

The Builder's Engineer

The Three Levels of Idiotdom



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This particular column has been rattling around in my mind for several years. I just couldn't figure out how to write it politically correctly. (I still may not have succeeded. By the way, I know the correct word is "idiocy" not idiotdom, but idiotdom feels more appropriate to this piece.)

Lying in bed last night it hit me. Idiots are like the bags of popcorn movie reviewers use to rate movies. For example, "That movie was so bad, it only earns one-half bag of popcorn out of four". Once I landed on this brilliant parallel, I knew a riveting column would spout forth from my fingertips come morning, which it did.

Idiots come in varying degrees; I think we would all agree on that. The vexing problem becomes how to categorize the really bad ones as opposed to the mildly-bad. Of course, there are no good idiots.

Brace yourself world, I have solved this dilemma.

There are precisely three levels of idiotdom. I was tempted to recognize four, but to so finely divide idiotic behavior into four levels started giving me a headache, so there are only three.

Next, what to call each level? If I wasn't an engineer, I'd have the creativity to think of some really cool descriptions, like: "Cementhead Level", "Sack-of-Hammers Level", and "Dull-Hoe Level", but I am an engineer, so we'll have to live with Level 1, Level 2, and Level 3.

Level 1. This is the least-serious level of idiotdom. In fact, we all have been guilty of Level 1 behavior at some point. For example, once as a young framer, I was eager to show off how well I could pound nails. We actually used real hammers in those days (as opposed to pneumatic nail guns) and I had a hammer to be proud of. It was a 32 oz. Vaughn with a razor-sharp serrated face. Yessir, I was quite the hammering machine. Well, we started a new job and I was put in charge. The Owner happened to be on site that morning and I went over our plan for the day with him. Making sure that he would witness my massive hammering prowess, I quickly grabbed some 2x4's and lifted a 16d nail into position. Only top-notch framers can pound a 16d all the way in one hit. I took aim, hefted the Vaughn and brought 'er down hard. Right on my thumb. Off came the

thumbnail. Off came a chunk of flesh. Blood spilled on the 2x4s. Yep, that razor-sharp serrated face didn't let my thumb slip off, not one iota.

The point about Level 1 idiotdom is the perpetrator knows better but still makes a poor choice. However, at this level, the consequences are not particularly far-reaching nor overly grave.

Level 2. This idiot makes unwise choices, but probably can't help it due to some innate deficiency. It is tough to get mad at a Level 2 because they're trying their best, but the bulb just doesn't glow very brightly no matter how high the voltage is cranked. I need not illustrate with examples, you, no doubt, can readily think of several.

Level 3. This idiot is far and away the most maddening, and usually downright destructive. To qualify for Level 3 you must:

- Have just enough intelligence to convince others you're smart, and
- Be in a position of some authority.

Here is an example: Chilly Verde (not his real name) runs a certain governmental department. Chilly is too inexperienced for the authority his position empowers him with. Unfortunately, Chilly can never be wrong, nor can he ever learn something, apparently because he is in charge. It is his governmental duty to know all and espouse said knowledge upon humanity, to their magnanimous benefit. The problem is Chilly truly knows very little, and worse, his Very Important Dictates cost his humble subjects Real Dollars. But what is worst of all is he is beyond reproach. He has just enough intelligence to know when someone is trying to teach him something. When that Bad Thing happens, little sirens go off in his head and imaginary concrete walls suddenly spring up making him impenetrable to any common sense or knowledge input. Chilly has literally cost certain developers and contractors millions of dollars, and is single-handedly driving business (tax dollars) from his jurisdiction.

Here is another example: Rhonda Rhadish sits on the board of directors of a small investment group. Times are tough and they decide to sell a particular industrial property to stay solvent. Several buyers show interest and a fair offer is received. The group's attorney, a well-respected fellow who's been in the business a long time, suggests taking the offer with a few minor counter-offer items. The board agrees, except Rhonda insists on getting another attorney's opinion. Of course, that attorney can only gain from the project if he is in the driver's seat, but he's not, so he poo-poo's the deal and suggests firing the original attorney. Rhonda falls for it, hacks off the board, and winds up scaring away the buyers. The group is left holding the bag and disintegrates into lawsuits.

In summary, a person can work with a Level 1 or Level 2 idiot because said idiot is generally open to rational discussion.

But how do you work with a Level 3? I have attended seminars and read books on this topic (they're entitled politically correct things like, "How to Work With Difficult People"). The conventional wisdom is to confront them with questions. But Type 3's don't dwell in the rational world, theirs is chaos. If, for example, I were to ask Chilly Verde, "Why can't a steel frame be used instead of this shear wall?" His answer would be something like, "Because steel is gray, and gray upsets my poodle." Then I'd reply

with something logical, but by that time sirens would be going off in his head and the discussion would be over.

Call me a coward, but when confronted with a Level 3 these days, I scramble for the nearest exit.

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