recently in human history, life was much less predictable and we were forced to encounter things not always of our own choosing. We are capable of more interesting and creative lives than our modern cultures often provide for us. If you go out of your way to find diverse ex–periences it will become impossible for you to miss ideas simply because your homogenous outlook filtered them out.

THINKING AT THE WRONG LEVEL

At any moment on any project there are an infinite number of levels of problem solving. Part of being a truly smart person is to know which level is the right one at a given time. For example, if you are skidding out of control at 95mph in your broken down Winnebago on

an ice covered interstate, when a semi-truck filled with both poorly packaged fireworks and loosely bundled spark plugs slams on its brakes, it's not the right time to discuss with your passengers where y'all would like to stop for dinner. But as ridiculous as this scenario sounds, it happens all the time. People worry about the wrong thing at the wrong time and apply their intelligence in ways that doesn't serve the greater good of whatever they're trying to achieve. Some call this difference in skill wisdom, in that the wise know what to be thinking about, where as the merely intelligent only know how to think. (The de-emphasis of wisdom is an east vs. west dichotomy: eastern philosophy heavily emphasizes deeper wisdom, where as the post enlightenment west, and perhaps particularly America, heavily emphasizes the intellectual flourishes of intelligence).

In the software industry, the common example of thinking at the wrong level is a team of rock star programmers who can make anything, but don't really know what to make: so they tend to build whatever things come to mind, never stopping to find someone who might not be adept at writing code, but can see where the value of their programming skills would be best applied. Other examples include people that always worry about money despite how much they have, people who struggle with relationships but invest their energy only in improving their appearance (instead of in therapy or other emotional exploration), or anyone that wants to solve problem X but only ever seems to do things that solve problem Y.

The primary point is that no amount of intelligence can help an individual who is diligently working at the wrong level of the problem. Someone with wisdom has to tap them on the shoulder and say, "Um, hey. The hole you're digging is very nice, and it is the right size. But you're in the wrong yard."

KILLED IN THE LONG TERM BY SHORT TERM THINKING

From what we know of evolution it's clear that we are alive because of our inherited ability to think quickly and respond to change. The survival of living creatures, for most of the history of our planet, has been a short term game. Only if you can out–run your predators, and catch your prey, do you have the luxury of worrying about tomorrow.

It follows then that we tend to be better at worrying about and solving short term issues than long term issues. Even when we recognize an important long term issue that we need to plan for, say protecting natural resources or saving for retirement, we're all too easily distracted away from those deep thoughts by immediate things like dinner or sex (important things no doubt, but the driving needs in these pursuits, at least for this half of the species, are short term in nature). Once distracted, we rarely return to the long term issues we were drawn away from.

A common justification for abuse of short term thinking is the fake perspective defense. The wise, but less confident guy says "hey — are you sure we should be doing this." And the smart, confident, but less wise guy says "of course. We did this last time, and the time before that, so why shouldn't we do this again?". This is the fake perspective defense because there's no reason to believe that 2 points of data (e.g. last time plus the time before that) is sufficient to make claims about the future. People say similar things all the time in defense of the free market economy, democracy, and mating strategies. "Well, it's gotten us this far, and it's the best system we have". Well, maybe. But if you were in that broken down Winnebago up to your ankles in gasoline from a leaking tank, smoking a cigarette in each hand, you could say the same thing.

Put simply, the fact that you're not dead yet doesn't mean that the things you've done up until now shouldn't have, by all that is fair in the universe, already killed you. You might just

need a few more data points for the law of averages to catch up, and put a permanent end to your short term thinking.

How many data points you need to feel comfortable continuing a behavior is entirely a matter of personal philosophy. The wise and skeptical know that even an infinite number of data points in the past may only have limited bearing on the future. The tricky thing about the future is that it's different than the past. Our data from the past, no matter how big a pile of data it is, may very well be entirely irrelevant. Some find this lack of predictive ability of the future quite frustrating, while others see it as the primary reason to stick around for a few more years.

Anyway, my point is not that Winnebagos or free market economies are bad. Instead I'm saying that short term bits of data are neither reliable nor a wise way to go about making important long term decisions. Intelligent people do this all the time, and since it's so commonly accepted as a rule of thumb (last time + the time before that), it's often accepted in place of actual thinking. Always remember that humans, given our evolution, are very bad at seeing the cumulative effects of behavior, and underestimate how things like compound interest or that one cigarette a day, can in the long term, have surprisingly large impacts despite clearly low short term effects.

HOW TO PREVENT SMART PEOPLE FROM DEFENDING BAD IDEAS

I spent my freshman year at a small college in NJ called Drew University. I had a fun time, ingested many tasty alcoholic beverages, and went to lots of great parties (the result of which of course was that I basically failed out and had to move back to Queens with my parents. You see, the truth is that this essay is really a public service announcement paid for by my parents – I was a smart person that did some stupid things). But the reason I mention all this

is because I learned a great bit of philosophy from many hours of playing pool in the college student center. The lesson is this: "Speed kills". I was never very good at pool, but this one guy there was, and whenever we'd play, he'd watch me miss easy shots because I tried to force them in with authority. I chose speed and power over control, and I usually lost. So like pool, when it comes to defusing smart people who are defending bad ideas, you have to find ways to slow things down.

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The reason for this is simple. Smart people, or at least those whose brains have good first gears, use their speed in thought to overpower others. They'll jump between assumptions quickly, throwing out jargon, bits of logic, or rules of thumb at a rate of fire fast enough to cause most people to become rattled, and give in. When that doesn't work, the arrogant or the pompous will throw in some belittlement and use whatever snide or manipulative tactics they have at their disposal to further discourage you from dissecting their ideas.

So your best defense starts by breaking an argument down into pieces. When they say "it's obvious we need to execute plan A now." You say, "hold on. You're way ahead of me. For me to follow I need to break this down into pieces." And without waiting for permission, you should go ahead and do so.

First, nothing is obvious. If it were obvious there would be no need to say so. So your first piece is to establish what isn't so obvious. What are the assumptions the other guy is gloss–ing over that are worth spending time on? There may be 3 or 4 different valid assumptions

that need to be discussed one at a time before any kind of decision can be considered. Take each one in turn, and lay out the basic questions: what problem are we trying to solve? What alternatives to solving it are there? What are the tradeoffs in each alternative? By breaking it down and asking questions you expose more thinking to light, make it possible for others to ask questions, and make it more difficult for anyone to defend a bad idea.

No one can ever take away your right to think things over, especially if the decision at hand is important. If your mind works best in 3rd or 4th gear, find ways to give yourself the time needed to get there. If when you say "I need the afternoon to think this over", they say "tough. We're deciding now". Ask them if the decision is an important one. If they say yes, then you should be completely justified in asking for more time to think it over and ask questions.

FIND A SANE PERSON PEOPLE LISTEN TO

Some situations require outside help. Instead of taking a person on directly, get a third party that you both respect, and continue the discussion in their presence. This can be a superior, or simply someone smart enough that the other person might possibly concede points to them.

It follows that if your team manager is wise and reasonable, smart people who might or–dinarily defend bad ideas will have a hard time doing so. But sadly if your team manager is neither wise nor reasonable, smart, arrogant people may convince others to follow their misguided ways more often than not.

AND YET MORE REASONS

I'm sure you have stories of your own follies dealing with smart people defending bad ideas, or where you, yourself, as a smart person, have spent time arguing for things you regretted

later. Given the wondrous multitude of ways the universe has granted humans to be smart and dumb at the same time, there are many more reasons why smart people behave in stupid ways. For fun, and as fodder for the forums, here's a few more.

If you have some thoughts on this essay, or some more reasons to add, please head on over to the forums I have sent up.

→ Smart people can follow stupid leaders (seeking praise or promotion)

→ Smart people may follow their anger into stupid places

→ They may be trained or educated into stupidity

→ Smart people can inherit bad ideas from their parents under the guise of tradition

→ They may simply want something to be true, that can never be

You can also download a free chapter of my new book, The Art of Project Management. The chapter is called How To Figure Out What To Do [pdf].

REFERENCES

→ Difficult conversations, a book about confronting people in tough situations.

→ The argument clinic, Monty Python (If you've never seen it, watch it before reading this script. It's in the 3rd season, disc 9 of the boxed set). Also see the splunge scene in episode 6.

→ Games people play, Eric Byrne. A book on transactional analyis: a model for why people behave as they do in certain situations.

→ The informed argument, Robert Miller. Textbook style coverage of both proper and unfair argument tactics.

→ With good reason, Morris Engel. a short summary of common logic manipulations, explained with a sense of humor (over a dozen cartoons).

→ Why smart people can be so stupid, Salon.com

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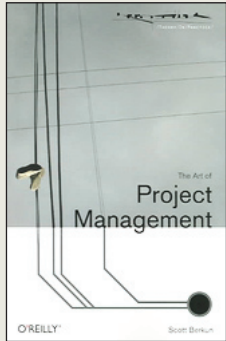
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