

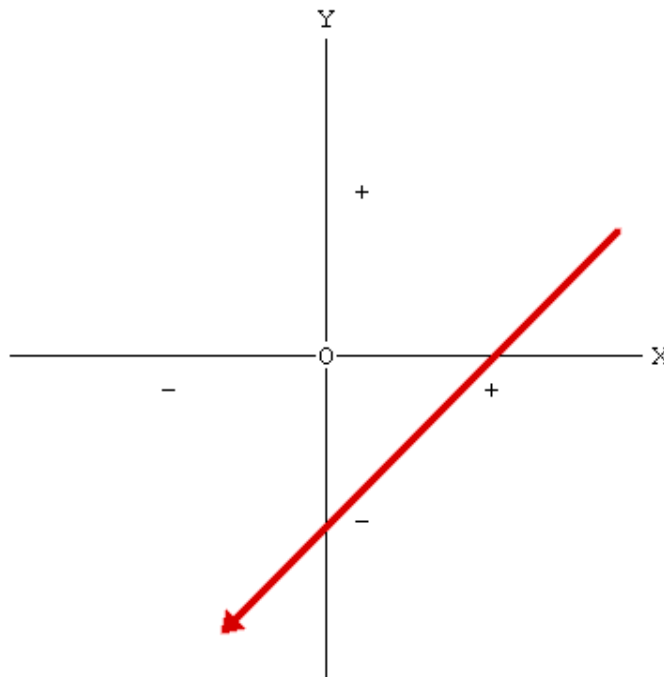
The Power of Stupidity



by Giancarlo Livraghi

Chapter 11 – The Ways of Power

People who have or seek power are, as an average, just as stupid or intelligent as any other person. But if we follow the method of measuring intelligence and stupidity by the effect of behavior, not motive or technique, the result is that in the effects of stupid power make things worse, shown in this diagram¹ – where the red arrow is the “power” factor. There is a general deterioration in the system, with a shift from “intelligence” to “stupidity.”

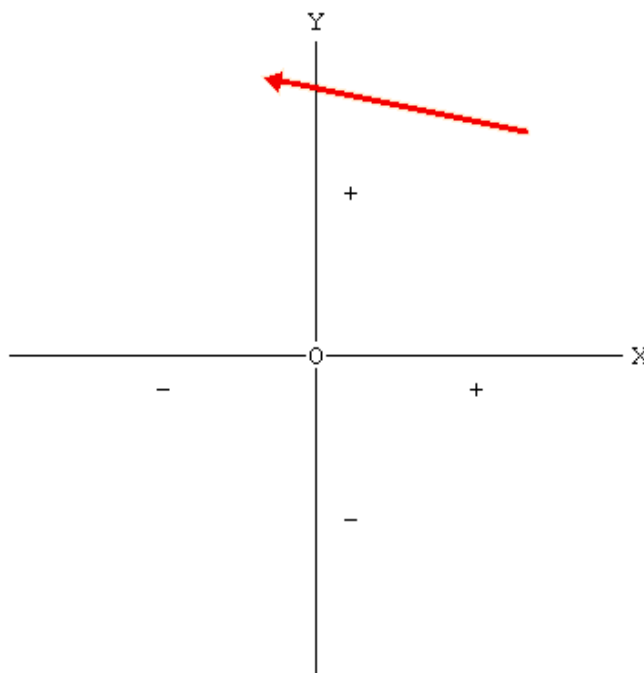


A careful reader may notice that the arrow isn't in the center. This is to allow for the fact that a few people (those in power and their entourage) gain some advantages – and therefore the shift in the system is not from the center of the “intelligent” area to that of the “stupid” but it leans on the lower right side crossing the harmful fourth quadrant.

¹ Based on “Cartesian coordinates” as defined in chapter 8.

The pursuit of power increases the stupidity factor. The impact can be relatively large or small depending on the amount of power (the importance of matters influenced by power and the number of people subject to its effects) and on the intensity of the power struggle.

As we have seen in chapter 10, power, as a system, is more stupid than basic human nature. We can, however, imagine others sorts of evolutionary process. Let's assume, for instance, a situation in which "intelligent power" prevails. We would probably see a trend like this.



Let's remember that the "first quadrant" (top right) is the "intelligence area", while in the "second" (top left) we find people who do good for others, but not for themselves. The more someone's behavior benefits others, the higher it is placed on the "Y-axis."

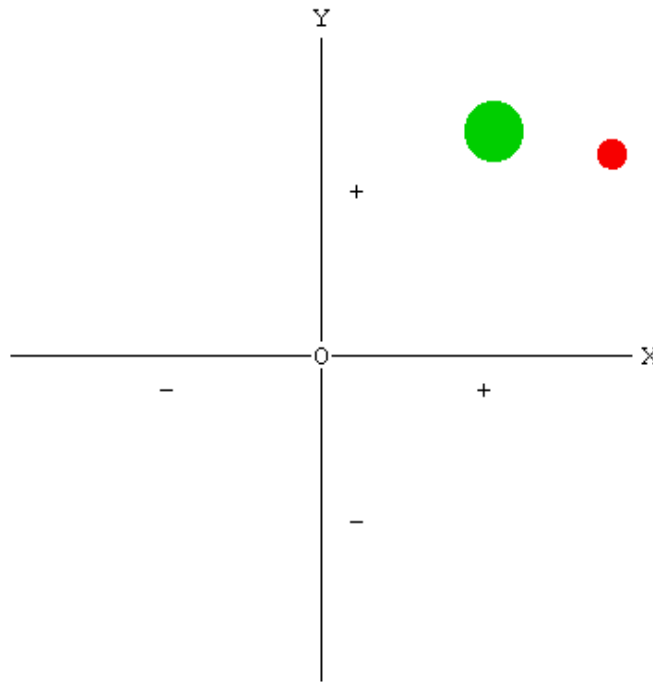
Power, in this case, deliberately chooses to offer greater advantages to the community than to itself, to the point – sometimes – of accepting some disadvantages if they help to improve general well-being.²

The shift to the upper part of the "Y-axis" is unlikely to be fast, but it tends to be steady and consistent. Such situations are not impossible. There are nearly always a few in some parts of the system. But they depend on unusually well tuned, well motivated teamwork – harmonies that aren't easily generated or reproduced, and can fall apart because of changes in the environment or disruptions in their structure.

Rare as they are, such teams are extraordinarily effective. Real innovations and improvements in society are much more likely to develop when and where there are synergetic teams, active symbiosis, instinctive cohesion and strong humanity.

When such behaviors prevail, the result is a situation like the one shown in the next graph (where the red area marks the position of people in power, the green is the rest of the community.)

² As noted in chapters 7, 8 and 9, in this case people in power can not be placed in the "second quadrant" or defined as "helpless" or self-defeating. If we consider ethic and human factors., their behavior is remarkably intelligent.



Here we find all results placed in the intelligence area,
with people in power gaining greater
advantage for themselves (+ in the “X-axis.”)

There are no “direction arrows” in this diagram because, in the most favorable circumstances, such a system can remain stable (or make slow progress, as indicated in the first graph.)

In a stabilized, or improving, situation people in power are likely to have greater advantages than the rest, but as this works for everyone’s benefit it isn’t a problem – as long as two (opposed but synergetic) stupidity factors don’t get into the picture: servility and envy.

I don’t want to complicate the picture, but I think there is one relevant comment. In some particularly efficient organizations (such as those called “quality circles”) the two areas overlap, because there is no hierarchy and responsibilities are shared. It’s a well known fact that this is the most “intelligent” form of human cooperation and it can produce extraordinary results.

Such systems are basically strong, but they are exposed to damage. They can be warped by internal problems, such as stupidity factors or power syndromes. Or they can suffer from unexpected changes in the environment – or be disrupted by intervention from the outside which (deliberately or by mistake) upsets their delicate balance.

The observation of history, and of some specific situations in today’s world, reveals that even in the most depressed periods or situations, and in the most degraded environments, there can be active nuclei of this kind. This confirms that intelligence, though rare, isn’t an anomaly. It’s a natural resource of human nature that can surface in any stage of evolution.

The demanding – but not unrealistic – task is to discover the existence, support the survival, encourage the development of these fruitful harmonies. And maybe help small sparks of light to become stronger sources of illumination.

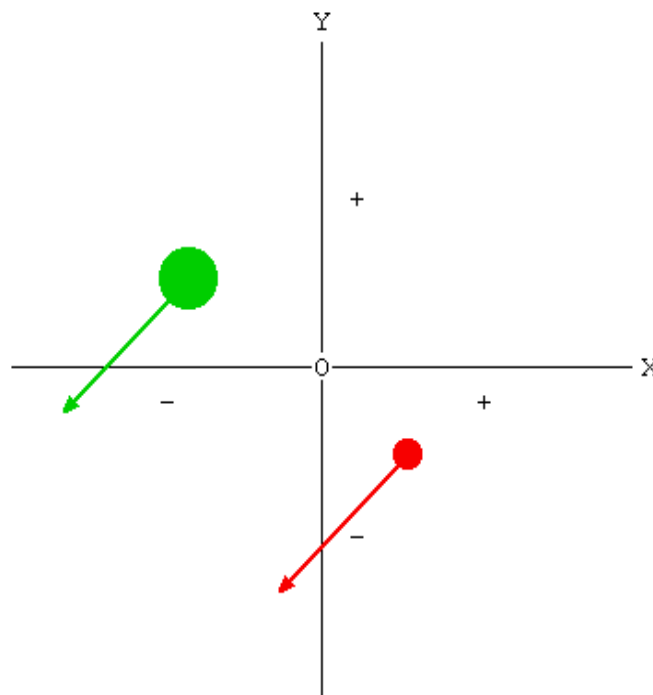
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After this short digression on intelligence we must go back to the unfortunately overwhelming subject – stupidity. Let’s take another look at history. We find that the stupidity of power doesn’t have the same impact at different times or in different situations.

At times of decline and fall we can assume that the general percentage of stupid people remains a constant, but we find that there is, especially among people in power, a higher concentration of “bandits”, who often tend to become stupid when the result of their behavior is evaluated considering the unbalance created by their role. While among people who are not in power there are more of those who, in this case, can be correctly called “helpless.”

One of the consequences is that the destructive power of stupidity is increased – and the resulting situation goes from bad to worse.

In this case the position of those in power, and of the rest of the people, is placed as we see in the next diagram.

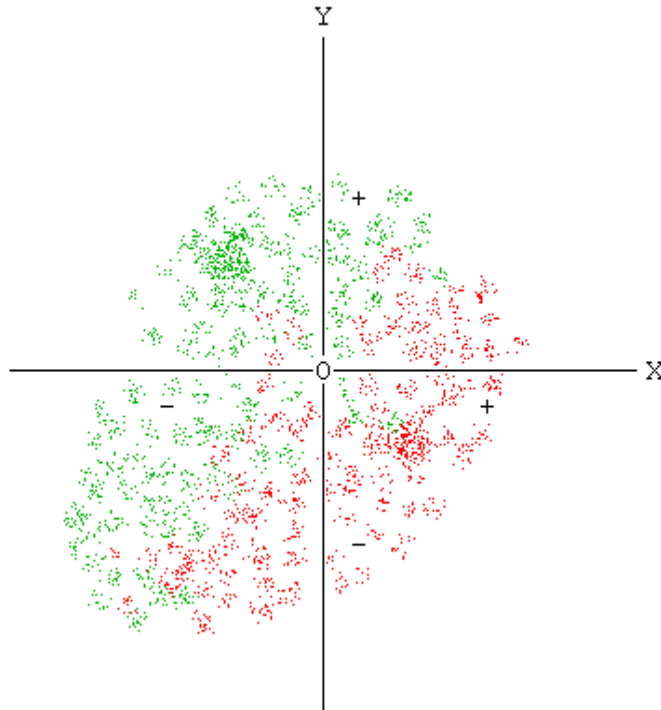


Behaviors and situations degrade, moving into the “third quadrant”, that is the area of stupidity.

It’s hard to understand, in this type of situation, if the stupidity of power increases the effect of widespread stupidity – or vice versa. In most cases both contribute to a “vicious circle” and so the entire system deteriorates, as shown by the arrows in the graph.

Sometimes this trend can be reversed, but that requires a very special combination: the convergence of intelligent people that can gain power and a strong collective thrust for substantial change.

In the absence of such an “intelligent mutation”, or of an outside influence that changes the basic criteria, over time the system tends to explode – that is, to disintegrate. As we see in the next (and last) graph.



If a “chaotic” situation occurs before there is irreparable damage to society as a whole, or to the entire ecosystem... almost anything can happen. A turbulent vortex generates countless openings for stupidity, but “intelligent” developments are not totally impossible.³

For the reasons that I have explained in chapter 3, comments here are only about the general criteria. We can all be free to apply them, as best they suit our purpose, to specific situations (from the general state of the planet to international communities or individual countries or any large or small organization.)

I just want to add that stupidity and intelligence, as other variables of human behavior, are not irreparably conditioned by genetic traits or cultural environments. They can change considerably with learning and experience.

We could draw all sorts of graphs or diagrams, or in any other way analyze facts and trends, not only to understand them better, but also to look for less stupid ways of coping with the problems. Not for the sake of dreaming (though, at times, it can be comforting) but to make real improvement. We know that it’s difficult, but it’s important to understand that it’s possible.

Understanding the diagrams in this chapter needs to be based on the definition of the “stupidology graph” as explained in chapter 8. Only here (not in other parts of the book) they are used to help focus on some examples – for those readers who appreciate their use.

On other subjects graphic “coordinates” are not particularly useful (and by mixing different criteria they can’t be developed coherently.)

In any case, for readers that find the diagrams boring or confusing, the concepts are fully developed in the text even when the graphs are not considered.

A summary of the book is online – stupidity.it

³ Some comments on this subject are at the end of the appendix *Simple Thoughts on Complexity*.