WHY DO SMART PEOPLE SOMETIMES DO STUPID THINGS?

How intelligence can lead you astray

If you're similar to the majority of our UGM clients, you're an intelligent, well-educated, high-achieving professional. This isn't about flattering you! It's simply acknowledging the demographic group you probably belong to. Your membership of this group has an important implication. It's likely that, whatever your sector, you earn your living at least in part because of your ability to solve problems and make a steady stream of sound decisions. In other words, you're paid to think and, if you think well, you get ahead. In fact, UGM research shows that the more senior you are, the more time each week you spend thinking, either alone or in collaboration with other equally intelligent, high-achieving colleagues.

Although its limitations are now widely accepted, IQ (or general intelligence) is still the main way your cognitive abilities are assessed. Much of our education system is geared towards improving this type of academic intelligence. Universities reward it and employers recruit for it. But the benefits of a high IQ don't necessarily pay off in work or in life. Intelligence it seems is not always synonymous with clear thinking and sound decision making.

Cognitive blind spots

Recent research exposes the somewhat disturbing fact that high IQ may even contribute to poor thinking and unsound decisions. Studies of extremely high IQ members of Mensa found that 44% believed that astrology is scientifically proven and 56% held that aliens regularly visit earth.

Canadian psychologist, Keith Stanovich, has spent twenty years exploring the link between intelligence and rationality. He stresses that his work doesn't devalue intelligence testing, but rather examines what other cognitive skills (beyond general intelligence) affect decision making. His experiments demonstrate only a moderate link between decision making skills and the kind of intelligence measured by standard IQ tests.

Stanovich points out that since the beginning of the twentieth century, the focus has been on measuring quite a narrow range of skills, including analogical reasoning, vocabulary and factual recall. The belief was that such skills reflect a general intelligence that underpins all types of learning and capability. Our education is then meant to build on this foundation and provide the smarts crucial for success in most professions.

Stanovich found that intelligent, educated people are less likely to learn from their mistakes or accept the advice of others. They are more able to construct elaborate arguments to justify their opinions, meaning they can be less willing to recognise their own logic gaps and blind spots than less verbally adroit peers. Stanovich has developed a 'rationality quotient' for use in assessing someone's reasoning and decision making. Perhaps unsurprisingly, he's had significant interest from financial institutions, law firms and executive head-hunters.

So what contributes to sound decision making?

Igor Grossman, a Ukrainian-born, Canadian psychologist, is at the cutting edge of this inquiry. He calls this new discipline 'evidence-based wisdom', paralleling the now widely accepted concept of 'evidence-based medicine.' He has broken down wisdom into six specific principles. One of these is 'intellectual humility' or an awareness of the limits of your knowledge and an acceptance that your judgement may be inherently uncertain. This ability links to your capacity to understand other people's perspectives, including when they differ significantly from your own.

Grossman's findings overlap with those of Stanovich. One of the tests Stanovich has developed, for example, measures a trait called 'active, open-minded thinking' which links with Grossman's 'intellectual humility'. Both concern the extent to which you are willing to revise your view in response to new evidence.

In one experiment, Grossman presented his volunteers with different dilemmas and then a team rated the complexity and sophistication of their thinking. The dilemmas ranged from what to do about the war in Crimea to responding to heartfelt crises outlined in the Washington Post's 'agony aunt' column. High scores correlated with more rational decision-making in all areas of life and predicted greater life satisfaction, relationship quality and contentment overall. But Grossman found that his volunteers' IQ scores did not relate to any of these measures and certainly didn't predict greater wisdom. He commented, "People who are very sharp may generate, very quickly, arguments for why their claims are the correct ones – but they may do so in a very biased fashion."

In the future, organisations may start to test for these other abilities, not just lean on IQ. Google, for example, has already announced that it plans to screen job candidates for attributes such as 'intellectual humility', not simply cognitive prowess. Reassuringly, Grossman's work also shows that wisdom can be trained. There are straightforward things that you can do to help you think and act more wisely and avoid blinkered thinking. The side box details things for you to try for yourself: what you could do less of and more of. This will help avoid the trap described by the great nineteenth century psychologist, William James, "A great many people think they are thinking when they are merely rearranging their prejudices."

How to make wise decisions more consistently!

Do LESS OF these:

- Cognitive miserliness: tendency to base decisions on intuition rather than analysis
- Earned dogmatism: self-perception of being an 'expert' closes the mind to other views
- Motivated reasoning: tendency to apply brainpower only when a conclusion suits a predetermined goal
- Strategic ignorance: deliberately avoiding the chance to factor in new data in order to avoid discomfort

Do MORE OF these:

- Intellectual humility: ability to accept own limitations & fallibility
- Active, open-minded thinking: deliberate pursuit of alternative views and evidence that may challenge own opinions
- Epistemic curiosity: a questioning attitude that protects against flawed thinking
- Moral algebra: willingness to evaluate arguments systematically, thus reaching wiser decisions
- Tolerance of ambiguity: tendency to embrace uncertainty, not seek immediate closure