



Book What Smart People Do When Dumb Things Happen at Work

Hundreds of Tips for Dealing with All the Blunders, Glitches, Traps, and Setbacks that Sabotage Your Road to Success

Charles E. Watson, Ph.D.
Career Press, 1999

Recommendation

Charles E. Watson, Ph.D., describes a variety of problems that can occur at work and tells you how "smart people" deal with them effectively. By smart, he means "good," his point being that good is smart. He organizes his management-oriented scenarios according to a series of themes that highlight the best policies to adopt, such as sticking to your principles, accurately weighing your options and seeking to do what's right, not what's popular. The book mixes behavioral tips with solutions to problems, emphasizing the need to be trustworthy and responsible and to follow the path of morality and integrity. Sometimes the book seems scattered, since the author distances the solutions from the dilemmas by dropping tips in between them, but the point and purpose survive this wrinkle. Since *BooksInShort.com* - like most of you - finds it pretty easy to advocate goodness, truth and fair dealing, we liked Watson's approach. Funny how doing the right thing turns out to be practical.

Take-Aways

- To avoid many difficulties at work, follow the key principles of smart people.
- It's better to have a good relationship with your conscience than with your boss.
- Look beyond your own self-interests to do what is best for your organization.
- Seek excellence rather than popularity.
- Do the right thing to maintain an excellent reputation and preserve trust.
- When difficulties occur, respond to them immediately, act positively to overcome them, and admit any mistakes you have made.
- Prioritize by putting the most important things first.
- It's better to make a deliberate decision than decide too quickly.
- Make your high standards an example to others.

- Don't try to cover up the truth, since the truth will ultimately come out.

Summary

The Basic Principles of Smart Behavior

Often people's own failings - a big ego, a quick temper, self-centered behavior - cause their own difficulties at work. Smart people avoid these problems by adopting some key principles:

- Maintain the right course by always sticking to high standards - Discipline yourself to follow what you know to be true. Commit yourself to living up to high ideals.
- Make good decisions by thinking clearly and insightfully - Look beyond your own self-interests and don't make self-serving choices.
- Seek excellence rather than popularity - Don't seek praise for its own sake, because you won't achieve enough praise or self-satisfaction.
- Do the right, honorable thing to gain an excellent reputation - The right thing is what has emerged as "right" through trial and error across many centuries of civilization.
- Have the courage to stand up for the things that are worthwhile, notably high ideals.
- Attack difficulties immediately and act positively in response to adversity.
- Act boldly to achieve high levels of performance - You will be at your best when you act upon your convictions without reservation. Boldness means being committed to a position you believe in and following through until you have achieved it, even if you face difficulties and hostility.
- Maintain a sense of proportion - Put the best and first-rate ahead of the good and second-rate.
- Care about adding positively to the world rather than just getting something for yourself - You will gain more both financially and personally than you can imagine.
- Superior performers focus their efforts outside themselves - Put service to others and great causes before self-interest.
- Create and maintain trust among yourself, others and the organizations to which you belong.
- Create friendly and productive relationships with others - The highest achievers have a knack for getting along with people.
- Don't get tripped up by your own ego - Remember that success is partly due to luck and the help you get from others.
- Learn from your experiences to continually improve your performance.

Avoid the Broken Compass

To stay on the best course, you need a good compass - essentially a reliable internal guidance system that will help steer you around difficulties in the workplace. Some of the ways to stay on course are:

- Have a compass that points you in one direction - Many times people become unhappy, because they can't accept the fact that you can't always have everything they want. Sometimes, you have to choose between different priorities, such as having a job you really love or a job that gives you more money, prestige and power.
- Clarify what you really want by prioritizing your goals - This will help you choose between mutually exclusive options.
- Make choices yourself, rather than allowing others or other forces to make them for you - This includes deciding between moving away to advance in your career or staying amid familiar surroundings and people.
- Get more information and experience to help you decide what you really want.
- Learn what your boss wants you to do and do it - Ask for clarification if you don't fully understand the assignment. Or as a boss, explain what you want and how to do it, since your primary job as a manager is to teach your employees what you need them to do.

Prioritize Your Choices

You are better off making a deliberate decision than a hasty one. Sometimes people feel like they have to make a decision, but too

rapid a decision exposes you to hidden dangers, just like diving into a pool of unfamiliar water.

“First-rate accomplishments never spring from second-rate aspirations.”

Sometimes your key lieutenants may be divided about how you should solve a problem. To deal with this, find out more about why each one is giving you the advice being offered. Consider all the pros and cons, including what is best for the organization. For instance, one manager faced this dilemma when a long-time good employee stole some spare machine parts. Should he fire the man or give him another chance? He eventually decided to send the employee back to work with a stern warning that he would lose his job if he ever stole again.

“Our best efforts come whenever we act boldly, doing what we believe should be done. Boldness is the thoughtful commitment to a position and the gallant, steadfast will to see it through to completion - even in the face of adversity and open hostility.”

Generally, make your decisions in light of solid, guiding principles, considering all the costs and benefits, positive and negative implications, and your own feelings. Don't use gray areas to justify what you shouldn't be doing, but be willing to bend the rules if necessary, such as when an employee put in many hours of extra work but then didn't qualify for overtime because her exempt status put her in a management category. It is better to go by the spirit of the law, rather than the letter of it, and to make a reasonable decision, such as giving this dedicated worker extra compensation for her extra efforts. To keep your priorities balanced:

- Live by the rules of honesty and integrity, even when no one else is watching.
- Set a good example for others.
- Be loyal to the higher good, such as forcing a friend to admit an error in judgment that has cost the company money, rather than covering up for the friend.
- Stay calm and cool; it's better to suffer a wrong than to act like an impulsive hothead.

Seek Reputation Not Popularity

If you get caught up in the popularity game, your desire for approval can undermine your honesty and peace of mind. Doing what people like is not necessarily doing what's most effective. In the long run, put doing what's correct ahead of doing what's popular. To pursue a higher purpose and earn a good reputation, try to:

- Solve problems before they get even bigger.
- Seek to be a peacemaker and healer, rather than a policeman on the right side of an issue.
- Try to do good, rather than to look good.
- Don't reward tattletales or feed their desire for applause by listening to them.
- Listen to others' opinions, even if you disagree with them or they aren't popular.
- Invite others to share diverse points of view.
- Don't try to cover up the truth - Do what's right, because the truth will eventually come out, such as when one company bought baby food at bargain basement prices despite warnings that the product might be a synthetic blend, which it was.
- Establish high standards - Insist that your employees follow them, such as telling employees not to engage in shady practices to win contracts.
- Bring wrongdoing out in the open, even though it is embarrassing - It's worse to cover up or to be accused of being a party to doing something wrong.
- Don't let excuses prevent you from correcting a problem - Fix the problem when it occurs, as Chrysler did when management discovered that some employees had been turning back odometers.
- Admit your mistakes immediately and fix the problem - Put doing what's right ahead of escaping blame.

Courage: You Can Do What's Right

Sometimes events will test your intention to do the right thing. What can you do if your organization asks you to carry out a practice that requires underhanded actions, particularly if other people seem to be doing these things without feeling bothered? For instance, one saleswoman was asked to vary the price of a service based on what she thought people would pay. She felt bothered by doing

this and eventually decided to leave the firm. She felt better about working for a more ethical employer. Ask yourself "Should I?" rather than "Can I?" to help you make these choices.

“A reputation for asking questions is not the same thing as a reputation for making dumb mistakes. Don’t be afraid to ask questions under any circumstances.”

Some ways to find the necessary courage to follow your principles and act boldly are:

- Stand up for high standards - Setting an example will help you stand tall in the minds of others.
- Be willing to say no and walk away when you feel your principles are being compromised.
- Be open to learning the truth, even if it shows that you made a mistake.
- When practices that have worked well no longer produce the desired results, have the courage to change them.
- It is better to have good relations with your conscience than with a boss who asks you to violate your ethics.
- If you build a reputation for playing by the rules, trouble should stay away.
- If you see someone doing something wrong, don’t jump to conclusions - You might have misinterpreted what you have seen, so it is best to talk to that person privately.
- Don’t be a tattletale - If someone offends you, go to that person immediately and discuss it privately.
- Admit your mistakes immediately and fix the problem - Put doing what’s right ahead of escaping blame.
- Face difficulties squarely and head-on.
- When one door slams shut, look for another door to open and move through it quickly.
- Let go of your bitterness and don’t try to fight back when you encounter a difficult situation or mean-spirited person.
- Turn away from disappointment and focus on what you can do that is productive.
- Make a difficult decision with your eyes open and then take a stand.
- Use ideals to guide your choices and commit yourself to a position; be willing to act on your convictions.

Stress the Best: Giving More of Yourself

In every organization, a weeding-out process continually separates those who produce meaningful results from those who just go through the motions and make second-rate efforts. They might look good, but don’t do their best. Strive to do your best at the most important tasks. To this end:

- Say no to the less important things that distract you from what’s more important.
- Put your priorities in the right order.
- Forget about yourself and focus on a worthy goal.
- Once you complete a project, turn to the next one - Don’t get distracted by seeking praise.
- See the larger purpose behind what you are doing, so you feel more motivated and committed.
- Work for a goal rather than just getting paid.
- Focus on the work you are doing, rather than the rewards you expect.
- Learn to delegate what is less important.
- Live by your word to promote trust.
- Keep your commitments even if you incur extra costs.
- Admit your mistakes and limitations and learn to profit from honest criticism.

About the Author

Charles E. Watson, Ph.D., a professor of management at Miami University in Ohio, has more than 25 years of teaching experience. He has lectured on management throughout the United States and abroad, and has consulted for numerous companies, including Gibraltar Steel, Sun Oil and Procter & Gamble. He is the author of five previous books and dozens of articles on management.
