

Willingness to look stupid

People frequently¹ think that I'm very stupid. I don't find this surprising, since I don't mind if other people think I'm stupid, which means that I don't adjust my behavior to avoid seeming stupid, which results in people thinking that I'm stupid. Although there are some downsides to people thinking that I'm stupid, e.g., failing interviews where the interviewer very clearly thought I was stupid, I think that, overall, the upsides of being willing to look stupid have greatly outweighed the downsides.

I don't know why this one example sticks in my head but, for me, the most memorable example of other people thinking that I'm stupid was from college. I've had numerous instances where more people thought I was stupid and also where people thought the depths of my stupidity was greater, but this one was really memorable for me.

Back in college, there was one group of folks that, for whatever reason, stood out to me as people who really didn't understand the class material. When they talked, they said things that didn't make any sense, they were struggling in the classes and barely passing, etc. I don't remember any direct interactions but, one day, a friend of mine who also knew them remarked to me, "did you know [that group] thinks you're really dumb?". I found that interesting and asked why. It turned out the reason was that I asked really stupid sounding questions.

In particular, it's often the case that there's a seemingly obvious but actually incorrect reason something is true, a slightly less obvious reason the thing seems untrue, and then a subtle and complex reason that the thing is actually true². I would regularly figure out that the seemingly obvious reason was wrong and then ask a question to try to understand the subtler reason, which sounded stupid to someone who thought the seemingly obvious reason was correct or thought that the refutation to the obvious but incorrect reason meant that the thing was untrue.

The benefit from asking a stupid sounding question is small in most particular instances, but the compounding benefit over time is quite large and I've observed that people who are willing to ask dumb questions and think "stupid thoughts" end up understanding things much more deeply over time. Conversely, when I look at people who have a very deep understanding of topics, many of them frequently ask naive sounding questions and continue to apply one of the techniques that got them a deep understanding in the first place.

I think I first became sure of something that I think of as a symptom of the underlying phenomenon via playing competitive video games when I was in high school. There were few enough people playing video games online back then that you'd basically recognize everyone who played the same game and could see how much everyone improved over time. Just like I saw when I tried out video games again a couple years ago, most people would blame external factors (lag, luck, a glitch, teammates, unfairness, etc.) when they "died" in the game. The most striking thing about that was that people who did that almost never became good and never became great. I got pretty good at the game³ and my "one weird trick" was to think about what went wrong every time something went wrong and then try to improve. But most people seemed more interested in making an excuse to avoid looking stupid (or maybe feeling stupid) in the moment than actually improving, which, of course, resulted in them having many more moments where they looked stupid in the game.

In general, I've found willingness to look stupid to be very effective. Here are some more examples:

- Going into an Apple store and asking for (and buying) the computer that comes in the smallest box, which I had a good reason to want at the time
 - The person who helped me, despite being very polite, also clearly thought I was a bozo and kept explaining things like "the size of the box and the size of the computer aren't the same". Of course I knew that, but I didn't want to say something like "I design CPUs. I understand the difference between the size of the box the computer comes and in the size of the computer and I know it's very unusual to care about the size of the box, but I really want the one that comes in the smallest box". Just saying the last bit without establishing any kind of authority didn't convince the person
 - I eventually asked them to humor me and just bring out the boxes for the various laptop models so I could see the boxes, which they did, despite clearly thinking that my decision making process made no sense (I also tried explaining why I wanted the smallest box but that didn't work)
- Covid: I took this seriously relatively early on and bought a half mask respirator on 2020-01-26 and was using N95s I'd already had on hand for the week before (IMO, the case that covid was airborne and that air filtration would help was very strong based on the existing literature on SARS contact tracing, filtration of viruses from air filters, and viral load)
 - It wasn't until many months later that people didn't generally look at me like I was an idiot, and even as late 2020-08, I would sometimes run into people who would verbally make fun of me
 - On the flip side, the person I was living with at the time didn't want to wear the mask I got her since she found it too embarrassing to wear a mask when no one else was and became one of the early bay area covid cases, which gave her a case of long covid that floored her for months
 - A semi-related one is that, when Canada started doing vaccines, I wanted to get Moderna even though the general consensus online and in my social circles was that Pfizer was preferred
 - One reason for this was it wasn't clear if the government was going to allow mixing vaccines and the delivery schedule implied that there would be a very large shortage of Pfizer for 2nd doses as well as a

large supply of Moderna

- Another thought that had crossed my mind was that Moderna is basically "more stuff" than Pfizer and might convey better immunity in some cases, in the same way that some populations get high-dose flu shots to get better immunity

- Work: I generally don't worry about proposals or actions looking stupid

- I can still remember the first time I explicitly ran into this. This was very early on my career, when I was working on chip verification. Shortly before tape-out, the head of verification wanted to use our compute resources to re-run a set of tests that had virtually no chance of finding any bugs (they'd been run thousands of times before) instead of running the usual mix of tests, which would include a lot of new generated tests that had a much better chance of finding a bug (this was both logically and empirically true). I argued that we should run the tests that reduced the odds of shipping with a show stopping bug (which would cost us millions of dollars and delay shipping by three months), but the head of the group said that we would look stupid and incompetent if there was a bug that could've been caught by one of our old "golden" tests that snuck in since the last time we'd run those tests
 - At the time, I was shocked that somebody would deliberately do the wrong thing in order to reduce the odds of potentially looking stupid (and, really, only looking stupid to people who wouldn't understand the logic of running the best available mix of tests; since there weren't non-technical people anywhere in the management chain, anyone competent should understand the reasoning) but now that I've worked at various companies in multiple industries, I see that most people would choose to do the wrong thing to avoid potentially looking stupid to people who are incompetent. I see the logic, but I think that it's self-sabotaging to behave that way and that the gains to my career for standing up for what I believe are the right thing have been so large that, even if the next ten times I do so, I get unlucky and it doesn't work out, that still won't erase the gains I've made from having done the right thing many times in the past

- Air filtration: I did a bit of looking into the impact of air quality on health and bought air filters for my apartment in 2012

- Friends have been chiding about this for years and strangers, dates, and acquaintances, will sometimes tell me, with varying levels of bluntness, that I'm being paranoid and stupid
- I added more air filtration capacity when I moved to a wildfire risk area [after looking into wildfire risk](#) which increased the rate and bluntness of people telling me that I'm weird for having air filters
 - I've been basically totally unimpacted by wildfire despite living through a fairly severe wildfire season twice
 - Other folks I know experienced some degree of discomfort, with a couple people developing persistent issues after the smoke exposure (in one case, persistent asthma, which they didn't have before or at least hadn't noticed before)

- Learning things that are hard for me: this is a "feeling stupid" thing and not a "looking stupid" thing, but when I struggle with something, I feel really dumb, as in, I have a feeling/emotion that I would verbally describe as "feeling dumb"

- When I was pretty young, I think before I was a teenager, I noticed that this happened when I learned things that were hard for me and tried to think of this feeling as "the feeling of learning something" instead of "feeling dumb", which half worked (I now associate that feeling with the former as well as the latter)

- Asking questions: covered above, but I frequently ask questions when there's something I don't understand or know, from basic stuff, "what does [some word] mean?" to more subtle stuff.

- On the flip side, one of the most common failure modes I see with junior engineers is when someone will be too afraid to look stupid to ask questions and then learn very slowly as a result; in some cases, this is so severe it results in them being put on a PIP and then getting fired

- I'm sure there are other reasons this can happen, like not wanting to bother people, but in the cases where I've been close enough to the situation to ask, it was always embarrassment and fear of looking stupid

- I try to be careful to avoid this failure mode when onboarding interns and junior folks and have generally been successful, but it's taken me up to six weeks to convince people that it's ok for them to ask questions and, until that happens, I have to constantly ask them how things are going to make sure they're not stuck. That works fine if someone is my intern, but I can observe that many intern and new hire mentors do not do this and that often results in a bad outcome for all parties

- In almost every case, the person had at least interned at other companies, but they hadn't learned that it was ok to ask questions. P.S. if you're a junior engineer at a place where it's not ok to ask questions, you should look for another job if circumstances permit

- Not making excuses for failures: covered above for video games, but applies a lot more generally

- When learning, deliberately playing around in the area between success and failure (this applies to things like video games and sports as well as abstract intellectual pursuits)

- An example would be, when learning to climb, repeatedly trying the same easy move over and over again in various ways to understand what works better and what works worse. I've had strangers make fun of me and literally point at me and make snide comments to their friends while I'm doing things like this
- When learning to drive, I wanted to set up some cones and drive so that I barely hit them, to understand where the edge of the car is. My father thought this idea was very stupid and I should just not hit things like curbs or cones

- Car insurance: the last time I bought car insurance, I had to confirm three times that I only wanted coverage for damage I do to others with no coverage for damage to my own vehicle if I'm at fault. The insurance agent was unable to refrain from looking at me like I'm an idiot and was more incredulous each time they asked if I was really sure
- The styling and content on this website: I regularly get design folks and typographers telling me how stupid the design is, frequently in ways that become condescending very quickly if I engage with them
 - But, when I tested out switching to the current design from the generally highly lauded Octopress design, this one got much better engagement when a user landed on the site and also appeared to get passed around a lot more as well
 - When I've compared my traffic numbers to major corporate blogs, my blog completely dominates most < \$100B companies (e.g., it gets an order of magnitude more traffic than my employer's blog and my employer is a \$50B company)
 - When I started my blog (and this is still true today), writing advice for programming blogs was to keep it short, maybe 500 to 1000 words. Most of my blog posts are 5000 to 10000 words
- Taking my current job, which almost everyone thought was a stupid idea
 - Closely related: quitting my job at Centaur to attend RC and then eventually changing fields into software (I don't think this would be considered as stupid now, but it was thought to be a very stupid thing to do in 2013)
- Learning a sport or video game: I try things out to understand what happens when you do them, which often results in other people thinking that I'm a complete idiot when the thing looks stupid, but being willing to look stupid helps me improve relatively quickly
- Medical care: I've found that a lot of doctors are very confident in their opinion and get condescending pretty fast if you disagree
 - And yet, in the most extreme case, I would have died if I listened to my doctor; in the next most extreme case, I would have gone blind
 - When getting blood draws, I explain to people that I'm deceptively difficult to draw from and tell them what's worked in the past
 - About half the time, the nurse or phlebotomist takes my comments seriously, generally resulting in a straightforward and painless or nearly painless blood draw
 - About half the time, the nurse or phlebotomist looks at me like I'm an idiot and makes angry and/or condescending comments towards me; so far, everyone who's done this has failed to draw blood and/or given me a hematoma
 - I've had people tell me that I'm probably stating my preferences an offensive way and that I should be more polite; I've then invited them along with me to observe and no one has ever had a suggestion on how I could state things different to elicit a larger fraction of positive responses; in general, people are shocked and upset when they see how nurses and phlebotomists respond
 - In retrospect, I should probably just get up and leave when someone has the "bad" response, which will probably increase the person's feeling that I'm stupid
 - One issue I have (and not the main one that makes it hard to "get a stick") is that, during a blood draw, the blood will slow down and then usually stop. Some nurses like to wiggle the needle around to see if that starts things up again, which sometimes works (maybe 50/50) and will generally leave me with a giant bruise or a hematoma or both. After this happened a few times, I asked if getting my blood flowing (e.g., by moving around a lot before a blood draw) could make a difference and every nurse or phlebotomist I talked to said that was silly and that it wouldn't make any difference. I tried it anyway and that solved this problem, although I still have the problem of being hard to stick properly
- Interviews: I'm generally not (perhaps not ever?) adversarial in interviews, but I try to say things that I think are true and try to avoid saying things that I think are false and this frequently causes interviews to think that I'm stupid
- Generally trying to improve at things as well as being earnest
 - Even before "tryhard" was an insult, a lot of people in my extended social circles thought that being a tryhard was idiotic and that one shouldn't try and should instead play it cool (this was before I worked as an engineer; as an engineer, I think that effort is more highly respected than among my classmates from school as well as internet folks I knew back when I was in school)
- Generally admitting when I'm bad or untalented at stuff, e.g., mentioning that I struggled to learn to program in this post; an interviewer at Jane Street really dug into what I'd written in that post and tore me a new one for that post (it was the most hostile interview I've ever experienced by a very large margin), which is the kind of thing that sometimes happens when you're earnest and put yourself out there, but I still view the upsides as being greater than the downsides
- Recruiting: I have an unorthodox recruiting pitch which candidly leads with the downsides, often causing people to say that I'm a terrible recruiter (or sarcastically say that I'm a great recruiter); I haven't publicly written up the pitch (yet?) because it's negative enough that I'm concerned that I'd be fired for putting it on the internet
 - I have never failed to close a full-time candidate (I once failed to close an intern candidate) and have brought in a lot of people who never would've considered working for us otherwise. My recruiting pitch sounds comically stupid, but it's much more effective than the standard recruiting spiel most people give
- Posting things on the internet: self explanatory

↳ learn to not be afraid to share yourself & put yourself out there as you grow self

Although most of the examples above are "real life" examples, being willing to look stupid is also highly effective at work. Besides the obvious reason that it allows you to learn faster and become more effective, it also makes it much easier to find high ROI ideas. If you go after trendy or reasonable sounding ideas, to do something really extraordinary, you have to have better ideas/execution than everyone else working on the same problem. But if you're thinking about ideas that most people consider too stupid to consider, you'll often run into ideas that are both very high ROI as well as simple and easy that anyone could've done had they not dismissed the idea out of hand. It may still technically be true that you need to have better execution than anyone else who's trying the same thing, but if no one else trying the same thing, that's easy to do!

I don't actually have to be nearly as smart or work nearly as hard as most people to get good results. If I try to solve some a problem by doing what everyone else is doing and go looking for problems where everyone else is looking, if I want to do something valuable, I'll have to do better than a lot of people, maybe even better than everybody else if the problem is really hard. If the problem is considered trendy, a lot of very smart and hardworking people will be treading the same ground and doing better than that is very difficult. But I have a dumb thought, one that's too stupid sounding for anyone else to try, I don't necessarily have to be particularly smart or talented or hardworking to come up with valuable solutions. Often, the dumb solution is something any idiot could've come up with and the reason the problem hasn't been solved is because no one was willing to think the dumb thought until an idiot like me looked at the problem.

Overall, I view the upsides of being willing to look stupid as much larger than the downsides. When it comes to things that aren't socially judged, like winning a game, understanding something, or being able to build things due to having a good understanding, it's all upside. There can be downside for things that are "about" social judgement, like interviews and dates but, even there, I think a lot of things that might seem like downsides are actually upsides.

For example, if a date thinks I'm stupid because I ask them what a word means, so much so that they show it in their facial expression and/or tone of voice, I think it's pretty unlikely that we're compatible, so I view finding that out sooner rather than later as upside and not downside.

Le reaction + seeming/feeling + vulnerable & weaker

Interviews are the case where I think there's the most downside since, at large companies, the interviewer likely has no connection to the job or your co-workers, so them having a pattern of interaction that I would view as a downside has no direct bearing on the work environment I'd have if I were offered the job and took it. There's probably some correlation but I can probably get much more signal on that elsewhere. But I think that being willing to say things that I know have a good chance of causing people to think I'm stupid is a deeply ingrained enough habit that it's not worth changing just for interviews and I can't think of another context where the cost is nearly as high as it is in interviews. In principle, I could probably change how I filter what I say only in interviews, but I think that would be a very large amount of work and not really worth the cost. An easier thing to do would be to change how I think so that I reflexively avoid thinking and saying "stupid" thoughts, which a lot of folks seem to do, but that seems even more costly.

Appendix: do you try to avoid looking stupid?

On reading a draft of this, Ben Kuhn remarked,

[this post] caused me to realize that I'm actually very bad at this, at least compared to you but perhaps also just bad in general.

I asked myself "why can't Dan just avoid saying things that make him look stupid specifically in interviews," then I started thinking about what the mental processes involved must look like in order for that to be impossible, and realized they must be extremely different from mine. Then tried to think about the last time I did something that made someone think I was stupid and realized I didn't have a readily available example)

One problem I expect this post to have is that most people will read this and decide that they're very willing to look stupid. This reminds me of how most people, when asked, think that they're creative, innovative, and take big risks. I think that feels true since people often operate at the edge of their comfort zone, but there's a difference between feeling like you're taking big risks and taking big risks, e.g., when asked, someone I know who is among the most conservative people I know thinks that they take a lot of big risks and names things like sometimes jaywalking as risk that they take.

This might sound ridiculous, [as ridiculous as saying that I run into hundreds to thousands of software bugs per week](#), but I think I run into someone who thinks that I'm an idiot in a way that's obvious to me around once a week. The car insurance example is from a few days ago, and if I wanted to think of other recent examples, there's a long string of them.

If you don't regularly have people thinking that you're stupid, I think it's likely that at least one of the following is true

- You have extremely filtered interactions with people and basically only interact with people of your choosing and you have filtered out any people who have the reactions describe in this post
 - If you count internet comments, then you do not post things to the internet or do not read internet comments
- You are avoiding looking stupid
- You are not noticing when people think you're stupid

of that is a call-out post

I think the last one of those is unlikely because, while I sometimes have interactions like the school one described, where

the people were too nice to tell me that they think I'm stupid and I only found out via a third party, just as often, the person very clearly wants me to know that they think I'm stupid. The way it happens reminds me of being a pedestrian in NYC, where, when a car tries to cut you off when you have right of way and fails (e.g., when you're crossing a crosswalk and have the walk signal and the driver guns it to try to get in front of you to turn right), the driver will often scream at you and gesture angrily until you acknowledge them and, if you ignore them, will try very hard to get your attention. In the same way that it seems very important to some people who are angry that you know they're angry, many people seem to think it's very important that you know that they think that you're stupid and will keep increasing the intensity of their responses until you acknowledge that they think you're stupid.

One thing that might be worth noting is that I don't go out of my way to sound stupid or otherwise be non-conformist. If anything, it's the opposite. I generally try to conform in areas that aren't important to me when it's easy to conform, e.g., I dressed more casually in the office on the west coast than on the east coast since it's not important to me to convey some particular image based on how I dress and I'd rather spend my "weirdness points" on pushing radical ideas than on dressing unusually. After I changed how I dressed, one of the few people in the office who dressed really sharply in a way that would've been normal in the east coast office jokingly said to me, "so, the west coast got to you, huh?" and a few other people remarked that I looked a lot less stuffy/formal.

Another thing to note is that "avoiding looking stupid" seems to usually go beyond just filtering out comments or actions that might come off as stupid. Most people I talk to (and Ben is an exception here) have a real aversion evaluating stupid thoughts and (I'm guessing) also to having stupid thoughts. When I have an idea that sounds stupid, it's generally (and again, Ben is an exception here) extremely difficult to get someone to really consider the idea. Instead, most people reflexively reject the idea without really engaging with it at all and (I'm guessing) the same thing happens inside their heads when a potentially stupid sounding thought might occur to them. I think the danger here is not having a conscious process that lets you decide to broadcast or not broadcast stupid sounding thoughts (that seems great if it's low overhead), and instead it's having some non-conscious process automatically reject thinking about stupid sounding things.

Of course, stupid-sounding thoughts are frequently wrong, so, if you're not going to rely on social proof to filter out bad ideas, you'll have to hone your intuition or find trusted friends/colleagues who are able to catch your stupid-sounding ideas that are actually stupid. That's beyond the scope of this post. but I'll note that [because almost no one attempts to hone their intuition for this kind of thing, it's very easy to get relatively good at it by just trying to do it at all](#).

Appendix: stories from other people

A disproportionate fraction of people whose work I really respect operate in a similar way to me with respect to looking stupid and also have a lot of stories about looking stupid.

One example from Laurence Tratt is from when he was job searching:

I remember being rejected from a job at my current employer because a senior person who knew me told other people that I was "too stupid". For a long time, I found this bemusing (I thought I must be missing out on some deep insights), but eventually I found it highly amusing, to the point I enjoy playing with it.

Another example: the other day, when I was talking to Gary Bernhardt, he told me a story about a time when he was chatting with someone who specialized in microservices on Kubernetes for startups and Gary said that he thought that most small (by transaction volume) startups could get away with being on a managed platform like Heroku or Google App Engine. The more Gary explained about his opinion, the more sure the person was that Gary was stupid.

Appendix: context

There are a lot of contexts that I'm not exposed to where it may be much more effective to train yourself to avoid looking stupid or incompetent, e.g., [see this story by Ali Partovi about how his honesty led to Paul Graham's company being acquired by Yahoo instead of his own, which eventually led to Paul Graham founding YC and becoming one of the most well-known and influential people in the valley](#). If you're in a context where it's more important to look competent than to be competent then this post doesn't apply to you. Personally, I've tried to avoid such contexts, although they're probably more lucrative than the contexts I operate in.

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1. This happens in a way that I notice something like once a week and it seems like it must happen much more frequently in ways that I don't notice. [\[return\]](#)
 2. A semi-recent example of this from my life is when I wanted to understand why wider tires have better grip. A naive reason one might think this is true is that wider tire = larger contact patch = more friction, and a lot of people seem to believe the naive reason. A reason the naive reason is wrong is because, as long as the tire is inflated semi-reasonably, given a fixed vehicle weight and tire pressure, the total size of the tire's contact patch won't change when tire width is changed. Another naive reason that the original naive reason is wrong is that, at a "spherical

cow" level of detail, the level of grip is unrelated to the contact patch size.

Most people I talked who don't race cars (e.g., autocross, drag racing, etc.) and [the top search results online used the refutation to the naive reason plus an incorrect application of high school physics to incorrectly conclude that varying tire width has no effect on grip](#).

But there is an effect and the reason is subtler than more width = larger contact patch.

[\[return\]](#)

3. I was arguably #1 in the world one season, when I put up a statistically dominant performance and my team won every game I played even though I disproportionately played in games against other top teams (and we weren't undefeated and other top players on the team played in games we lost). [\[return\]](#)

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