

Tuesday, June 7, 2005

Stupidity, mentors and bye-bye to the CIRA Board

I'm sitting up late in my hotel room in St. John's, Newfoundland having just completed two things:

- 1) A few hours ago I left my last Board meeting as a CIRA Director, aside from a short teleconference slated for next week, as of June 22nd, my term is over and I'm done.
- 2) Because I can't sleep, I just watched Albert Nerenberg's documentary Stupidity which just aired on CBC's Rough Cuts.

I'm glad I watched it. Something I've been trying to do over the last few years is come to grips with my own stupidity. Being on the CIRA Board didn't help. It was an honour and a privilege to serve on the Board, but it was also one of the my more intimidating experiences. The CIRA Board is stacked with incredibly smart people who really know what they're talking about and most of them are drawing from intellectual wells that are far deeper than my own.

I could go around the table and individually cite each person's acumen and intellect but that may drift this post into "fluff job" territory. Suffice it to say that there is a formidable array of intelligence there.

As for myself, I have a talent for seeing patterns amongst the obscure and an ability to extrapolate present conditions in a non-linear way to come up with unexpected and sometimes surprisingly compelling predictions or models. Because of these knacks I sometimes appear to be of above-average intelligence.

But I also have a problem with what I call being "oblivious to the obvious". I overlook things which are right in front of my face and from time to time I appear to be dumb as a post because of it. I suspect it stems from a variety factors ranging from a short attention span to genuine lack of comprehension skills but I've come to recognize it as my own personal disability and I have to constantly compensate for it.

My primary method of doing this is through trusted mentors and advisors who I constantly barrage with a steady stream of ideas and notions to "reality test" and "sanity check". My wife is the closest and first line of defense against my own dull-wittedness. Then I have layers of friends and advisors expanding outwards in concentric circles. Most of my stupid ideas will get null routed somewhere along those shells before they can hit the real world and do any real damage.

The documentary briefly touched on expectations driving results and in one interview scene a fellow described how he was branded an "idiot" as a child, and as a result he acted and felt like a dolt for a number of years. He managed to shirk the confines of those expectations and went on to become the president of the American Psychiatric Association (sorry, his name eluded me).

My childhood was driven by the expectations of intelligence. My parents nurtured my sister and I in an atmosphere of "can-doism". We were constantly reminded that we were exceptionally bright children and thus could accomplish anything we set our minds to. These attitudes spilled over into our school environments and we were both fast-tracked into enrichment programs for our entire primary through high-school careers.

I used to concur with all this and thought I was a pretty brilliant person. As of a few years ago (it started around the time I stopped drinking and smoking grass) I began to suspect that maybe I wasn't as smart as I thought. Today that "maybe" is a "probably". I suspect now that the expectations of high intelligence enabled me to rise to a higher station in life than had I been left to what would have otherwise been average potentials.

So in effect, expectation drove accomplishment which outstripped capability.

If it wasn't for awareness (or at least suspicion) of this, I would be a textbook example of the Peter Pyramid. Fortunately my friend and mentor Sieg, the Atavist explained the Peter Principal to me many years ago, when I was doing my first computing job for his courier company. He told me how 95% of the efforts of mid-to-top-level managers are spent hiding their own incompetence. I was younger and dumber then but I gleaned enough to promise myself that I would never fall into that, and if I found myself in at the apex of a Peter Pyramid, I would put a stop to it.

If I wanted to boil this down into the Lowest Common Denominator^{™}; I would say something banal like "Embrace Your Incompetence" and maybe even wrap a management theory around that and wait for someone like Fast Company to elevate it to a new management fad.

But more realistically, and less sensationally I will say "Be Aware Of Your Inadequacies" and deal with them. Part of the way to deal with them is to get help, seek mentors and bring on people who are smarter than you are to be part of your team^[1].

Closing the loop on this insomnia-powered post I can say that one of the factors driving my decision not to run for re-election on the CIRA Board was that at this time I don't think I'm smart enough to be sitting at that table.

The other thing is that now is the time for me to devote my full attention to running my own company. So...

[1] If anybody is interested, I'm currently looking for a Director of Marketing and a Director of Software Development to join my team. Qualifications are that you have to be a smarter than me. My email address is my firstname at my lastname dot net.