
The Fine Line Between Stubbornness and Stupidity



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One pathway to greatness is the ability to change one's mind when proven wrong.

Stubbornness isn't necessarily bad and can in fact be a virtue. Sometimes, as history has shown, people do the right thing by remaining steadfast to their beliefs. Take General Charles de Gaulle, who refused to admit defeat after France was overrun by Nazi Germany during World War II. Against overwhelming odds, he persuaded the French that they would ultimately prevail. His unwavering belief in the greatness of his country helped him turn his vision into reality. After the war, then President de Gaulle managed to secure a permanent seat for France on the United Nations Security Council. His determination earned France respect on the global stage.

At times, it is only by being stubborn that we can bring a great idea to life. Stubbornness makes us persevere. It helps us stand our ground when everyone else is trying to tell us that we are wrong. Used with discernment, stubbornness can be a strong leadership quality and a key determinant of success.

Because stubborn people know what they want, they tend to be more decisive. They have greater focus and they get things done. Qualities like vision, action orientation, grit, resilience and persistence are derivatives of stubbornness. We can even argue that perseverance is stubbornness with a purpose.

In the case of de Gaulle, stubbornness was a blessing. Unfortunately, there are not many of his ilk. This is because there are fine distinctions between wise stubbornness, ego-driven obstinacy and even sheer stupidity.

The ugly side of stubbornness

When there is overwhelming evidence that we are wrong, but we still insist on staying our own course, we must ask ourselves what motivates us to dig our heels in. What is happening in our inner world?

Conversely, when dealing with a stubborn person, we should not be fooled by outside appearances. Stubborn people may seem invincible, but there is a huge difference between a strong person and a stubborn person. Although stubborn people project strength and power, it is only a façade. Stubbornness is often a sign of insecurity and a way to hold on to a very fragile mental equilibrium. Truly strong people know how to compromise when necessary.

Stubborn people are often fearful of change, which explains the rigidity that characterises much of their behaviour. At an unconscious level, they perceive attempts to change their mind as personal attacks. Thus, they are always on their guard, lashing out at anyone who tries to question their ideas. Instead of accepting new information or entertain the possibility that someone else could be right, they prefer to argue their original point of view. Their insecurities make them ideal candidates for confirmation bias, i.e. the tendency to process information in ways that prop up one's belief system.

Transforming stubbornness into dogma

Stubbornness also touches on the dynamics of power. When stubborn people perceive a threat to their dignity, honour or pride, they may resort to power games in which there can only be winners and losers. The idea that guides them is that, "If I'm not stubborn, people will walk all over me." But stubbornness soon becomes a self-defeating exercise.

Another characteristic of stubborn people is their tendency to categorise people as “good” or “bad,” depending on whether they agree with their ideas. With a preference for simplistic, black-and-white thinking, devoid of uncertainty or disagreement, they are often prejudiced and resort to stereotyping.

Given stubborn people’s closed-mindedness, this behaviour pattern comes to full fruition when it involves religions, ideologies, political philosophies or economics. Embedded opinions in these areas are the hardest to change, as they are more subject to personal judgment and idiosyncratic interpretation. One can just think about Brexit, an issue around which political and economic ideologies have trumped reason.

Dealing with stubborn people

Because stubbornness contributes to interpersonal conflict, stubborn people sometimes see a need to change. In most instances, trying to change by themselves will be hard. If they do seek help – whether from a significant other, family member, friend, colleague or professional advisor – this individual had better possess a generous dose of empathy.

The first step is to understand the story behind the stubbornness. This involves uncovering some of the experiences that led to this maladaptive behaviour. Stubbornness often arises as a survival mechanism.

Given stubborn people’s instinctive fear of being controlled by others, helpers must tread lightly. They need to go with the flow and control any impulse to move directly against the defences of the stubborn person. Instead, they should practise a form of emotional judo. Whatever resistances stubborn people put up – and however irritating they may be – helpers should try to remain empathic. Arguing with stubborn people will not pay off.

Helpers must be extremely careful not only about *what* to say but also *when* to say it. When the time is right to present a different opinion, it should be done very respectfully. If this emotional judo is done correctly, stubborn people may consider the other point of view, even though they may initially reject it. Most importantly, helpers need to understand that for stubborn people to change, they must believe the change is their own idea.

No quick-fix

People can only change if they are prepared to explore why they do what they do and discover different ways to deal with life. Stubborn people will profit from becoming more aware of the underlying issues behind their compulsion to be right. Through psychotherapy or coaching, they may come to recognise how their inadequacy-fuelled rigidity has complicated their lives.

Gradually, they may discover that their need for argument and conflict is abating. They may learn to appreciate the value of looking at issues from different perspectives; they may even start to appreciate ambiguity. They may slowly unlearn old defence mechanisms and replace them with more constructive ones.

Developing a more stable sense of self-worth is never a quick fix. The hope is, however, that stubborn people will realise that although the world is full of individuals who think they are right, an individual's strength and pathway to greatness is the ability to admit fault when a wrong decision has been made.

Without reflection, stubbornness is nothing more than plain stupidity.

Find article at

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/leadership-organisations/fine-line-between-stubbornness-and-stupidity>

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