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How to deal with idiots at work

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Abstract

Sitting in Amsterdam (in Schiphol) Airport on that Thursday noon (17 March 2016), awaiting to connect to South Africa via Dubai – you wouldn't have guessed what was going through my mind. After shifting my thoughts from the workshop I had just concluded in Leiden, I stumbled across electronic notes on workplace related challenges whose resolution I had helped facilitate. I had enough time to observe strange patterns in these episodes, and to draw inferences from literature and on my own life experiences. In this process, the complexity in psychological dynamics of interpersonal relations in workplaces became more apparent. Though 30% of workplace disagreements are routine and sometimes necessary, sadly, the majority tend to be idiotic and destructive. The reality is that idiotic challenges often catch you off-guard, making it difficult to cope. As you would imagine, those unwelcome sexual advances by the immediate boss (who happens to be connected to people in high places) may be idiotic, but also psychologically draining for a female junior employee who reports to him. Generally, a career journey can be a long and hard road, with idiots gunning for your blood along the way. Knowing that you are not the first or last, and that many before you had overcome the most ferocious idiocy, would help you cope. The point is, idiots at work can turn your 40 hour (or more) a week into hell, unless you learn how to deal with them. This paper draws on a survey on workplace disputes, related literature and insight from experts in industrial psychology – to unpack the reality of idiocy. It explores effective ways on how to deal with idiots at work, and sensitises one on what not to be.

Key words: Ferocious idiots; Idiocy; idiots at work; idiots' traits; idiots' major dislikes

1. Introduction

A question “how to deal with idiots at work” assumes that **idiots**¹ exist, that there is a general understanding of what they are, that they can be found even in work places, and that it requires a special skill to deal with them.

References to the term date back to antiquity in biology – where **idiocy**² meant a “*condition of profound intellectual disability*” (Zaretsky, et al, 2005). With increased usage in interpersonal interactions however, the meaning have since altered towards emotion-embedded sinister translations in contemporary times, at the expense of clarity. Lost in translation, one colleague went as far as to question the difference between the **idiot** and a silly fool. After being cautioned that such a question may be **idiotic** however, she immediately backed off.

Nevertheless, the answer may lie not in the dictionary, but somewhere between your (1) recent interpersonal experiences, and (2) your outlook in life. If you have been suspected of idiocy for example, a denial approach is most likely. Conversely, if you've suffered unjustified psychological torture, deception, indignity and frustration at the hands of **idiots**, you might be more practical. You might even recall how **idiot** labels are populated - always thrown around in judgemental disapprovals that are seldom useful, but self-righteous and condemning. Here, a self-centred bigot (Parker, 2005) assumes a superior wisdom stance (Rau-Foster, 2016), as a yardstick upon which all possible decisions should measure or else, be condemned into a good for nothing, worthless **idiot**. Utterances like “*Oh, s/he is such an idiot...*” and “*Oh, don't be such an idiot...*” are never uncommon. Like uses of the term “bullshit”, the concept is never defined, but a sinister understanding is often shared by perpetrators, with no one daring to ask the exact meaning, lest you be seen as a **real idiot**.

2. From the victims' perspective

Bigotry is not the only side to the conception. **Idiocy** in contemporary interpretations can also be understood from a victim's perspective – a victim of misjudgement, ungratefulness, unreasonable expectations, foul language, unexplained hatred, those persistent sexual advances by the immediate boss (who is connected to people in high places), and other forms of narrow minded antics. If you just had to put up with these, you might even see the questioning of **idiocy** existence as purely **idiotic**. Of course **idiots** exist, they are everywhere...you would say.

¹ The dictionary defines an **idiot** as “an utterly stupid or foolish person” (Merriam-Webster, online).

² An **idiot** also referred to a person with no skill to make civil judgements, and often over-prone to error (Zaretsky, et al, 2005). However, the concept has gained a new, rather distorted meaning that hardly meets the original definitions. It is the educated and skilled who seem to be lead perpetrators of **idiocy** in workplaces. Hence, it is the now dominant sinister conception that is accommodated in this paper.

Well, despite the frustration, try not to invite doubters to your workplace for first hand evidence, no matter how pressing the temptation may be.

However, **idiots** are not to be confused with morons³ (Hahn, 1998). Neither should they be confused with imbeciles (Sternberg, 2000)⁴, for the latter 2 are medical conditions that are more intellectually sound than idiots. In the contemporary sense, **Idiocy** may be a psychological condition (Aukrust, 2011) that tends to lean towards egocentrism. Whilst it is more complex in the conventional medical sense, idiocy in the contemporary sense can be learnt off. There is always a chance to grow out of it – provided you can finally see the light. In such a case, humility would be key, without which a transformation is least likely.

3. Why pick on idiots?

In a democratic society where everyone has a right to their culture, religion and language, we cannot be seen to be discriminating against **idiots**. Well, does this suggests that there is an **idiocy** culture? Before you start mobilizing towards formulating the "**idiots' rights movement**", note that we recognize **idiots** to be human, with a democratic right "not to be misunderstood". In other words, the more that is learnt about them, the better for them too.

However, victims have rights too (Bowling & Beehr, 2006), and we are more sympathetic towards the victims! Imagine coming to work with all good intentions, wanting to be creative, productive, and to make all the difference – and just before you could blink, mind-boggling **idiocy** just happens

³ A moron is a person of mild mental retardation, where an adult would have a mental age of 7 to 12 years old. With borderline intelligence of around an I.Q. of 50 to 69, notably lacking in judgment (Hahn, 1998).

⁴Medically, an imbecile is a person with moderate to severe intellectual disability - with an IQ lower than a moron's (Imbecile IQ: 26–50), but higher than the **idiot's** IQ of 0-25 (Sternberg, 2000)

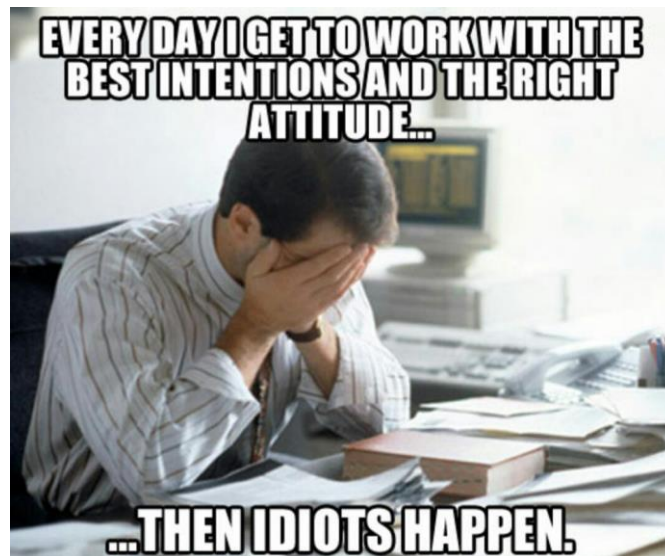


Figure 1: When **idiots** get to you, you'll know it!

Ferocious **idiocy** is like cancer, with a damaging effect on the victim. Careers have been destroyed; health contaminated, wealth demolished, families divided, relationships turned upside down, and even lives have been lost through ruthless encounters with **idiocy**. Even the World War 2 is partly linked to statesmanship **idiocy**. Like germs (bacteria), you know that idiots exist, but are very hard to describe. You can only tell by a devastating impact. Well, maybe a germs (microbes) analogy is slightly misleading. Because when you take a microscope you can magnify a germ (bacteria), and clearly describe it even before encountering any effect. Perhaps an analogy of a terrorist maybe more fitting. Terrorists are humans (like you, and well, perhaps not like me). They come in large, medium, small, tall, short, and in all other human shapes, across race and gender lines. Some governments can even take official policy positions against them - for example, never to negotiate with a terrorist. They walk, talk and think (largely terror related thoughts).

Well, maybe a claim on what they think remains premature until we analyse their minds. Unlike terrorism however, **idiocy** is never voluntary but circumstantial, and half the time – feeds on incorrect information, exaggerations and error. In this instance, institutionalized **idiocy** including racist regimes, antagonistic ethnic formations, extreme classist settings, religious biases and disempowering patriarchal arrangements are the most dangerous extremes, with effects extending to workplaces and beyond.

On average, we spend more than half of our lifetime at work. This is a greater chunk of time to spend suffering at the hands of **idiots**. **Idiots** know no boundaries, and not even the person of faith is spared.

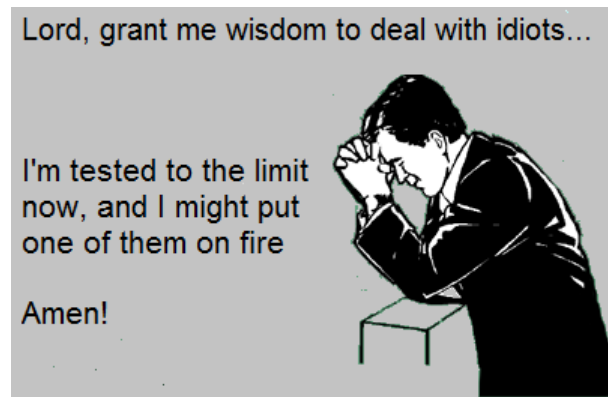


Figure 2: Idiots can really test your faith

Trying to understand the causes of heart attacks on low risk patients, a research team of Lindbergh University Medical Centre found that working with idiots can just be as hazardous to your heart health as cigarettes or greasy foods. In this study, 62% of the 500 heart attack patients were considered low risk before the heart attacks, but had complained of having been working with “*extremely stressful people*”. Their heart attacks had also, co-incidentally, come within 12hrs of a confrontation with an **idiot** at work. Actually, “*a woman had to be rushed to hospital after her assistant shredded important documents she had been asked to photocopy*”. Idiots can also double your workload, with the bulk of hours side-tracked to damage control. One administrator for example, “*had to spend a week recreating clients’ records after a clerk had misunderstood the meaning of the **Recycle Bin** desktop icon*”. S/he put all client records in this bin, thinking that they would literary be recycled and be re-used later on.

It is proving to be very hard to cope with **idiocy**. Many people opt to internalize their frustrations until they finally just crumble.

4. Understanding the real idiot

*Understanding **idiots** could be empowering to the victim, and therefore a worthwhile effort:*

- **Idiots** tend to be arrogant and bully. **Idiocy** is often driven by a desire to hustle for superiority and approval, but an **idiot** is easily satisfied if you submit. So, if you pull away from an unfruitful argument by submitting defeat (even if you don't mean it), they will have nothing to fight against. By their very nature, **idiots** love to dominate conversations and to have the last say. To win them over, try to affirm them in public platforms. Referring to him/her as “my boss” will always do the trick. Humility is the killer here, and opting to see things from their side will always work to your favour.
- They are attracted to the glittering extrinsic value of humans and things, regardless of the real intrinsic substance. Advice: learn to speak “their language”, and never ignore

praising that new outfit, a gold ring, a necklace, shoes or that gold tooth - otherwise, you risk being perceived as "jealous". The associated backlash and tension at work can be devastating.

- **Idiocy** thrives on gossip & hearsays. Keep your opinion to the minimum in tea-breaks, lunch-time and cocktail party gossips to curtail the **idiocy** potential
- They tend to exaggerate their own strengths, often underestimating the strength of others. They hardly take time to understand the unfamiliar, but rush into dismissing it as "**idiocy**", which lends itself into gross inaccuracies, misjudgement and frustrations.
- **Idiots** are selfish and often, grossly inconsiderate. An extremely slow driver staying on the fast lane for her comfort, regardless of a growing number of faster cars behind that need to pass, is a relevant example.
- **Idiots** never apologise when wrong, but always find alternative explanations. Advice – adjust your expectations after unfair treatment, even when your innocence is proven
- **They** just love to be praised, whether deserved or not. Advice: never refer to an **idiot** Dr or Professor as Mr, Miss, Ms., they will feel undermined, it is safer to use senior titles every time. Refer to them as (give an impression that they are) senior, wiser, better, cool, hot or cute, they love this. They can even spend money they don't have to buy that image – use this to get to their good books. It works!
- **Idiots** are often extremely short tempered, with physical fights seen as the solution to any dispute. They tend to attract nicknames like Cranky, Grumpy or a Witch, or even Miss Know-it-all. Sometimes, Chief, Boss, Sir or Madame is used to give them that superiority assurance they so eagerly crave. Use this to get yourself on their good books.
- They tend to rush into giving answers before making sense of a question posed, with a huge element of error as a consequence.
- Whilst a person is generally innocent until proven guilty, for the **idiot** you are guilty until proven innocent. Statements like, "*oh that sort of thing has Ronald written all over it*". "*With those kind of eyes, I knew all along that he was up to no good*", and with attitudes like "*you've seen one, you have seen them all*", unsubstantiated verdicts are delivered, only for the real culprits to emerge later.
- Fine-tuning skill and dexterity at anything is immaterial, for "*it is not what you know, but who you know*" that matters the most in the **idiot** world.

- **Idiocy** is increasingly being linked with implicit cowardice, though evidence remains sketchy at the moment

The list is not exhaustive, but offers basic insight to help you understand who you're dealing with.

5. Common things idiots tend to dislike

Stopping with the **idiot's** favourite tendencies would be short-sighted, for it would only give half the picture. What about their strong dislikes:

- **Idiocy** is like a javelin. It is only good to be thrown away (at others), and is never owned. They can't imagine themselves being one - but anyone else. They are quick to remind you not to take them for an "**idiot**".
- In the eyes of an **idiot**, it is impossible for him/ her to be wrong in and at anything (otherwise, what are you taking him/her for... an **idiot**?)
- **Idiots** hate being challenged in public, they will make you pay for it if you do
- If what s/he does happen to fail, it is often because of a conspiracy (perhaps some form of discrimination), it cannot be out of their mistake, for they are wise & infallible
- They lack humility, but are quick to judge who is arrogant (which is hypocritical)
- **Idiots** are extreme addicts of habit, and tend to resist change regardless of the obvious need for it
- They often seem outspoken, brave and dominating, but if you stand your ground their ego can be very fragile, though they will stop at nothing to get you back.

Whilst the list is not exhaustive, it offers a basis to understand idiots better.

6. How to deal with idiots at work

You might have suspected from those peculiar questions during your job interview that you were dealing with *suspicious* characters. One of the questions in particular, asking that - "*with all the other talented candidates, why should we hire you...*" is literally, grossly short-sighted. It asks a job-seeker to do two awful things: to assume a supplicant position and beg for the job, and most **idiotically**, it asks a person to compare him or herself to people s/he's never met and likely never will, and then rate him/herself above competitors – which would be dishonest. It is the job of the interview panel to analyse the potential of the candidate, compare it with others and do the hiring, not the candidate's. Did they also ask what your greatest weakness was... and or where you see yourself in 5 years? You wanted the job anyway, so you had to answer, perhaps thinking that **idiocy** would not go beyond that interview process.

The reality is that **idiots** at the work-place can turn your life into a 40hr (or so) a week hell, unless you learn how to deal with them.

6.1 Counteracting idiotic episodes

According to the London psychologist, Dr Bertleson (Ronald), even a ferocious pit-bull of a Boss can become a purring pussycat. It takes understanding and patience to manage this situation. The most important thing is never to get upset. Never to lose control. With **idiots**, there are better ways to get ahead than fighting back. I have first-hand experience with this situation.

Look, whether it's a nasty boss, an unpleasant fellow-worker or a lazy and manipulative employee, you may need to accept him/her for what s/he is. Then try to think of his/her strengths rather than weaknesses, always acting in control of a situation. Refuse to stoop to behaviour you consider to be unprofessional. If your Boss is the type that insults you in-front of other employees, Dr Bertleson suggests that you stay calm. Let him/her say his/her piece, without arguing back at this time. It is OK to give him/her the attention s/he so eagerly craves. Just tell him/her you understand why s/he is upset, and there was no ill-intention on your part. The idea is to cool him/her down from the current paranoia, but not to start admitting non-existent faults. Thereafter, approach him/her quietly (in private - for if approached in public, the fragile ego may prevent him/her from seeing the light). State your logical position, as though your concerns are in the best interest of the company, with every attempt not to be personal.

There should be no illusion that it will be easy. A bully presenter in a work-related international conference in Pretoria, South Africa comes to mind. Instead of responding to a counter-scenario presented by a dissenting participant, a visibly irate academic stood up and rubbished the critique as "**bullshit**". The self-proclaimed expert had spoken. It became very quiet in the room, momentarily, and the targeted participant was extremely intimidated. As a chairperson I asked the aggressor, in the interest of sanity, to define the meaning of the term he had just used. It was important for the audience to understand the scientific meaning of his "bullshit" term, so we could critique its "supposed" attributes in the content raised by the dissenting participant.

Fearing the challenge, the aggressor opted to apologise for the use of inappropriate language. After the apology we had to let it go. Actually, a "**bullshit**" utterance is equivalent to the use of an "F" word. It is an aggressive attempt to silence a dissenting voice, instead of offering a logical counter-argument.

On a different note, have you ever wondered whether a sober **idiot** is better than the intoxicated one? A problem with this question is that it implies that idiocy can be quantified, with some quantities and forms more preferable than others. To the contrary, the position of this paper is that all forms of **idiocy** are problematic, and therefore undesirable. Yes, coward **idiots** can turn to intoxicating substances for courage to do what they would otherwise fear, but are they not **idiots** first, before the substance? In his advice to managers in the Forbes leadership magazine, a work-place conflict resolution specialist - Mike Myatt (Myatt, 2012) suggests that whilst conflict is part of leadership, there is no substitute for prudence.

There are times when it is better to embrace your fiercest adversary than to get rid of him/her. No one was better at staying close to adversaries than President Lyndon Johnson (USA: 1963-1969). Whilst distrusting (and disliking) the FBI Director Edgar J. Hoover, President Johnson accepted the difficulty of firing him. He decided to keep Hoover in his role, regardless of his troublesome character. His reasoning was that "*it's probably better to have the bastard **inside the tent** **pissing out** than to have him **outside the tent** **pissing in**". The thinking that has since become known as Johnsons' Maxim (Major, 1993; Pfeffer, 2016).*

6.1.1 Is it only about the “Idiots to Non-Idiots” tension?

Up to this point, focus has been limited to the "**idiot**"(perpetrator) to "**non-idiot**" (you) scenarios in this paper, which is half of the story. For, when left as is, risks treading along the border of reductionism and fallacy. Fallacious in that it would assume a homogenous group of people known as **idiots**, consciously subscribing to an “ideology” (and perhaps a religion or even a cult) of **idiocy** – in conspiracy against **non-idiotics**. Consequently, a certain level of homogeneity among **non-idiotics** (and a counter conspiracy to fend-off the **idiocy** agenda) could then be deduced, which would be **idiotically** misleading. Simply, because an ideology based conspiracy would, in this contradictory format, be too formally organized a discourse to fit the **idiocy** description. **Idiocy** represents the epitome of circumstantial disorganisation, and there has neither been any formal conference, nor known ideology of **idiocy** in recorded history. Beyond this tension stands a more complex work-place challenge – the "**idiot-to-idiot**" egocentric interactions.

6.1.2 Idiot-to-idiot episodes

In the **idiot-to-idiot** scenario, each of “the opposing sides see their way as the only way to achieve their goals and objectives” (Rau-Foster, 2016). Things can get messy. Have you considered why a disagreement between two **idiot** drivers would end-up in the most violent “road-rage”?

Idiot-to-idiot conflicts work themselves around the logic of who has more power, who is physically stronger in that fist fight, who can shout the loudest or and, in the “bullshit” kind of sense, it is the "bull" with the biggest "bullshit" that survives.



Figure 3: How **NOT** to deal with **idiots** at work

In that world, everything tends to depend on who has more influential connections, who can get the most expensive lawyers, who can find the most fatal gangsters to pull the trigger, who can find the stronger voodoo (witchcraft) practitioner, who can spread the most damaging of the ***gossips and character assassinations***, as you might have observed in media reports and perhaps, in your not-so-distant circles lately.

Character assassinations are seldom well-founded, yet extremely damaging. Particularly to those in senior leadership positions. A gossip is something else. It usually starts with a whisper: “*did you know... she has a short little tail under that outfit. It’s so weird, they say it wags when she is upset... she makes weird wolf-like sounds at midnight, which explains those tantrums and similar animalistic behaviour...*” It then closes with a warning “*...ssshhh... don’t tell anyone that I told you so*”, and like wild fire, off the gossip spreads!

The aim behind character assassinations, gossips and damaging rumours is often threefold, mostly to portray you as:

- Lacking integrity (that you were involved in some uncovered gigantic theft, robbery or murder). You should also appear to be a devious character of twisted moral standing with corrupt tendencies, having underhand dealings with shady characters

- Under-qualified, in-experienced and therefore a worthless piece of incompetent **idiot** (or perhaps a psycho) with a grossly erratic sense of judgement.
- Not being completely human, or holding those perverse social beliefs that can only spell trouble for “the people”.

The media would then escalate these juicy leaks from nameless sources, and for one reason or the other, a story on who is having an affair with whom – often gets to the front page. If you find yourself on the receiving end however, try not to play into the hands of the perpetrators. Rather, stay level-headed, regardless of how dim the situation may seem.

Remember that you are not the first (and you can certainly never be the last) to be victimised. A case of a middle-aged finance executive comes to mind. Feeling sorry for herself as she requested a medical prescription for stress in a popular pharmacy, she was surprised to learn the plight of a senior pharmacist. His health had deteriorated so bad, the only reason he was still working was simply to afford medical bills so he can cope with stressful people working in that pharmacy. Otherwise, he would have long left the pharmacy. Yes, his reasons seem a bit strange. However, many people are subconsciously caught in the same vicious circle, instead of dealing with idiots decisively.

In any case, always treat co-workers with respect. Instead of giving advice that may be undermining, try to lead by example on the job. Correcting an employee by yelling, screaming and spreading gossip would be **idiotic**, and least likely to help. You will advance in life, not by stepping on other people’s toes, but by providing a good example. Be quick to compliment good things. This will help them develop confidence and earn you their trust.

7. Conclusion

A working environment can be a much better place without idiots. Unless you can change or remove the **idiot** however, finding a means to peaceful co-existence is better than growing a savings account of hurt and hate.

Avoidance cannot be a solution either (Moriarty, 2007). Instead, engaging difficult situations is encouraged (Schneider, 2011). Focus **not** on how things cannot work, but **how can things work**. An attitude that refuses to see obstacles as limitations, but solutions will help you focus on the positive. Nevertheless, we cannot under-estimate the complexity of **idiocy** and there may be times when your noble efforts would seem futile. You may either bring sanity to the situation, or you may need to make extreme changes.

The reality is that **idiots** are here to stay. Recognizing **idiocy** as a psychological deficiency and a health disorder, can help you shape your perspective. By distinguishing between **idiocy** and a person committing it (the **idiot**), you can learn to substitute hurt with empathy for the **idiot** concerned. You might need to take a deep breath though, and simply accept that it is after-all, only the **idiot** you are dealing with. If you have a bit of vengeance, remember that success is the best revenge.

But what if I'm dating a **real idiot**, or if I turn out to be married to one...you might ask. Well, when did you first realize that s/he is the **idiot**? They say that true love can be a potent cure. Love is meant to be blind: it knows no **evil**, it tells no **lie** and it sees no **idiot**. Explore this untested theory. Then publish your results, for the world awaits major breakthroughs!

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