

When Smart People Work for Dumb Bosses

HOW TO SURVIVE IN A
CRAZY AND DYSFUNCTIONAL
WORKPLACE

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How to Survive in a Crazy and Dysfunctional Workplace

William Lundin and Kathleen Lundin
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Recommendation

You would be hard-pressed to find a more honest book about business and the often short sighted, un-productive, arbitrary, and just plain stupid decisions made by "dumb" managers and leaders. William and Kathleen Lundin articulately challenge the absurdities of corporate culture and the workplace. In this landmark book, they define "dumb" quite broadly: it applies to the stupid, the egomaniacal, the dictatorial, the scheming, the manipulative, and even the abusive. First-person accounts from leaders and employees illustrate the authors' journey through the epidemic dumbness of corporate structure, decision-making, and practice. The authors thoroughly and truthfully present these problems, analyze their impact, and offer remedies. However, their conclusions often clearly indicate that if you are mired in a consistently, terminally dumb workplace, leaving is usually your best option. Don't let the juvenile look of the volume throw you. *BooksInShort.com* recommends this book to everyone with a job: it's that good, like a sharp-witted social commentary delivered by keen observers.

Take-Aways

- In the workplace, the "leader-follower" relationship can be very dysfunctional on many levels.
- Dumb bosses are defined as those who are stupid, selfish, insensitive, shortsighted, dictatorial, manipulative, and even abusive.
- The longer smart employees stay in dysfunctional environments, the more their perceptions of reality become skewed, and make them susceptible to getting "dumbed down."
- Dumbness is inherent in the corporate structure and the culture of most companies.
- Corporations believe that this system works for them.
- Small companies often have small jerks as bosses. Big companies have dumb bosses who've grown into big jerks.
- Loyalty to one's employer is harder to kick than a drug habit.
- Employees must leave chronically difficult or abusive workplaces.
- Many employees stay and "survive" at dysfunctional companies, always under extreme stress, because they believe they have no other option.
- Unmasking dumbness is politically dangerous.

Summary

The Leader-Follower Relationship

In the workplace, and in the inherent structure and culture of any corporation, the "leader-follower" (boss-subordinate) relationship can be very dysfunctional on many levels. Employees are often smarter than their bosses and have a better grasp of reality and better solutions. But, these same employees are put in the position of supporting their managers' dumb behavior.

“Never expect the truth when you start a new job. The only question is how much are you being lied to, not if you are being lied to.”

Bosses can be manipulative, petty, arbitrary, authoritarian, cruel, and downright abusive. Employees often stay for years and years in these horrible situations. They hang around out of company loyalty, the need for a paycheck, and the fear that they will not find work elsewhere that meets their other needs (salary level, benefits, etc.). People also stay because they have been broken down by negativity or abuse, and have become willing participants in their own victimhood.

“By the time a dumb boss recognizes there is a problem, there's no way such superficial solutions can address what's really wrong.”

The truth is that "the dysfunction of smart people working for dumb bosses has short-range corporate survival value, and therefore corporations will continue to encourage this dysfunctional relationship." Smart people continue to work for dumb, even abusive, bosses because ultimately it "works" in the short run. In other words, "that's the way the corporations like it." The longer the smart employees stay in the dysfunctional environment, the more their perceptions of reality become skewed. "Employees start to buy the company line." As once-smart employees get "dumbed down," a smooth operation emerges over time. But, it's not a well-run company, it's merely "a workable harmony of mediocrity." For most employees, the realities are alarming:

- If you're okay with continuing to work for a dumb boss, it could be because you've grown accustomed to it and have been numbed by the daily abuse.
- If you hate your boss, but love the company, and stay in spite of how frustrating or awful it is to work for your boss, you're not a victim - you're a willing participant in the situation.
- If you're a constant whistle-blower, and the company tolerates this, they're getting more from you than you realize. So, you're not actually winning: you're losing.

“Studies report that companies earn higher profits when employees have fun, feel secure, and are respected. One would think that companies would want to embrace such enlightened management.”

A boss' free exercise or abuse of authority has more of a negative affect on employees' emotions than the individuals or society ever acknowledge. So, remember, if you act "tough," and protect your emotions, dumb bosses and dysfunctional companies will be less inclined and less able, to take advantage of you, professionally or personally. A dumb boss' negative energy can drag you down. To keep from being emotionally damaged, remember that the boss is the one with the problem - nothing is wrong with you or how you perform your job.

“Dumbness has affected everything from...the sinking of the Titanic, the loss of the automotive market to Japanese car manufacturers, the rejection of the xerographic process by Kodak, to the ValuJet crash.”

Abusive dumb bosses will steal your accomplishments and do their best to steal your self-respect too. When things are bad, resist the urge to be complacent or to stay for the paycheck. There are other jobs in the world. However, it can be worth staying - at least for a little while - in a job that provides you with a great opportunity to learn or to advance. This is true if the boss is only dumb, but not abusive or controlling. If you are largely unsupervised, or if the boss doesn't interfere with you, you can "become as smart or dumb as you please."

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Ultimately, most dumb bosses are recognized as such by the top command. For instance, the careers of selfish bosses are always in danger because their peers hate them, top executives don’t trust them, and subordinates want revenge. Corporations often have a vested interest in keeping the environment dysfunctional. If you feel pulled into corporate politics or feel like you are being dragged against your will into submissive behavior to authoritarian bosses, it isn’t just your imagination. It’s management’s way of letting you know who has the power.

“To err in the face of contradictory evidence, the usual kind of business dumbness, is a form of evil. The workplace is composed of the innocent error and the willfully stupid deed.”

Often dumb bosses actually prevent their employees from doing their jobs. That’s part of a power play and can be the first sign that the boss is looking for ways to give you a bad review. Then, the boss can feel justified in firing you or preventing your promotion. The dumb boss may do this out of jealousy or out of the thrill of having the power to control someone else.

Truly Dumb Organizations

Every kind of company can be dysfunctional and can harbor plenty of dumb bosses, but stupid management is more obvious, and more unforgivable, particularly when it occurs in the healthcare industry. When profit is medicine’s only measure of quality, lives are literally jeopardized.

“Unmasking dumbness is just too politically dangerous. As long as an organization functions well enough, the wise don’t make waves. If you were to take such a functioning system apart (the former Soviet Union is a good example), the result would be chaos. Company profits are the only measure of success.”

Since dumbness in the handling of employees is an epidemic throughout our economy, why would you expect the handling of patients to be different? "Managed care - in other words, medicine - has finally become a true reflection of today’s organizational values. How can we think it can really be fixed when we haven’t yet fixed airline safety, when drug company researchers fabricate results, and when education isn’t educating? The values that permit all those atrocities to happen are what need fixing. Dumbness at the top!"

“Managed care, a kind of medical apartheid, has fathered many examples of the dysfunctional organization.”

Adapting to a dumb leader in a dumb corporation is like being the fox in the hunt: you may be quick, clever, and nimble, but you’ll still be dead when it’s over.

Dumbness and Corporate Culture

Only a gullible organization will try to imitate another company’s culture. Many companies do so out of being desperate for a fast route to success. In addition to trying to mimic another company, they may also become attached to dumb fads sold to them by consultants. Small companies often have small jerks as bosses. Big companies have dumb bosses who’ve grown into big jerks. The more there is at stake - money, power, or prestige - the worse an inherently dumb boss is going to be.

“In a truly dumb organization, everyone’s wrong except the people at the top. Employees’ feelings don’t really matter. Job insecurity, in spite of strong economic numbers, is felt at all levels. There is little trust. Stress is high. Loyalty is minimal.”

Unfortunately, loyalty to one’s employer can be harder to kick than a drug habit. For many people, this loyalty is akin to patriotism. "Love your country, love your company used to be a strong family value." Corporate loyalty has been taught to children by their parents for generations. While employees are so concerned with being loyal to their companies, in today’s culture, most companies have no loyalty to their employees. They are loyal only to the bottom line. They may profess loyalty, but that’s just to induce good morale. It isn’t real when put to the test.

“People tell of finding themselves part of systems so stupidly managed that no procedure could ever make it right.”

Believe it or not, your first job should be with a dumb leader who has created an awful corporate culture. That's the best way for you to learn to be a not-dumb boss. "You become smart studying dumb culture on the job, up close and personally." You just don't want to stay there very long, just long enough to figure out how stupid the place is. When you see an unresolvable struggle between smart employees and a dumb boss, it's time to go.

“Shared visions, in spite of all the hype, are not possible until people step into one another's shoes.”

Dumbness exists on many levels and in many varieties. Some dumb bosses are just stupid. Others are stupid and abusive. Sometimes, the volume of dumbness depends on the company's size. "Big dumb" is when there are buffers between the idiots at the top and everyone else below. "Little dumb" is when most of the employees work directly for the jerk at the top. This doesn't refer to the size of the stupidity, but to how directly employees have to interact with the top idiot, given the size of the firm.

Usually, dumbness is simply the result of egos run amok. That goes for all varieties of dumbness, from the stupid to the evil. Leaders who promote incompetent people often do it for their own ego's needs. That allows them to feel smarter than everyone around them, and they don't have to worry that their subordinates will ever get their jobs.

Faces of Dumbness

Sometimes dumbness is a group problem. "Teams can be collectively dumb even when their members are individually smart." What causes dumb teams? Ironically, industry might be more productive if it told employees that they are forbidden to form teams. Tell people not to do something and they will work passionately to do exactly what they've been forbidden to do. This often surprises leaders, who don't take human nature into sufficient account when they rely on teams to do things. It's a wonder that any teams succeed. Team members are always fighting their individual ambivalent feelings and the company's ever-changing expectations. When you are in a group, "The need to protect one's job collides with a sincere desire to help the organization."

Employees should cooperate with one another for their own good, and good leaders can motivate employees to want to cooperate. Unfortunately, cooperation usually is not the main value of those in power, who always need to be placated. Organizations have become so autocratic, and so arrogant, that if they don't change they will ultimately fail. To improve, organizations must care about quality. However, they must be healthy, and not dysfunctional, to generate true, realistic quality information.

The impact of dumbness doesn't matter just when people work together. It even matters when people work with machines. So, what happens?

- A dumb (unmotivated or untrained) employee working with a smart (self-correcting) machine can still produce junk.
- A smart (creative, self-activated) person working on a dumb (error-prone) machine can still produce wonders.
- A dumb employee working with a dumb machine will always produce junk.
- A smart employee working with a smart machine will always produce wonders.

Change and Learning

"To lead positive organizational change, managers must instill trust among employees before taking them through the frightening world of the newer technologies." The world is constantly changing, therefore, so is everything connected to business. Change brings the needs for education. Under dumb bosses, employees usually stop learning. You can't run a successful company with leaders who don't like employees and don't care whether or not they are still learning. If employees aren't constantly learning, the company will grow stagnant.

Lessons of Survival

Employees are fearful and unhappy. They work in ruthless and often demeaning and abusive cooperate environments. Smart bosses and dumb bosses both know that employees will stick around for a very long time, despite the terrible environment, because they think they have to. Employees at dumb companies learn "how to survive for longer periods and how to maneuver around the undertow. Those are necessary skills when you're under siege." They are surviving, but they aren't growing.

About the Authors

William Lundin, Ph.D., and **Kathleen Lundin** are cofounders of Worklife Productions, a consulting/training practice that serves corporations of every size. Widely recognized for their straight-talking approach to workplace problems, they have trained managers for companies such as Ameritech, Hewlett Packard, Saturn, Harley Davidson, Sun Microsystems, Johnson Hill Press, M&M, Mars, and many others. They are also the authors of *The Healing Manger*, *Building Positive Relationships at Work*, *Working with Difficult People*, and *Three Values of Leadership*. They are based in Whitewater, Wisconsin.
