

The Wondrous Value of Incompetence

By Justin Locke

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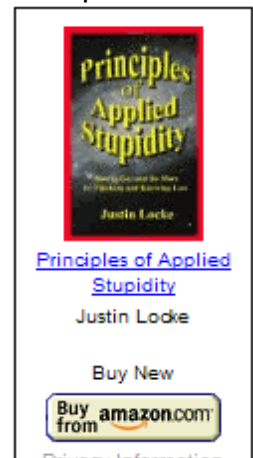
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Ignorance and incompetence are underappreciated. There may be a lot to say for training, knowledge, and expertise, but with so much emphasis being placed on acquiring more and more knowledge (especially by those in the knowledge-peddling business) a dose of ignorance these days can offer incredible value.



I first realized that the value of knowledge was overinflated when I was an aspiring teenage bass player in Ohio. I took lessons with a number of well-known university-level double bass instructors. These instructors were all brilliant, no doubt about it. They had all devoted their lives to the art and technique of playing the bass. They had published books and articles, they had formulated theories and methods, and they had all analyzed bass playing to an extraordinary level. Whenever I had a lesson with one of these superstar teachers, I was mesmerized by their knowledge of the double bass.

Unfortunately, since all I could think about was how brilliant they all were, I didn't get any better myself. I could never imagine myself doing all the many technical feats that they described in minute detail. I felt stupid when I dared to practice for my next lesson, for in the presence of such great teachers I felt like I was nothing. I only practiced to avoid quaking in my boots with shame for not having done so. In my heart, I felt practicing was pointless, for no matter how much I practiced, I knew these teachers would find, and carefully point out, every little error I was making.



I also knew that they would then offer ever more suggestions for improvement, far more than a mere mortal like me could ever hope to comprehend or implement. There were so many things I didn't know how to do, it all seemed hopeless. I felt that I could never play at their level, no matter how hard I might try. So I didn't try. My one solace was I was able to say that I was studying, however pointlessly, with some truly brilliant teachers.

The result? I became just another average high school bass player.

When I graduated high school, I wound up taking lessons with a fellow who I knew as



“Uncle Bob.” Uncle Bob played the bass in the Boston Symphony. He had a reputation for turning out quite a few highly successful bass players. He had a very liberal policy about who he would accept as a student, so despite my mediocre audition, I found myself studying with him.

I assumed that lessons with Uncle Bob would be similar to my experiences with my previous double bass instructors.

I was wrong.

Uncle Bob didn’t teach in some fancy well-appointed conservatory studio. Instead, I would take a train to his house in the suburbs, and the lessons took place in his living room. It was a very small room, made ever smaller by the presence of at least 500 figurines of little bass players that were made out everything from blown glass to wrought iron. I had to fit myself in between the TV set, the ottoman, and the fireplace pokers. One could hear his wife rattling pots and pans in the adjoining kitchen, louder or softer depending on their level of marital conflict that day.

Lessons with Uncle Bob were something of a communal affair. Anyone who happened to be around would sit in on them, including friends, neighbors, visiting relatives, other students, the mailman, or Pinky, Uncle Bob’s poodle.

The many oddities of the physical environment were nothing compared to the presence of the man himself. Uncle Bob weighed something like 400 pounds. He was also a chain smoker and an alcoholic.

In between his scarfing down Kentucky Fried Chicken, lighting up a Benson and Hedges 100, and chugging a bottle of Creme de Menthe, I would play something for Uncle Bob out of a lesson book. Unlike the great pedagogues of the Midwest, however, Uncle Bob offered no in-depth analysis of niggling little technical issues. Even on those rare occasions when he roused himself to articulate actual words, all he would say is, “Sounds great. Play some more.” It didn’t matter how I played anything. I could screw up royally or play reasonably well. In either case, I always got the same, drowsy, vaguely slurred response: “Sounds great. Play some more.” There were times when he actually watched television during the lessons.

Not knowing what else to do, I went through the same motions at these lessons that I had with my previous teachers – or at least I tried to. Each week I would put in the bare minimum amount of practicing required of me, then I would dutifully and obsequiously come in to each lesson expecting to hear a concise inventory of my personal deficiencies. I also assumed that, as in past lessons with other teachers, this would be followed by a lengthy lecture on various technical methods to be used to fix them. I waited patiently, but this never happened. All I heard, week after week, was “Sounds great. Play some more.”



This went for about a year before I finally said to myself, “Hey – this guy is an idiot. I’m never going to learn anything from him. Sure, he plays in the Boston Symphony, but if someone this dumb can do it, how hard can it be?”

And so I started to practice in an entirely different way. I was quite certain that, pathetic though I may have been, I could certainly be at least as good – or at least, not quite so pathetic – as one current member of the Boston Symphony Orchestra.

At the time, I thought Uncle Bob was pretty stupid. But now I know he was not as dumb as he looked. He was using the Principles of Applied Stupidity.

Instead of overwhelming me with information, he did the opposite. By playing the role of dumb observer, he created an intellectual vacuum. Even though I did my best to avoid having to make the effort of filling that vacuum, he outdid me at every turn. His feigned stupidity had no limits. It was not uncommon, after playing that week’s assignment, to look up and discover that Uncle Bob had fallen asleep. He was not going to fill the air with any of his own intelligence. By emulating total stupidity, he succeeded where all my other brilliant teachers had failed. By “out-stupiding” me, he forced me to fill that intellectual vacuum with learning of my own making.

Before meeting Uncle Bob, I had unwittingly become an expert in stupidity emulation myself. In my past lessons, and in many other so-called learning environments, I had learned how to seem both pathetic and dumb, thereby creating an informational vacuum. All of my previous teachers had fallen into my little trap; they would always step right up and fill that vacuum with lengthy displays of their own knowledge. I saved myself a huge amount of work simply by keeping my mouth shut and letting them have the pleasure of believing they were smarter than me. It’s amazing just how many students use this technique without even knowing it.

The difference with Uncle Bob was that, by pre-emptively emulating total stupidity himself, he reversed the roles of who was “smarter.” He forced me to take charge of the situation and actually look at my deficiencies myself.

Once I stopped feeling obliged to be the “dumber” person, my thinking was no longer limited by a belief that I had to completely conform my approach to someone else’s. My mind was no longer concerned with what Uncle Bob might think, for, in Uncle Bob’s emulated total stupidity environment, it was blatantly obvious that listening to him was a total waste of time.

Once I realized that Uncle Bob had no interest in trying to look smarter than me, the flow of information reversed. Instead of looking outside, I discovered (much to my amazement) that I had a virtually infinite capability *inside* of myself to recognize, analyze, and solve just about any technical problem I had. It is truly astonishing just how quickly a total change in my playing manifested itself.



A year later I was playing with the Boston Pops.

Some people think I'm talented. I'm not. I just happen to be the beneficiary (or the victim) of the Principles of Applied Stupidity. They removed all the limitations that held me back in an intelligent environment. I'm living proof that stupidity can work wonders where intelligence and careful thought have no chance of succeeding.

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Justin Locke is a speaker based in Boston. He spent 18 seasons playing the bass with the Boston Pops, and he is the author of several books, including "Real Men Don't Rehearse" (a musical memoir) and "Principles of Applied Stupidity," a look at how to be more productive and effective by going against the conventional wisdom. See more by visiting his website at www.justinlocke.com.

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