

A conversation with **Martin Lindstrom**,  
Author of



# The Ministry of COMMON SENSE



HOW TO ELIMINATE BUREAUCRATIC RED TAPE, BAD EXCUSES, AND CORPORATE BS

## **1. If it's so easy for people, why is it so hard for organizations to practice common sense?**

The organizations we work for have created so many systems, structures, and other political and emotional straightjackets that we end up spending all of our time wondering how to navigate them. By the time we get through all of the emails, forms, meetings, and reports we have to get through, we have no time left to do our jobs!

## **2. What are the costs of bureaucratic red tape?**

Red tape paralyzes organizations, kills creativity, and leads to plummeting employee morale and embarrassing productivity numbers. It's no wonder that most corporate watercooler chat these days is nothing but whining.

## **3. What are some of the most common and annoying examples of corporate nonsense we can all relate to at work?**

Have you ever been unable to work because your computer broke down and you can't even get through to the IT department? Or have you ever tried to send a large file to a client but services like Dropbox are banned by security rules so you end up having to spend forty minutes breaking down the file into smaller files? What's fascinating about these examples is that people get frustrated but no one fixes them. Individually, these gaps common sense may seem small, but when you add them up, they become huge drains on morale, productivity, and innovation.

## **4. What stories have you experienced yourself?**

I was attending a meeting recently at a company where the rooms had names like EK229bC5G3 and didn't even follow in sequential order, so to find the proper location you basically had to memorize every meeting room. Every day there, you would see people walk around lost, in a maze of meeting rooms unable to find anything.

## **5. How might corporate nonsense problems get solved instead of just tolerated?**

You need to plant proof points in an organization that change indeed can happen. Most people at work try but give up feeling paralyzed by a system out of their control. Start small and give people hope that a domino effect will soon restore common sense.

You also have to start with saving money. If you say, “We want to restore common sense, but we want to save money at the same time” it gives everyone a mandate. You can give half of the money saved to the department impacted by the change and keep half for innovative initiatives. Addressing common sense issues becomes a profit center that everyone wants to be aligned with.

## **6. Why is a lack of empathy in part to blame for organizations’ lack of common sense?**

Corporate types usually associate empathy with sentimentality or crying or cupcakes. But the issue here is that we are increasingly inept at seeing the world from another’s point of view. Why? We are too busy with ourselves – looking at our phones, reading ultrashort headlines, trying to look perfect on Facebook and LinkedIn, evaluating a potential date with a right swipe on Tinder, blocking out the world with our EarPods and so on. Eventually we end up caring less and less about others, particularly at work and especially if it’s a bigger company where there are different divisions, markets, and countries.

## **7. Why do people start adhering to official and unofficial codes of behavior when they start working inside organizations even when they know they have no logic?**

People in general want to please the tribe. We all tried it as kids – we were part of a soccer team or some kind of official group. We either felt welcome and a sense of belonging, or we were excluded and felt like losers. As soon as we become part of a company, and rules set in, we react the same way. You either follow those rules and win, or don’t follow them and are kicked off. Even if these rules don’t make sense, you’re probably not going to criticize them on day one, so you buy into them. Suddenly it’s not about whether the rules are right or wrong, but about whether or not you fit into the tribe.

## **8. What brands exemplify common sense (or correcting gaps in it when they see them) and which right now might need help?**

There are almost no companies out there that fully adhere to common sense. It’s not because they don’t believe in it, but we are so busy today that we can’t even comprehend questioning our ethics in that way. If you want to find good examples, typically you will find them in startup companies. It’s because most startups today have one thing in common: they were founded to solve an entrepreneur’s frustration with something. For example, Uber was founded out of Travis Kalanick’s frustration trying to get a taxi in Paris. While most entrepreneurial companies are common-sense based in the beginning, as they become more and more successful, they become fearful of losing. They create a wall of protection that quite often lacks common sense because it restricts people from thinking freely.

**9. When companies have a problem like low productivity or lack of innovation, how can they draw on common sense to find the solution and what will make that process simple?**

One technique is to ask people to take photos of situations in their daily work lives which represent a lack of common sense. Then, you can collect these and hang them on the wall. Structure these into quick, medium, and long-term wins. Focus on two key issues and turn the problems up-side-down with solutions. Break the solution down to a small 90-day intervention. It is essential to generate a result within 90-days as this will boost the moral in the organization and fuel the passion for further change to clean up other outstanding nonsense issues.

If you're severely suffering from a lack of common sense, of course, there's the option of setting up a Ministry of Common Sense department to systematically vacuum stupidities across the organization and convert these into bite sized, tangible (cost saving) solutions.

**10. Can you change a company culture to have more common sense to avoid having to make corrections in the first place?**

One way to do this is to focus on how your employer can save money. It's a very good technique because it means no one will argue against you. If you can then find one single little thing that can both solve a common sense issue and save money, then you have a home run.

For example, one company spent a fortune on the production of their own internal magazine distributed to all staff globally and meant to boost morale and strengthen their culture. It was a glossy catalogue with nice photos and a production timeline of 6 months. And it had no impact except for getting displayed on the coffee table of the executive floor.

That's when I introduced the "campfire" concept – designed to replace the magazines. Every Friday early afternoon, staff across the world, in each of their offices, on each floor, would sit down in a circle. Switch off the lights, project a campfire on the screen, have a speaker playing the crackling – while a lamp in the center would indicate the fire. And employees would just talk – establish a rapport with each other. It was like a soul cleansing exercise.

Within three months the company was buzzing and the brochure forgotten. The yearly production cost of the brochure was close to \$890,000. The cost for the campfires? A projector, a lamp, a speaker ... and an extended lunch break.

**11. What's the most important thing we can do to bring common sense back to how we run meetings?**

First, plan how you spend your time for meetings carefully. Just because you've reserved a conference room for an hour doesn't mean you can't end it earlier if you accomplish your objectives. Next, ban all phones and laptops from the room to keep people's attention. Set a goal for what you want to achieve in the meeting and what decisions should be made. Don't plan a PowerPoint Deck to impress by how many slides it has. Instead design it for communicating with maximum impact and minimal content.

**12. Why do companies end up with so many rules and regulations that make no sense?**

At the end of the day, no one kills rules because they're afraid that maybe someone saw some logic behind them, as impossible as that might be to imagine. Or worse, they might get sued or get in trouble with the legal department.

**13. How can we help our organizations to question and improve rules that make no sense?**

Most of us accumulate too much stuff in our homes but when we move, we're forced to throw it all out and we feel liberated. A company needs to plan a move and cleanup too! Don't just sit there and assume there is a reason why those rules are there. Rules are not fixed in place. They are in constant need of fixing.

**14. Why is common sense often carefully considered when organizations design a customer experience, but rarely when they design their employee experience?**

At the end of the day, companies at least try to focus on the customer but usually fail to realize that their employees crave just as much common sense as their customers do. Your best bet is to frame internal nonsense with the same bottom line that focuses efforts on the customer experience. Save the company money while you fix common sense issues at the same time, and you will immediately see an uptick in productivity, employee satisfaction, or turnaround time.

**15. Can you provide an example of how you restored common sense for a client?**

At one company I introduced a ban of the email CC button to reduce the email stress. This literally cut in half the number of emails received. In another company we separated the CC emails and had them automatically redirected to a special folder. Like a spam folder where you can check those "FYI" emails when time allows. Make sense?

**16. What's an example of how you restored common sense even as a child?**

As a kid, I and my friends suffered from constant bicycle accidents. We realized many of them could have been prevented with noise. So we installed a piece of cardboard on the front deck of the bicycle to flap against the ribs of the wheel generating a motor sound. And voila, bicyclists were heard and accidents were practically eliminated.

**17. What's a small way each of us can restore common sense in our own teams or realms of control, no matter our level or status at work?**

Start by writing down what's most nonsensical at your workplace. Sit down with people in your department and spend a half hour to ask for the top common sense issues they face. Pick one. And solve it. Then celebrate the success with your team. Celebrations give people hope and permission to change.

**18. Why or why aren't you a more talented seer than the rest of us when it comes to common sense or a lack of it?**

Common sense is like muscle memory. The more you start to think about it, the more you start to see it (or a lack of it). I'm just like anyone else but have developed strong radar for nonsense when I see it. Too many of us are afraid we'll look like idiots if we question a rule. We also wonder why we should fix common sense issues if we're not getting paid for it, or worry that fixing nonsense issues in other departments will only create enemies. Once you eliminate those fears you'll remove the barriers to change.

I hope everyone will start flexing their common sense muscle memory, so they can spot nonsense, and then collectively question it, address it and solve it—one stupidity at a time.