

Deny the science?

Don't be D.U.M.B.

Marc Efron



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It's understandable when people are shaken by the discovery that their deeply held beliefs about a concept are fundamentally flawed. These new insights may challenge their core view of themselves or the work they've chosen to pursue. At that moment of discovery, they have some wonderful options. They could reflect on the new facts and adapt their worldview to what's proven to be true. They could research their beliefs to produce a compelling counter-argument. Or, they could be D.U.M.B.

D.U.M.B. doesn't mean 'dumb' even though the concepts are correlated. D.U.M.B. is an acronym that describes how many people respond when they hear information that challenges their core beliefs – Deny, Unconcerned, Misdirect, Burden-shift. I hear D.U.M.B. responses when I raise relevant science in discussions about talent management and human psychology, and they typically move in this order of defensiveness:

Deny: The Deny response uses personal examples and anecdotes to contradict proven science. Deny often sounds like, "Well, I know a guy who did this and it worked for him!" or the even less convincing, "I've been doing that for years and it's always worked for me." Proponents of Grit and Growth Mindset concepts run on stories like these even though there's science that directly contradicts their beliefs.¹



Deniers will often name a company that they believe practices the concept to prove that it's effective, i.e. "I'm pretty sure IBM has done this for years." This legitimacy-by-brand works until the brand or company fails, as we saw with the "eliminate performance ratings" crowd citing GE as a hallmark of that fad.

Unconcerned: It's a curious but refreshingly honest response to be challenged with new facts and then say, "I agree that the science says this doesn't work but I'm going to do it anyways." This response is often heard when discussing Myers-Briggs and a variety of other assessment tools that have questionable validity but strong pop psychology credentials.

Unconcerneds will frequently cite other benefits of using these tools (i.e. "I find it's a great conversation starter") while ignoring that their customer or client isn't sophisticated enough to separate that unrelated benefit from the what the tool claims it does. This response would be far less disturbing if it wasn't frequently heard from people with a Ph.D. in Organizational/Industrial psychology. It also helps to explain why more managers can name something as trivial as their MBTI "type" while not knowing something as important as their blood type.

Misdirect: Like a clever politician, the Misdirecter asks the listener to ignore the presented facts and

Figure 1.



focus instead on “the real issue.” This tactic often appears when discussing claims about strength-based development and is understandably advanced by those who’ve dedicated their careers to that concept. When informed that there is no science to support strength-based development’s ability to develop people faster, Misdirecters will suggest that’s not the “real issue.” They’ll tell you that real issue is ensuring that employees are engaged with development, are building their self-worth, are enjoying learning or any other item from a long list of choices.

Misdirecters will respond to science that disproves their claims by misdirecting you to other, irrelevant science to back their claims. For example, those who claim that emotional intelligence (EI) predicts a leader’s success more than their cognitive skills do will cite articles about emotional intelligence being a part of personality. If your reaction to a conversation is, “Wait. What were we talking about?”, then you’ve been misdirected!

Burden-shifters: Perhaps the most innovative approach to arguing against science is to flip the scientific method on its head. Burden-shifters will claim a wild idea and then require you to prove their

idea is wrong, rather than them having to prove that it’s right. It’s applied to every variety of false claim of effectiveness and typically sounds like this:

Them: “Marc, did you know that the center of the Earth is filled with rich, gooey Camembert cheese?”

Me: “I’m not sure that’s correct.”

Them: “Yeah? Prove that it’s not.”

Burden-shifting is the ultimate defensive reaction, likely driven by the three other parts of the D.U.M.B. response. It’s a childish and nonsensical response and only in a universe of alternate facts would this tactic not be openly laughed at. That doesn’t stop it from regularly appearing in the comments section of LinkedIn posts that take down pseudo-scientific concepts.

You could be smart or . . .

Few of us are pure slaves to the science – believing only exactly what’s conclusively proven to be true. We each have biases, preferences and deeply held beliefs that guide how we evaluate facts. That means that we will each come to different conclusions and that we’ll argue passionately for what we believe in and our worldview. That’s to be encouraged and there are many smart ways to do that so, please, don’t take the D.U.M.B. route.

1. On Growth Mindset (examined here as goal orientation) Hulleman, Chris S., Sheree M. Schrager, Shawn M. Bodmann, and Judith M. Harackiewicz. “A meta-analytic review of achievement goal measures: Different labels for the same constructs or different constructs with similar labels?” *Psychological bulletin* 136, no. 3 (2010): 422. And Payne, Stephanie C., Satoris S. Youngcourt, and J. Matthew Beaubien. “A meta-analytic examination of the goal orientation nomological net.” *Journal of applied psychology* 92, no. 1 (2007): 128. On Grit, Credé, Marcus, Michael C. Tynan, and Peter D. Harms. “Much ado about grit: A meta-analytic synthesis of the grit literature.” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 113, no. 3 (2017): 492.

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