



ESSAYS

The Idols of Organizational Theory From Francis Bacon to the Dilbert Principle

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The comic strip Dilbert has been commercially successful in portraying dysfunctional aspects of the workplace. However, it is not well linked to related academic work, and its descriptive success is not matched by its prescriptive usefulness. This article (a) employs Francis Bacon's "idols of the mind" framework (b) to organize academic research in the field of organizational theory (c) for the purposes of better understanding the Dilbert principle and outlining appropriate coping mechanisms or, if changeable, managerial actions to address its different root causes.

The comic strip *Dilbert* has found an audience in corporate America. It has spawned several best-selling books and numerous popular Internet sites, has received prominent mention in such business publications as *Fortune* and *Business Week*, and is common fodder for cubicle bulletin boards across corporate America. At its foundation is a simple ontology, termed "the Dilbert principle" (Adams, 1996), which states the following: "People are idiots."

The overwhelming public response to Scott Adams's thesis is YES! Adams's book jacket reports that *The Wall Street Journal* reviewer called *The Dilbert Principle* "the best management book I have ever read." The *Washington Times* called it "the management book of the century." Even management guru Michael Hammer is quoted as commenting that it

"provides the best window into the reality of corporate life that I've ever seen." Moreover, *The Tampa Tribune* ("Dilbert: A Prophet," 1996) reports, "Ye who seek managerial enlightenment: Worship not at the feet of Peter Drucker. Forsake the search for excellence. Turn thy head from quality circles. Dilbert is the new management messiah." To add further perspective to *Dilbert's* popularity, the comic strip has more than 1,000 newspaper clients worldwide, is read by more than 60 million people daily, its Internet site receives over 500,000 hits weekly, and Adams himself receives between 350 and 800 e-mail messages each day.

Dilbert's popularity indicates that Adams's thesis has an overwhelming bottom-up, grassroots appeal. In contrast to ivory-tower conceptions of management, Adams's commentary is one of the few perspec-

tives on organizations that is practitioner driven. In this sense, it has similar beginnings as the writings of Barnard and Sloan. Adams confesses that now his comic strip is essentially written by the people living it, that is, by workers' e-mails and other correspondence. It therefore offers a less filtered (and potentially more valid) representation of what is really happening in organizations, albeit an atheoretical one. This contrast between normative theory and Adams's realistic explanations probably accounts for much of *Dilbert's* popularity.

Adams demonstrates his thesis through humorous stories and cartoons. Most of *The Dilbert Principle* is spent comically portraying such phenomena as humiliation in the workplace, getting your way, performance reviews, meetings, marketing, sales, project management, downsizing, and team building. But the question that goes largely unanswered is, Why are people idiots? Adams's precursory, somewhat evolutionary explanation is that the complexity of life has increased at a greater pace than humans' capacity to manage it. This is consistent with arguments advanced by Toffler (1970) and others. However, this abstract reasoning is too global and hence of little practical use to managers. Although Adams is clearly effective at illustrating the principle (the commercial, more profitable avenue), he spends less time and is less effective at tracing the root source(s) of people's idiocy so that it can be better understood (the academic alternative) and perhaps even reduced through effective management practices (the practical alternative). This is something Adams readily admits, stating in a *Newsday* interview (Locke & Kitchen, 1997) that

for every person who's a manager and wants to know how to manage people, there are ten people who are being managed and would like to figure out how to make it stop. You have a choice of appealing to the one or to the ten, and I simply choose the ten.

Therefore, given the Dilbert principle's wide appeal, we as scholars and managers have several options for using Adams's insights: (a) *Dilbert* is an outlet for frustration, disappointment, or perhaps futility in understanding the complexities and dysfunctional aspects of human business interactions, or (b) *Dilbert* is an opportunity and challenge to systematically dissect the idiocy that infects human business interactions. The assumption of the former approach is that people cannot change or be changed, and its practical implication is that organizations should try

and muddle along while attempting to idiot-proof the workplace. The assumption of the latter approach is that people can change or be changed, and its practical implication is that organizations should offer appropriate methods for reducing the idiocy and its dysfunctional consequences in a world of Dilbert.

Of the two, the former approach is most often taken. By Adams's own admission ("The Anti-Management Guru," 1997), Dilbert is typically used as "a safety valve, a harmless way for disenchanted employees to laugh off their anxieties." This article adopts the latter perspective, which is the road less traveled. However, some precedent exists. For instance, Debra Comer of Hofstra University and Gayle Porter of Rutgers University are reported to use *Dilbert* comic strips to spur discussions in their classes, providing a contrast to what Comer terms the textbook "utopian view of the world of work," which holds that "if you're a conscientious, dedicated, smart person, you'll get ahead" (Locke & Kitchen, 1997). Also, the *Los Angeles Times* (Hamilton, 1997) recently featured a debate on management practices between *Dilbert Principle* character Dogbert and noted academic Warren Bennis.

This article represents another attempt at answering the challenge by adopting a phenomenological perspective (cf. Daft & Lewin, 1990) to understanding the rationale implicit in Adams's theory. To this point, I draw on the philosophical work of Francis Bacon (1620/1861) as well as more contemporary research in organizational theory (OT). Specifically, the article uses Bacon's "four idols which beset man's mind" to organize OT concepts into a multitiered explanation for suboptimal behavior in the workplace (i.e., why people sometimes act like idiots). It then explores two alternative scenarios: (a) If this idiocy cannot be changed, it explores coping mechanisms that can be employed, and (b) if this idiocy can be changed, it develops a typology of managerial actions that can address the different types of trappings manifest in organizations.

PHILOSOPHY AND OT

This article seeks to merge thinking in philosophy and OT to better understand and address the Dilbert principle. Therefore, a brief description of the literature is appropriate. Philosophy is at its core the study of the meaning of life. It is composed of five fields concerning (a) logic, the study of ideal method of thought; (b) esthetics, the study of ideal form or beauty; (c) eth-

ics, the study of ideal conduct; (d) politics, the study of ideal social organization; and (e) metaphysics, the study of ultimate reality and knowledge (Durant, 1961). Philosophy is distinguished by many great thinkers who have struggled with many of the same fundamental questions and human implications faced today in the social sciences. Thus, it would be a mistake to ignore their ideas when exploring issues relevant to structure and behavior in organizations.

OT is a body of thought concerned with the function and management of social systems at both micro and macro levels of analysis (Astley & Van de Ven, 1983). OT is a synthesis of streams and disciplines such as psychology, sociology, anthropology, political science, industrial engineering, general systems theory, decision theory, economics, mathematics, and practitioner experience (Koontz, 1980). Its development has been marked by a progression from (a) classic doctrines such as scientific management and bureaucracy; (b) neoclassical theory such as human relations, power and politics, and decision-making schools; and (c) modern theory such as contingency, communication networks, and open systems models (Perrow, 1973; W. G. Scott, 1961) to (d) radical structuralist theory. The elements or major subject areas of OT include leadership, power and politics, culture, learning, decision making, goals, performance, structure and design, technology, strategy, environments, innovation, and change (W. R. Scott, 1992).

It is often said that the more things change the more they remain the same. This certainly appears to be true of our discipline. The context-specific answers generated by OT can largely be seen as derivative of the general questions, issues, and debates raised long ago in philosophy.

Consider, for example, the following lines of inquiry: How can we be internally consistent in our thoughts and actions? What are the limits of human reasoning? What are the motives of individuals and the goals of collectives? What is an appropriate code of behavior? and How should governance mechanisms be constructed? These questions are fundamentally philosophical but become managerial when applied to the specific domain of organizations. Thus, it may be useful for theory development if we consider the arguments and insights of history's greatest thinkers.

Indeed, a philosophical approach to exploring OT is useful insofar as it informs the fundamental concepts, explains divergency of theories, and answers various questions and objectives of our discipline.

Hartman's (1988) survey of the conceptual foundations of OT attempted to ground our discipline in an underlying logic and fundamental questions. Hartman argued that a discipline can only "free itself from philosophy" when it develops a precise vocabulary and agreed-upon rules and evaluative criteria: OT is far from such a consensus (Pfeffer, 1993). Another effort to relate the theories of OT to the underlying issues of philosophy was undertaken by Burrell and Morgan (1979), who observed within the fundamentally sociological debates between objectivism versus subjectivism and regulation versus radicalism four philosophically based paradigms of organizational analysis. Morgan (1986) continued this analysis in his metaphor-based attempt to categorize organizational theories into different "frames," many of which were linked to philosophical roots. A fourth attempt at uniting philosophy and OT is represented by Badaracco's (1992) survey of different spheres of business ethics that developed a system of three areas based in philosophy and manifest in OT theories.

These authors have surveyed some of the philosophical roots of the major paradigms and metaphors of our literature. In addition to this approach to uniting the disciplines, another strategy would be to classify OT perspectives by their emphases on different aspects of a single philosopher or philosophy. That is, one can also exploit the overlap between philosophy and OT by exploring the manner in which current theories take up one or more features of a philosophical framework. In the philosophy of the 17th-century Englishman Francis Bacon we can find such a basis for organizing many of the perspectives of our field.

Francis Bacon saw philosophy as an endeavor best concerned with "the real business and fortunes of the human race" (if only all academics were so inclined!). He sought to answer questions that dealt with the nature and origin of knowledge (epistemology) as well as its practical application to human affairs. In perhaps his greatest work, the *Novum Organum*, Bacon (1620/1861) attempted to discover how we could advance our understanding and subsequent usefulness through systematic observation and empirical analyses. Primary in this endeavor was the detection and correction of human prejudices and fallacies or, as Bacon termed them, false idols.

The foundations and objectives of OT do not differ significantly from Bacon's, though they do apply their principles to a more specific domain. The basis of OT can be found in its attempt to increase theoretical, empirical, and practical understanding of business

and other types of organizations. Much of the emphasis of OT researchers, like Bacon's, is on detecting suboptimizing behaviors, strategies, cultures, or configurations and suggesting remedial action. Thus, the remainder of the article traces Bacon's idols to OT concepts and then to the Dilbert principle, culminating in managerial recommendations for managing in the world of Dilbert.

THE IDOLS WHICH BESET MAN'S MIND (OR, SOURCES OF IDIOCY)

To Bacon, "knowledge is power." Exploring this aphorism, Bacon sees knowledge as the ability to perceive, interpret, and generalize from the senses. Power is represented by one's command over events rather than events' command over him or her. Therefore, Bacon argued that nothing can be consistently controlled, altered, or predicted without first being understood. His first step in furthering our understanding is to identify and purge the idols of our minds (i.e., sources of idiocy, from *The Dilbert Principle*). He argues that man is handicapped by different types of false ideas in his efforts to understand the world and act objectively. These idols become deeply rooted in our minds to the extent that they take possession of them, strongly resisting our efforts to understand the world and act rationally within it. Bacon believed that we can guard against these idols only if we become aware of what they are and how they mislead thinking and fortify ourselves against their assaults. These idols were proposed to fall into four categories: (a) idols of the tribe, (b) idols of the cave, (c) idols of the marketplace, and (d) idols of the theatre.

Idols of the tribe are common to all humans because their source is human nature itself. These idols arise from imperfect perceptions and imperfect interpretations inherent in the human capacity for observation and thought. Most basic, what we see is not objective reality but our limited conception of it, thereby biasing the very foundation of learning by distorting the information on which knowledge and understanding are based. Similar to Einstein's ideas on relativity, reality is imperfectly represented by people in general differently because "the human mind is like a false mirror, which, receiving rays irregularly, distorts and discolors the nature of things by mingling its own nature with it" (Bacon, 1620/1861, p. XLI). Idols of the tribe

arise from the "dullness, incompetence, and deception of the senses" (p. L). Consequently, this idol is manifest in our superstitions (because we are reluctant to abandon simple interpretations even when contrary evidence is found); in a general unwillingness to recognize the limitations of our abilities to understand the world (because of a need for comprehensible meaning and order); in emotion swaying us from reason; and, ultimately, in the systematic deceits of our perceptions (due to the defects of our sense organs and the boundaries of our capabilities to interpret them). Thus, we can say that they refer to idiocy due to human perceptual and interpretational limitations.

Idols of the cave are peculiar to individuals. They represent erroneous conceptions resulting from individual predilections, specifically due to the mental and bodily idiosyncrasies of different individuals. We all have diverse backgrounds, therefore, we "refract and discolor the light of nature" (Bacon, 1620/1861, p. XLII) and construct reality based on the interests and values inherent in these backgrounds. Whether biased by our unique education, culture, readings, authorities, or acquaintances, we are all dwellers of our own caves. Using Plato's famous cave analogy, whereas the idols of the tribe emerge from our collective attempts to decipher truth from shadows, the idols of the cave represent the individual differences in the fires we light and the frames and perspectives we adopt. Idols of the cave arise from "peculiar constitution, mental or bodily, education, habit, and accident" (p. LIII). Bacon gave particular emphasis to the idols caused by "predominance of a favorite subject . . . excessive tendency . . . or out of partiality" (p. LVIII). For example, these idols are manifest in our different cognitive styles (emphasis on differences or similarities), different time orientations (emphasis on past versus future), and different decision-making styles (emphasis on programs versus creativity). Thus, we can say that they refer to idiocy due to individual backgrounds and biases.

Idols of the marketplace are contingent on the patterns of "intercourse and association of men" (Bacon, 1620/1861, p. XLIII). In short, they represent confused ideas resulting from the nonsensical or loose (e.g., vague or ambiguous) use of language. Thus, the prejudicial nature of communication and of definitions is seen by Bacon (1620/1861) as yet another impediment to objective and accurate understanding. "Empty controversies and idle fancies" (p. XLIII) are the result of

subjective and flawed communication and other means of interaction. To Bacon, these are the most troublesome of all, for they arise from the equivocality of socially constructed (e.g., Berger & Luckman, 1967) “words and names” and influence fundamental disagreements over definitions. Idols imposed by words fall into two categories: names for things that do not exist and names for things that exist but are confused and ill defined. Thus, we can say that they refer to idiocy due to interpersonal and group communication.

Idols of the theatre are systemic. These biases emerge from the dogma, ideology, and institutionalized false arguments of past works. Bacon (1620/1861) argued that they have been instituted mainly through “tradition, credulity, and negligence” (p. XLIV), whereby the drivers of truth are not scientific but instead based on fashion, networks, and/or flawed practices. These idols are not innate but instead imposed by systems and regulations. In other words, faulty principles, axioms, and assumptions can also skew understanding and bias action. Specifically, they take the form of maladaptive principles and rules that create systems that suppress rather than harness human potential. In Bacon’s words, “The lame man who keeps to the right road outstrips the runner who takes the wrong one.” Thus, we can say that they refer to idiocy due to systems and context (e.g., organization structure).

To further differentiate the idols from each other, a computer-based analogy is employed. Idols of the tribe have their foundation in human nature, or inadequate hardware (limited capacity). Idols of the cave have their foundation in individual differences, or inadequate software (peculiar styles and predilections). Idols of the marketplace have their foundation in language, or inadequate modem hookups and network connections (communication breakdowns). Idols of the theatre have their foundation in rules and systems, or inadequate corporate policies regarding programming and usage (ill-fitted structures and procedures).

IDOLS AND OT (OR, ELEMENTS OF IDIOCY)

Idols of the tribe. Idols of the tribe are sources of idiocy due to human attention and perceptual limitations. Perception and attention are important insofar as they influence the distribution of energies as well as

the assignment of slack in organizations (March, 1988). Many OT theorists have advanced our knowledge of specific tribe-based limitations that affect organizational life. For example, Simon (1976) told us that because of our limited knowledge of alternatives, consequences, and preferences, as well as our limited ability to process information, we operate under bounded rationality. Because of these bounds, we engage in restricted searches and routines, develop a simplified model of the world, and satisfice (versus optimize) to predetermined aspiration levels. Kahneman and Tversky (1979) made us aware that the reference point we adopt in processing information has a powerful impact on whether we perceive potential gains or potential losses, and this perception influences our behavior toward risk-averse or risk-seeking ends. Weick (1979) similarly, but perhaps most directly, argued that our perceptions are our reality. More specifically, he told us that we enact or create our own environments through the bracketing of ambiguous information in an effort to reduce deviations in our understandings, often resulting in self-fulfilling prophecy.

Adams’s (1996) views on change and change management are based in the idols of the tribe:

People hate change, and with good reason. Change makes us stupider, relatively speaking. Change adds new information to the universe; information that we don’t know. Our knowledge—as a percentage of all the things that can be known—goes down a tick every time something changes. And frankly, if we’re talking about a percentage of the total knowledge in the universe, most of us aren’t that many basis points superior to our furniture to begin with. . . . The goal of change management is to dupe slow-witted employees into thinking change is good for them. (p. 198)

One can also see Adam’s views on leadership here:

Any good leader operates under the assumption that the people being led are astonishingly gullible. . . . The most important skill for any leader is to take credit for things that happen on their own. In primitive times, tribal chieftains would claim credit for the change in seasons and the fact that wood floats. They had the great advantage of the ignorance of the masses working in their favor. (p. 288)

I don’t mean for this chapter to imply that leadership is the same as a con job. The differences are substantial, in the sense that leadership pays much more and doesn’t require quick wits. (p. 310)

Dilbert: I'm CEO, what am I supposed to do?

Advisor: You're supposed to make superficial statements about how good the company is, then hope something lucky happens and profits go up. It's called leadership, sir.

Dilbert: Make it so. (p. 289)

Adams also commented that one's height and the quality of one's hair are essential to be selected as a leader. In this reference to perceptual simplification and halo effects he writes,

Boss: Dilbert, I'd like you to meet Ben, our newest fast-track manager. Ben has no real experience but he's very tall, so we know we'll go far.

Ben: I also have executive-style hair.

Boss: We think it will turn silver. (p. 309)

Idols of the cave. Idols of the cave are sources of idiocy due to individual backgrounds and preferences. The effect of cave-related biases on organizational processes have been explored by several OT researchers. For example, Dearborn and Simon (1958) and others showed us that the base of an individual's judgment (e.g., attitudes, interests, training) exerts a strong influence on how he or she interprets and subsequently reacts to his or her environment. This premise is reinforced in the motivation literature (e.g., Alderfer, 1969; McClelland, 1961), where, for instance, McClelland (1985) argued that our motives for achievement, affiliation, and power determine what we do. Individuals with a high need for achievement will take moderate risks, whereas those with a high need for power may be more likely to engage in political activity.

Adams's (1996) views on the differences between marketers and engineers are based in the idols of the cave:

If the Engineering Department keeps asking for market requirements, [marketers can] take one of these approaches: (1) Insist that you've already specified the requirements when you said it should be "high quality and low cost." Complain to the engineer's boss that the engineer is stalling. (2) Ask the engineer to tell you all the things that are possible plus the associated cost so that you can choose the best solution. Complain to the engineer's boss that the engineer is uncooperative. (3) Specify market requirements that are either technically or logically impossible. Complain to the engineer's boss that the engineer is not being a can-do person. . . . Engineers are the natural enemy of marketing people. (pp. 144-145)

However, engineers' myopia and personal characteristics do not escape the wrath of Adams:

Engineer 1: I think it was fifty gigabits.

Engineer 2: I think you mean *megabits*.

All: (much laughter)

Engineer 3: We're so fun-loving. You'd think one of us would have a friend outside of work. (p. 170)

Engineer Identification Test: You walk into a room and notice that a picture is hanging crooked. You . . . (a) straighten it. (b) Ignore it. (c) Buy a CAD [computer-aided design] system and spend the next six months designing a solar-powered, self-adjusting picture frame while often stating aloud your belief that the inventor of the nail was a total moron. (p. 172)

Idols of the marketplace. Idols of the marketplace are sources of idiocy due to interpersonal and group communication. The effect of suboptimal communication in organizations, both intentional (i.e., political) and unintentional, has been explored by many researchers. For example, Daft and Lengel (1984) demonstrated that mismatches between the complexity of our messages and the richness of the channels we select to convey these messages can result in poor communication due to overcomplication (too much irrelevant "noise") or oversimplification (too few cues). In addition, Whetton and Cameron (1995) informed us that communication can be biased by nonsupportiveness or the engendering of defensiveness and disconfirmation. This may occur through overly evaluative or person-oriented correspondence.

Thus, idols of the marketplace can arise because of unintentional inaccuracies or nonsupportiveness. For example, communication can be biased because someone uses the wrong medium and undercomplicates a message (e.g., sending a memo to division heads to announce a major strategic alliance) or because someone is overly person oriented in their communication (e.g., telling someone they are always wrong when in fact only the action they committed happened to be wrong in the specific context in which it was taken). They may also arise because of intended manipulation. March (1962, 1988) highlighted this in his discussions of organizations as arenas of negotiations and shifting coalitions where conflicting preferences, power relations, and political behavior affect the transmittance of information; the relationships between participants; and, ultimately, the control of the firm. Political gamesmanship often results in dis-

torted objectives, suboptimized division of labor, and displaced goals (Mintzberg, 1983).

Adams's (1996) views on business communication are based in the idols of the marketplace. To illustrate, consider the following examples:

The real objective of business communication is to advance your career. That objective is generally at odds with the notion of "clear transfer of information." (p. 35)

Boss: Good report, but change the word "use" to "utilize" in each case. Change "help" to "facilitate" and replace "do" with "implementation phase." Hmm . . . it's still a bit too readable.

Dilbert: I could reduce the type size and run it through the fax. (p. 46)

Chapters on "great lies of management" (e.g., "We reward risk-takers," "I haven't heard any rumors," "We don't shoot the messenger"), "humiliation" (e.g., cubicles, dress clothes, and so forth as methods for lowering self-esteem), "meetings" (e.g., a type of performance art), and "Machiavellian methods" (e.g., provide bad advice, shade the truth, withhold information) also speak to idols of the marketplace. Consider the disconfirmatory message sent by cubicles:

Boss: We've got a lot of empty cubicles because of downsizing. I hired the Dogbert construction company to convert part of the office into prison cells which we'll lease to the state.

Dilbert: Sounds like a big job.

Dogbert: Nah, a little paint, new carpet, and we're there.

The chapter on Machiavellian methods "contains many surefire tips for gaining wealth and power at the expense of people who are studying to be team players" (Adams, 1996, p. 62). For example:

Dilbert: Wally, you never really answered the question I left on your voice mail. Is this a case of simple incompetence or a preview of something far more sinister?

Wally: It's the sinister one. I've adopted a defensive strategy. I'm withholding information to make myself appear more valuable. Now I only return phone calls late at night and leave incomplete answers. In person I act over-worked and irrational so people stop asking questions. If cornered, I sigh deeply and recount old war stories that don't relate to the question." (Adams, 1996, p. 68)

Idols of the theatre. Idols of the theatre are sources of idiocy due to contextual circumstances. The impact of these theatre-related biases on organizations has been studied by OT researchers at many levels. For exam-

ple, the dysfunctional consequences of the bureaucratic theatre (a favorite target of Dilbert) bracketing organizational life has been examined by several authors. March and Simon's (1958) seminal work detailed some of the idols discussed by Merton (excess rigidity), Selznick (subgoal displacement and conflicting interests), and Gouldner (satisficing behaviors and increased tension). In addition, Kerr (1975) explained how misguided reward systems lead people to poor performance. The larger theatre, or interorganizational institutions, has also been shown to constrain human behavior and limit innovation, for instance, through extreme isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991). Isomorphism is a constraining process that forces one unit to resemble others through coercive, mimetic, or normative pressures. J. W. Meyer (1991) even argued that these legitimizing pressures of institutions "tend to lower the structural rationality of formal organizations" (p. 263), and J. W. Meyer and Rowan (1991) argued that formal structures of organizations often reflect the myths of their institutional environment rather than the demands of their technologies and core activities.

Adams's (1996) representations of "pretending to work" (e.g., by using computers), "budgeting" (e.g., padding your budget, spending it all), "business plans" (e.g., padding predictions, adopting unrealistic assumptions), and "ISO 9000" (e.g., overdocumentation) are derivative of dysfunctional work contexts and, hence, based in the idols of the theatre. For example, due to the perverseness of many performance appraisal systems, Adams argued that it makes sense for workers to work on projects with no verifiable results and to avoid jobs that can be measured. As a result, micro logic (i.e., what is best for the individual) is different from macro logic (i.e., what is best for the company). Also, consider the following illustrations of contextual dysfunctions manifest in budgeting and downsizing.

Dilbert: On the advice of [Dogbert], I'm asking for an additional ten million dollars for my project. That will make a more spectacular failure, thus guaranteeing a promotion for me.

Boss: As your boss, I'd get recognition too. . . . Okay. (p. 206)

Dogbert: I've been asked to reduce headcount. To be fair about it I created a scientific algorithm to decide who goes.

Executive 1: I thought you were firing the employees with the highest salaries.

Dogbert: Okay, maybe "algorithm" is an overstatement. (p. 255)

IDOLS AND THE DILBERT PRINCIPLE— PART I (OR, WAYS TO IDIOT-PROOF)

If Scott Adams is right that people are only a “few base points superior to our furniture” with respect to their ability to understand what’s going on around them and act in a rational manner, then it follows that any such effort would prove futile because the raw material managers have to work with isn’t up to the task. That is to say, the age-old idols of the mind are irreversible. We cannot overcome our bounded rationality or escape our perceptual limitations (tribe), see beyond our training and motivations (cave), communicate with perfect accuracy or supportiveness (marketplace), or create wise structures and institutions. This is probably why so many OT-based interventions work so poorly.

To be fair, one objection to the assertion that people are idiots (and hopelessly idiotic at that) is based in the argument made by Nisbett and Ross (1980) that “if we’re so dumb, how come we made it to the moon?” To this point, Bacon (1620/1861) warned that any attempt to praise the accomplishments of man in the sciences and arts should be tempered by the recognition of how ignorant we still are in these areas. For example, how much do we really know about the moon (or the earth, for that matter), and how many celestial bodies have we yet to explore? He added that quite ironically, much of our knowledge is set forth with such ambition and parade that it comes across as more complete than it really is.

So the question remains how managers can idiot-proof their organizations (see Table 1). Regarding idols of the tribe, organizations need to simplify (or dumb down) jobs and uncomplicate roles so as to remove many of the demands required of their employees. That is, if humans are inherently bounded, then dumb down jobs so that job requirements are within the capacity range of the job occupants. This is similar in spirit to Taylor’s (1911) ideas on job design. For example, given that information-processing ability is limited, jobs should be designed with limited discretion and cognitive requirements. Also, because sensory information is framed, jobs should provide appropriate reference points (e.g., goals, criteria). Thus, the goal of dumbing down jobs is to decrease demands.

Regarding idols of the cave, organizations need to program jobs and functions so as to remove the judgment component from decision making. The issue here is not capacity but differences in individuals’ pre-

dilections. For example, the effects of attitudes, interests, and training can be neutralized if these factors are not given the opportunity to exert an influence on the role-occupant’s decisions because there are explicit rules and regulations governing the execution of that role. Moreover, the influence of tangential motivations (e.g., politicking) can be limited if there are strict guidelines for behavior with little gray area. Thus, the goal of programming is to decrease discretion.

Regarding idols of the marketplace, organizations need to segment jobs. This is because communication is assumed to be inherently flawed, biasing understanding and creating ill will and disharmony. This can take the form of reducing the need to share information (e.g., creating self-sustaining groups, divisions, or profit centers) and creating integrative mechanisms to share information only on a need-to-know basis. For example, irrelevant noise can be reduced with segmented work units. Restricted interpersonal associations will also reduce defensiveness and disconfirmation. Moreover, intended manipulation will be reduced if face-to-face meetings and other opportunities for gamesmanship are curtailed. Thus, the goal of segmenting is to decrease interaction.

Regarding idols of the theatre, organizations need to institute a system of checks and balances so that the dysfunctional effects of contextual misrepresentation and suboptimization are curtailed. More specifically, problems of subgoal displacement, conflicting interests, and isomorphic pressures will be less likely to constrain human potential and limit its achievements when a system is in place that can correctly localize failures and counteract internal malevolence. Thus, a system whereby constraints are placed on its parts will be better able to limit the damage that can be done by false arguments or maladaptive principles. For example, functional, geographic, and other differentiated parts of organizations sometimes need to be restrained in their endeavors. At the public level, many would argue that governments also benefit from a system of internal constraints (on its members and its branches) and institutionalized stability. Thus, the goal of checks and balances is to decrease systemic distortion.

IDOLS AND THE DILBERT PRINCIPLE— PART II (OR, WAYS TO REDUCE IDIOCY)

The above interpretation of Bacon’s idols is that people are hopeless idiots and that they are doomed to

Table 1
Managing the Idols of the Mind to Address the Dilbert Principle

<i>Idol</i>	<i>Constraint</i>	<i>Idiot-Proofing Mechanism</i>	<i>Goal</i>	<i>Action to Reduce Idiocy</i>	<i>Goal</i>
Tribe	Perception/interpretation	Dumb down	Decrease demands	Elucidate	Increase capacity
Cave	Background/prejudice	Program	Decrease discretion	Broaden	Increase tolerance
Marketplace	Language/communication	Segment	Decrease interaction	Facilitate	Increase cooperation
Theatre	Systems/context	Checks and balances	Decrease distortion	Liberate	Increase synthesis

lives of error and suboptimization. However, Bacon (1620/1861) disagreed with this negative interpretation. In short, he claimed he had been taken out of context and that we can overcome the idols:

The doctrine of those who have denied that certainty could be attained at all, has some agreement with my way of proceeding at the first setting out; but they end in being infinitely separated and opposed. For the holders of that doctrine assert simply that nothing can be known; I also assert that not much can be known in nature *by the way which is now in use* [italics added]. But then they go on to destroy the authority of the senses and understanding; whereas I proceed to devise and supply helps for the same. (p. XXXVII)

Thus, Bacon believed that there is still hope. Men need to realize the value of objective knowledge and rationality and then revamp the current system to overcome the barriers (i.e., idols) that stand in the way of achieving it. We will never get close to the truth if we are continuously hampered by these idols. Instead, we need to purge these idols and open our minds, lest we suffer the consequences of stagnation and status-quoism:

And as the immense regions of the West Indies had never been discovered, if the use of the compass had not first been known, it is no wonder that the discovery and advancement of the arts hath made no greater progress, when the art of inventing and discovering the sciences remains hitherto unknown. . . . And surely it would be disgraceful, if, while the regions of the material globe . . . have been in our times laid widely open and revealed, the intellectual globe should remain shut up within the narrow limits of old discoveries. (Durant, 1961, p. 102)

Thus, this section builds on the previous discussion by adopting a contingency perspective (c.f. Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967) to offer a framework for managing different idiocies differently (see Table 1). That is, the theme of this section is that different sources of

Dilbert-related idols can be changed but that they need to be managed differently.

The primary constraint of idols of the tribe on people is perception and interpretation. The appropriate action is to elucidate. More specifically, this type of idiocy can be reduced by expanding the bounds on rationality and increasing people's awareness regarding the frames that influence them and the enactments they create. To the extent that we are better aware of our limitations, we are more likely to appreciate them and take a conditional approach to them. To the extent that we can push back these boundaries through training, skill development (c.f. Whetton & Cameron, 1995), and sharing information (e.g., open-book management), we are less likely to fall prey to these biases. Thus, the goal of elucidating is to increase capacity.

For example, in the famous parable "The Blind Men and the Elephant," different people came upon different parts of an elephant (read "reality") and, hence, came to different conclusions on the nature of the elephant; for example, the person who felt the leg thought the elephant was like a tree, and the person who felt the tusk thought the elephant was like a spear. If the men were cognizant of their perceptual boundaries, then they would be less likely to make unwarranted generalizations and trumpet false relationships and claims of causation. If they were trained to perceive more effectively, then they would be likely to see more of the elephant in the first place.

For idols of the cave, the primary constraint on people is narrowness of background and prejudice. The appropriate action is to broaden. More specifically, this type of idiocy can be reduced by helping employees emerge from functional silos and appreciate (or even capitalize on) diverse needs and motivations. To the extent that we can appreciate the differences manifest in divergent personality characteristics and functional training, we would be less likely to stereotype others and adopt dysfunctional in-group and out-group mentalities. To the extent that we can capitalize

on diverse personalities and bases of expertise, we would be in a better position to exploit the many advantages of diversity (e.g., multiple perspectives, breadth of information, etc.). Thus, the goal of broadening is to increase tolerance.

The rise in the use of cross-functional job rotation and cross-functional teams represents efforts to reduce idols of the cave. Cross-functional teams are particularly relevant to the management of innovation and new product development, where new and unfamiliar problems push managers to abandon traditional conceptions of cave-like divisions in favor of integrative, holographic teams (Ancona & Caldwell, 1990; C. Meyer, 1993). Different yet complementary skills of team members help to build a "creative tension" that facilitates innovative activity (Jain & Triandis, 1990; Pelz & Andrews, 1966) while also improving the integration and collective understanding of the entire team (Brown & Eisenhardt, 1995; Emmanuelides, 1991).

For idols of the marketplace, the primary constraint on people is language and communication. The appropriate action is to facilitate. More specifically, this type of idiocy can be reduced by strengthening the accuracy and supportiveness of communication as well as by reducing dysfunctional politicking. To the extent that we can communicate more accurately and more supportively, we can increase the opportunities for productive interaction and foster the transfer of knowledge without engendering feelings of defensiveness. To the extent that we can develop shared goals and reduce illegitimate political behavior, we can focus energies more fully on relevant tasks and challenges. Thus, the goal of facilitating is to increase cooperation.

It is axiomatic to organizational studies that good communication is required if groups or organizations are to perform to their potential. Communication serves four major functions: control, motivation, emotional expression, and information (W. G. Scott & Mitchell, 1976). That is, good communication offers employees clear guidelines to direct their activities, clear goals and feedback to motivate their progress, opportunities for social interaction, and the data required to make necessary decisions. It also enhances the relationship between parties (Whetton & Cameron, 1995). Training people to facilitate exchanges can be accomplished by concentrating on such skills as public speaking, business writing, listen-

ing, and supportiveness. In addition, developing common goals, collaborative techniques, and a strong culture can work to limit tangential politicking and increase collaborative efforts. For example, congruent value systems have been shown to positively influence company performance (Gordon & DiTomaso, 1992). However, firms need to beware the dangers of isolating key suppliers and customers and, instead, include them as partners in culture building.

For idols of the theatre, the primary constraint on people is systems and context. The appropriate action is to liberate. More specifically, this type of idiocy can be reduced by helping employees break out of dysfunctional or overly constraining structures, institutions, and cultures.

To the extent that we can match the structural characteristics of an organization to its desired action pattern, we could eliminate needless obstructions and constraints for workers. Moreover, achieving a fit between the context and the purpose of activity creates internal harmony (in the biological sense). Thus, the goal of liberation is to increase synthesis.

One way of interpreting Adams's character Dilbert is that he is made a prisoner inside his own organization, confined by his cubicle and his boss, and misguided by senseless policies and procedures. Thus, companies would do well to fit their structure to their strategy (Chandler, 1962). For example, more innovative firms tend to benefit from a less bureaucratic, more "organic" form of governance (Burns & Stalker, 1961; Daft, 1982; Galbraith, 1982), where traditional rigidities give way to an evolving "boundarylessness" (e.g., General Electric). General Motors, realizing this, has distanced itself from its innovative Saturn division to limit bureaucratic intrusions. Similarly, such firms as AT&T (Bell Labs) and Xerox (PARC) have separated research and development activities from the parent organization.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In an attempt to clarify the relationship between organizational theorists and practitioners, Astley and Zammuto (1992) argued that scientists "should be viewed not as engineers offering technical advice to managers, but as providers of conceptual and symbolic language for use in organizational discourse" (p. 443). That is, how we say things as well as what we

say can contribute to the management of organizations. This article has addressed the “how” consideration by building a bridge between three distinct yet interrelated streams of thought: the philosophy of Francis Bacon, the arguments of OT theorists and researchers, and the insights of Scott Adams. I argue that creating a common ground for these collections of ideas advances our ability to understand and manage organizational phenomena. Thus, one important message of the article is that we should not consider these ideas in a vacuum but take advantage of important overlaps and interdisciplinary connections. This is not a new argument but one that continues to convey significant insights and advantages.

The Dilbert principle is familiar (we see it all around us) yet elusive (we are unsure how to manage it). Scott Adams shocks us, and makes a truckload of money in the process, into seeing the gap between normative and descriptive management. However, he makes no false arguments about trying to do something about it: “My goal is not to change the world. My goal is to make a few bucks and hope you laugh in the process” (Locke & Kitchen, 1997). One may combine Adams’s statement with the preceding commentary to infer that we (I by writing it, *JMI* by publishing it, you by reading it) are elevating a comic strip intended to make a few bucks and generate a few laughs to a status it was never intended to have. However, like many innovative ideas and perspectives, its impact is more important than its intentions. The literal reply is, yes, of course we are making more out of *Dilbert* than Adams intended. The caveat to this is that we are probably underselling it in relation to the important insights it makes and the topical issues it raises. We hope we will see more efforts that attempt to bridge the worlds of academic and Dilbertian views of management.

More specifically, if *Dilbert* is indeed the “management book of the century” and provides “the best window into the reality of corporate life,” or if it even comes close to justifying these claims, then it is adding something valuable to the organization management literature. I argue that we should take advantage of this opportunity to reconcile its insights with the empirical evidence and theoretical developments of academia. This article represents an approach at integration, merging an element of Francis Bacon’s philosophy with the findings of several academic researchers, to explain, cope (i.e., idiot-proof), and possibly

address (i.e., manage) the implications of Adams’s thesis. Future research can strengthen this connection.

If we adopt the assumption that people are forever doomed to idiocy, they must be carefully controlled and closely managed. Then workers will be protected from themselves. Thus, this approach is more in tune with calls for standardization, formalization, and supervision.

Moreover, if, indeed, people are hopelessly idiotic, an important message of the article is that *Dilbert* represents the failure rather than the manifestation of OT to make plain the way organizations really work. That is, *Dilbert* can be viewed as not only addressing the how we say it issue but also the what we say issue. At the center of this controversy is the assumption that *Dilbert*’s popularity among practitioners is due to its compensation for theory. If this is true, then future research can also probe *Dilbert* for clues as to the areas that OT has neglected and should subsequently address. It can also further develop the above coping strategies and suggest other ways to idiot-proof the workplace.

If we adopt the assumption that people can rise above this idiocy, an important message of the article is that we need to dissect the root sources of *Dilbert*-like idiocy if we are to better understand and effectively manage this idiocy (cf. Kerr, 1975). Then, people will be freed from their artificial restrictions as well as the constraining practices of poor management, which according to Adams (1996, p. 14) is the home of the most ineffective workers. Thus, this approach is more in tune with calls for development, empowerment, and delegation. Specifically, it is argued in this article that we need to adopt a contingency approach, matching the intervention to the appropriate OT-related idol. For example, idiocy due to tribe-based perceptions should be addressed differently than idiocy due to cave-based prejudice, marketplace-based communication, or theatre-based context. In this sense, this article offers itself as one step in linking organizational reality, theoretical comprehension, and managerial remedy. Future research can further develop and refine this model.

So where do I stand on the issue of idiocy in the workplace—hopeless or hopeful? I would agree that as currently managed (by selves, by others, by organizations), there are more than a few examples of idiocy to be found by people in the workplace. However, it doesn’t have to be this way. That is, we are not irrev-

cable idiots, at least to the degree Adams tends to imply. Instead, we are each combinations of imperfect attributes operating in imperfect contexts.

Therefore, it stands to reason that some individuals and some firms are less idiotic than others (to the extent that idols have been purged). However, it is not easy to eliminate or even reduce these deep-seated idols (e.g., opening minds, overhauling communication systems, establishing cross-functional integration). Development may be the more desirable action, but it may not always be enough to overcome ingrained habits and motivational deficiencies. Consequently, a combination of idol purging and idiot-proofing is probably organizations' best bet, with a gradually increasing proportion of development relative to control. What is your opinion?

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