

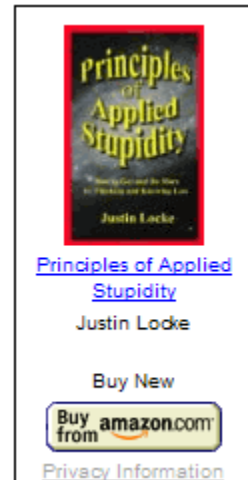
How to Succeed Without Knowing Anything ***The Principles of Applied Stupidity***

By David Raileanu
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The most commercially successful musical conductor of all time was not Leonard Bernstein. It's wasn't Toscanini, von Karajan, or Boulez.

That honor goes to the Boston Pops' Arthur Fiedler, who gained fame – and commercial success – by being different. Fiedler was known for chasing fire trucks through the streets of Boston, wearing outlandish costumes during performances, and combining fireworks with his music.

Fiedler succeeded, according to Justin Locke, at least in part through dumb luck and the willingness to experiment without fear of failure.



The Principles of Applied Stupidity, Locke's second book, details 33 of his principles that can turn stupid decisions and questionable judgments into good fortune. From Principle #5 (Everyone Wants to Look and Feel Smart) to #22 (Stupidity is Better than Anxiety), Locke lays out his laws for "stupid" living.

"The original idea of the book was that it was going to be a joke," laughs Locke. After a long career with the Boston Symphony Orchestra, a job he says he got because he was "too dumb to know it was impossible," Locke, a bass player, has put his accidental success into words.

"In its most common use," Locke explains, "stupid is simply an expression of disapproval. A person can be absolutely brilliant ... but if they do something that someone else finds to be confusing, frightening, threatening, or annoying, the brilliant person will be told they are 'stupid.'"



Locke spent 18 years playing with the Boston Pops, starting at age 20. He calls himself largely self-taught, a distinction he maintained throughout subsequent careers as a video producer, lecturer, and author.

His many occupations are just as surprising to Locke himself. "I kept stumbling into jobs because I just didn't know that I couldn't do it." And yet he has proven that he can, often



by applying many of his own principles to situations that those who would have chosen the “smart” route might never have attempted.

Many of the stories Locke tells in *The Principles of Applied Stupidity* deal with his several careers. Most notably, he focuses on the “stupid” career decisions of his former boss, Fiedler.

“The reason why Arthur Fielder became so popular was very simple: he was able to distinguish himself from the rest of the herd by the simple fact that he was willing to risk ‘looking stupid,’” Locke writes. By dressing up in fantastic costumes and arranging music by the Beatles, Locke argues, Fielder found success doing the things conventional wisdom – conformity – deemed to be stupid.

Much of the book draws from Locke’s own, very personal, experiences. “I was always the smart kid,” he says. “I got a 4.0 average through life.” To write a book, he adds, “I had to make myself the dumbest person on the planet.” In what he describes as a “very emotional presentation,” the first eleven principles deal with changing the “smartist” mindset.

Principle #11 encourages readers to break free from a familiar, but devastating, prison. “Once you realize that it doesn’t matter whether or not other people think of you as being smart or dumb, you are free,” he writes.

In writing the book, Locke often turned to his family and friends for advice. He calls his brother Joseph one of the smartest people he knows, and yet Joseph was always told as a child that he was stupid.

Many early advisers told Locke that he simply couldn’t use the word stupid because it conjures too many raw memories, something Locke acknowledges. “I realized I was lancing an emotional boil with this book,” he says. By redefining a word that has for decades locked scores of schoolchildren in a “shame spiral,” Locke attempts to exorcise some academic demons.

“The first principle was originally supposed to be ‘Stupidity is Power.’ But I just had too many people tell me, ‘Justin, you can’t say that,’” Locke says. That principle is “Lack of Thought and Information is Power,” and sets the tone for the rest of the book as sneakily sarcastic, like selling a shot of snake oil with a leadership seminar chaser.

The book could use a little more insight into how some of Locke’s cryptic personal anecdotes explain the theories they’re meant to illustrate, but that didn’t detract from the entertainment value of the story of the truant teen who ended up in a posh private school or the doctor who ignored all the rules and won a competitive fellowship.



Don't expect to find any statistics or concrete data backing up Locke's theories. But his observational wisdom can be fascinating.

For example, Locke points out that four out of the five richest people in the United States did not graduate college and that, of the famous composers he played for, only Leonard Bernstein had a college degree – in business, of all things.

Dropping out of college with the goal of inventing the personal computer or conducting to the New York Philharmonic turns out to be a pretty bad bet. According to the US Census Bureau, over the course of his or her life, a college graduate can earn up to \$1 million dollars more than someone with a high school education. That figure increases with every level of further study achieved.

But it's this kind of debate that motivates Locke. "I just took that devil's advocate point of view, and I would just sit there and say, now, in this situation, what are the advantages of being kind of slow-witted and not knowing anything?" he says. In many cases, Locke advocates a position marked by ignorance, avoidance, and failure.

Eliminating the stigmas associated with those traits, however, is the book's animating cause. Locke contends that the fear and anxiety associated with performance and perfection will inevitably lead to much greater negative consequences than the simple decision to be simple.

Now on its third printing, *The Principles of Applied Stupidity* has struck a chord with many audiences. Lecturing around the country, Justin Locke explains how, when faced with a difficult decision, to pick the "stupid" path to success.

It's worth a shot.

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