



Organizations and the Laws of Human Stupidity

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ABSTRACT

The paper is an attempt to present Carlo Cipolla's most famous work "The Basic Laws of Human Stupidity" in the context of organisations. Cipolla's work is highly regarded as one of the finest works on human behaviour and cognition. The Basic Laws of Human Stupidity take an approach to categorizing humans under four different quadrants-The Helpless, The Bandit, The Intelligent and The Stupid. The author further lays out structured laws as per his perspective on the world. The paper has tried to fit the same laws of the world in one of the microcosms called 'Organisations', the five laws are the basis for the paper. The paper also has tried to define the same set of people in the organization as elaborated in Cipolla's book and further investigates the behavioural dynamics that govern the organisations by drawing parallels with Cipolla's work.

Keywords: Human Behaviour, Carlo Cipolla, Laws of human stupidity, Organization

I. INTRODUCTION

Carlo Cipolla's "The basic laws of human stupidity" is a satirical work on human stupidity and how human stupidity impacts our society as a whole. The book is a humorous read and the laws are nothing more than a tongue-in-cheek jurisprudence. Cipolla in his time claimed that the book is the consequence of several years of his research on disasters and shambolic affairs. Though the reasons are many, the basic reasoning to take the work with a pinch of salt is, because it is heavily generalized. Einstein once said that "Human stupidity and the universe have no boundaries", confining the attribute of a human trait to certain laws is itself frowned upon by several behavioural researchers. Human beings are dynamic beings and no laws can certainly determine the individual's lack of sense or judgment at a particular situation or a circumstance. Then, there are also researchers who have an open mind and regard Cipolla's work as his magnum opus, that there is always something to learn from his works. The commonality of stupidity might differ with space and time but the inferences drawn through the actions of the individuals might remain the same. For instance, Carelessness on most occasions can be taken as a forerunner of stupidity. If an individual is careless in his attitude, most probably would also engage in stupid decisions or actions. If you track the link of a stupid decision back to the outset, one among the many attributes will also be carelessness.

However, The interesting aspect of the laws is that they can be used in any setting, going beyond the vicinities of prevalent geography. In this article, I have attempted to elaborate that the laws of human stupidity are also applicable to our organizations and no organization in this world is bereft with executives who show their lack of cognition from time to time.

II. THE LAWS

1. "Always and inevitably, everyone underestimates the number of stupid individuals in circulation"

The actual number of managers or executives in an organization who lack the sense of judiciousness will always be more than the assumed number. If we take the assumed number of unthinking people in the organization as ϵ and the actual number of unthinking people in the organization as Ω , then $\Omega > \epsilon$. Ω will always be greater than ϵ . We always miscalculate the number of unmindful people around us and the damage that they could do, passing through the tough corona pandemic we know that the intensifying havoc was solely due to careless people not following the rules or proper regimen.

2. "The probability that a certain person (will) be stupid is independent of any other characteristic of that person."

Being stupid is not a mutually exclusive event. It can exist in an individual simultaneously with several other positive traits, for instance, the lack of prudence can also exist in a 'high performer employee of the month' individual. Stupid actions might as well emanate from good communicators, good decisions makers, good leaders, etc.

3. “A stupid person is a person who causes losses to another person or a group of persons while himself deriving no gain and even possibly incurring losses.”

Cipolla is very clear in acknowledging that the actions of stupid people don't benefit them in any way, the actions cause harm to others and themselves. In the organizations we might come across several people who engage in corporate politics, negative tittle-tattles, rumour mongering, mismanagement, immoral conduct etc. thus causing harm to the company, to the people around and also to themselves.

4. “Non-stupid people always underestimate the damaging power of stupid individuals. In particular, non-stupid people constantly forget that at all times and places, and under any circumstances, to deal and/or associate with stupid people always turns out to be a costly mistake.”

Law no. 3 states clearly the damaging effects that a stupid person can bring about in an organization. It is always in the best of our interest to identify such people and keep them at bay. The amount of loss that the organization suffers from individuals who engage in infantile stupidity is unfathomable. A healthy work culture can never be sustained if we don't identify such people or underestimate the damage that they could cause.

5. “A stupid person is the most dangerous type of person.”

Cipolla in his essay segregated four types of individuals in our society. **The Intelligent, The Stupid, The Helpless and The Bandit**. The same applies to our organizations as well. In every organization, you will find an employee, who is **Helpless** and is the victim of the circumstances. These people per se are not harmful to the organization. Then, **The Bandits** who take undue advantage of the people around in an organization. They take credit for work done by someone else or engage in politics of putting obstacles in someone's progress. They make sure that they win in every situation and the other person must lose. Bandits take life as a zero-sum game. Bandits do cause harm to the organization but since bandits are always on a winning spree, most of their misconduct is often ignored. **The Intelligent** ones in the organization are those who cause benefit to others and themselves, they make sure that every situation is a Win-Win situation. There is no one to lose in the Intelligent person's game. The most dangerous ones are the **Stupids** because their actions cause harm to others and themselves, there is nothing to gain in situations where stupids participate in fact their presence is deemed to be counter-productive for the organisation.

III. CONCLUSION

The laws of human stupidity by Cipolla can always be comprehended multifariously. Drawing parallels with his laws to organizations seemed a bit ludicrous but then it did make sense in the end. Our organizations are the microcosms of the real world around us. In every organization, we find different varieties of people with different behaviours or conducts for operation. The segregation of individuals fairly on the basis of their actions is a tad bit difficult and can always be misconstrued. One person's rational action can be another person's stupidity. Even if we take cognizance of the fact above we can never deny that several negative actions of the employees such as gossiping, sexual misconduct, mismanagement, procrastination etc. are not biological problems but behavioural problems. The very great thing about behaviours is that they can be consciously changed with the right efforts. Laws of human stupidity can also be understood as a treatise on human behaviour as lack of cognizance is not a permanent behavioural flaw but a situational one, we all err as humans, don't we? but to identify and rectify it is the mark of a wise one.

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AUTHOR'S PROFILE



Amit Mishra currently serves as an Academic Associate at the Indian School of Business, Hyderabad. He has done his master's from the Tata Institute of Social Sciences and has worked with Tata Industries Ltd. & Tata Pigments Ltd. in the past before joining ISB. He is deeply interested in research pertaining to Strategy and Organisational Behaviour.