

Be the Dumbest Person in the Room



By: LCDR Neil Orlich

We like to think of ourselves as the best and brightest that the country has to offer. As leaders, we may put pressure on ourselves to have all the right answers all of the time. However, leadership is less about *having* the right answer and more about *getting* the right answer. In order to get the right answer, we may need to take a backseat and become the dumbest person in the room, asking questions and allowing the team to come to the answer, rather than forcing it upon the group.

Being the dumbest person in the room is a concept highlighted by David Ogilvy, considered by many to be the Father of Advertising. An individual of numerous insights, Ogilvy made the claim:

If you always hire people who are smaller than you, we shall become a company of dwarfs. If, on the other hand, you always hire people who are bigger than you, we shall become a company of giants.

Ogilvy was essentially saying that you want to surround yourself with the best talent (and get out of their way). Now, Ogilvy's comments were directed at the corporate world, where leaders have greater capacity to hire and fire members, essentially building their teams from scratch.

Although often applied to the corporate world, these concepts are still relevant to the Coast Guard, even when we may have little to no control over the hiring process. By being the dumbest person you want to assume that you already have the best possible talent around you and leverage the team's knowledge in the decision-making process.

Why should you be the dumbest person in the room? While there are numerous reasons, here are a few to get you started:

You want the best – As a leader, your goal should be the *best* course of action, not necessarily *your* course of action. In fact, I would argue that if your course of action is consistently deemed to be the best, there is probably something wrong with either the quality of your team or the quality of leadership.

You want to learn – Being the dumbest person is about asking questions and gathering data. As a child, your favorite question likely consisted of one word – why. Although the questions may be more sophisticated as an adult, the premise underlying them is the same – the desire to learn.

You want others to learn – This ties in closely with the previous point – it is important to have others understand the “how” and “why.”

The process is essential – Probably more important than arriving at the “right” answer is the process you use to get there. While process is a deep topic all of its own, it's all about asking the right questions.

Being the dumbest person is an excellent leadership tactic that will work to bring out the best in your team. However, the concept may also elicit fear from those considering its use. For example, if we are supposed to be the best and brightest, shouldn't ideas come directly from us? Furthermore, will "being the dumbest person" be seen as a sign of weakness or inferiority? And what if we actually *are* the dumbest person in the room – shouldn't we pretend to know more than we do in order to maintain the confidence and respect of those who follow us? In short – not necessarily, no, and definitely no.

Let's discuss those fears a little bit further. Think about experiences you have had with poor leadership. Which leaders are criticized, either openly or behind closed doors – those that ask for and take the advice of their team members or those that ignore that advice (or fail to ask for it) and go their own route? Which projects are more likely to fail – those that involve open, honest communication or those that breed fear and contempt for question-asking?

And as for pretending to be the smartest person in the room – others in the room will only see arrogance and call your bluff. On the flip side, people enjoy talking about things at which they are good – take advantage of this and learn!

So in your current leadership role strive to be the dumbest person in the room. It just might be the smartest thing you'll ever do.

Leadership competencies addressed: Followership, Self Awareness and Learning, Team Building, Decision Making and Problem Solving