

Look at yourself objectively

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This post is part three of the series [Raw Nerve](#).

In the 1840s, hospitals were dangerous places. Mothers who went in to give birth often didn't make it out. For example, at Vienna General Hospital's First Obstetrical Clinic, as many as 10% of mothers died of puerperal fever after giving birth. But there was some good news: at the Second Clinic, the number was just 4%. Expectant mothers noticed this — some would get down on their knees and beg to be admitted to the Second Clinic. Others, hearing new patients were being admitted to the First Clinic that day, decided they'd rather give birth in the streets.

Ignaz Semmelweis, an assistant at the First Clinic, couldn't bear it. He began desperately searching for some kind of explanation for the difference. He tested many things without success. Then, in 1847, Semmelweis's friend Jakob Kolletschka was performing an autopsy when a student accidentally poked him with a scalpel. It was a minor injury, but Kolletschka got terribly sick and ultimately passed away, with symptoms rather like the what the mothers had. Which got Semmelweis wondering: was some "deathly material" on the corpses responsible for the deaths?

To test this, he insisted the doctors begin washing their hands with chlorinated lime (which he found best removed the stink of death) before handling the pregnant women. The results were shocking. In April 1847, the mortality rate was 18.3%. Semmelweis instituted handwashing in mid-May and by June the mortality rate had crashed to 2.2%. The next month it was even less and later that year it reached zero — for the first time ever.

You'd think doctors would be thrilled by this incredible discovery. Instead, Semmelweis was ridiculed and attacked. He was fired from the hospital and forced out of Vienna. "In published medical works my teachings are either ignored or attacked," he complained. "The medical faculty at Würzburg awarded a prize to a monograph written in 1859 in which my teachings were rejected." Even in his native Vienna, hundreds of mothers continued to die every year.

Semmelweis turned to alcohol and his behavior became increasingly erratic. In 1865, he was committed to a mental institution. There he was beaten by the guards, placed in a straitjacket, and locked in a dark cell. He died shortly thereafter, at the age of 47, from an infected wound.¹

Why did doctors so stubbornly reject Ignaz Semmelweis? Well, imagine being told *you* were responsible for the deaths of thousands of your patients. That you had been killing the people you were supposed to be protecting. That you were so bad at your job that you were actually worse than just giving birth in the street.

We all know people don't like to hear bad news about themselves. Indeed, we go out of our way to avoid it — and when we do confront it, we try to downplay it or explain it away. Cognitive dissonance psychologists have proven it in dozens of experiments: Force students through an embarrassing initiation to take a class, and they'll insist the class is much more interesting. Make them do a favor for someone they hate, and they start insisting they actually like them. Have them make a small ethical compromise and they'll feel comfortable making bigger and bigger ones. Instead of just accepting we made a mistake, and shouldn't have compromised or done the favor or join the class, we start telling ourselves that compromising isn't so bad — and when the next compromise comes along, we believe the lies we tell ourselves, and leap at making another mistake. We hate hearing bad news about ourselves so much that we'd rather *change our behavior* than just admit we screwed up.²

It doesn't help much when our friends point out what we did wrong. If we're so scared of hearing from ourselves that we made a mistake, just imagine how much we hate hearing it from someone else. And our friends know this: the answer to “Does this outfit make me look fat?” is not supposed to be “yes.” We may joke about our friends' foibles behind their back, but we rarely do so to their face. Even at work, a lot of effort goes into making sure employees are insulated from their superior's most negative assessments. This is what we're taught: make five compliments for every criticism, sandwich negative feedback with positive feedback on each side, the most important thing is to keep up someone's self-esteem.

But, as Semmelweis showed, this is a dangerous habit. Sure, it's awful to hear you're killing people—but it's way worse to *keep on killing people*! It may not be fun to get told you're lazy, but it's better to hear it now than to find out when you're fired. If you want to work on getting better, you need to start by knowing where you are.

Semmelweis was defeated about as much as a man can be defeated. But nothing the other doctors could do to him would change the facts. Eventually scientists proved the germ theory of disease and Semmelweis was vindicated. Today, he's an international hero: universities and hospitals are named after him, his house has been turned into a museum, Austria even put his face on a €50 gold coin. Meanwhile, the doctors who opposed him are now seen as close-minded killers.

Try as you might, you can't beat reality. Semmelweis was right: those doctors *were* killing people. Firing him, driving him out of the country, writing long

books disproving all his claims — none of it could change that frightening fact. The doctors may have thought they were winning the argument at the time, but they were big losers in the long run. And so were all the families that lost a loved one because they refused to admit their mistake.

But imagine if they had. When you're being attacked, conceding you screwed up seems like the worst thing you can do. If even you won't stand up for yourself, how can anyone else believe in you? Admitting your mistakes seems like giving up; it just proves that your opponents were right all along. But is it really so bad?

When Oprah started defending fabulist James Frey, she was savaged by the press. So she invited her critics on the show and apologized, saying "You were right, I was wrong." It didn't destroy her reputation; it rescued it. When the space shuttle *Columbia* exploded, launch manager Wayne Hale took full responsibility: "The bottom line is that I failed to understand what I was being told...I am guilty of allowing Columbia to crash." He was promoted. When JFK admitted the responsibility for the Bay of Pigs fiasco was "mine, and mine alone," his poll numbers soared.³

Imagine the same thing in your own life. If your boss started taking responsibility for your organization's problems instead of blaming others, wouldn't you like him more? If your doctor told you honestly that she had screwed up a procedure, instead of trying to cover up the mistake, wouldn't you prefer that? If a politician came clean that their policy proposals had failed, wouldn't you be more likely to trust him?

In moments of great emotional stress, we revert to our worst habits: we dig in and fight harder. The real trick is not to get better at fighting — it's to get better at stopping ourselves: at taking a deep breath, calming down, and letting our better natures take over from our worst instincts.

Even if seeing ourselves objectively is the best option, all our natural instincts all point the other direction. Not only do we try hard to avoid bad news about ourselves, we tend to exaggerate the good news. Imagine you and Jane are both up for a promotion. You want it bad, so you stay late, you work weekends. Sure, some things still slip through the cracks — but even those mistakes have really good reasons! Jane never does anything like that.

But if she did — would you even know? We see the world from our own perspective. When we have to cancel hanging out with friends to do extra work, we always see that — and feel the sacrifice. But when Jane does it, we see and feel nothing. You only get to see your own perspective. And even our mistakes make sense from our perspective — we see all of the context, everything that led up to it. It all makes sense because we saw it happen. When we screw up, it's for a reason. When other people screw up, it's because they're screwups.

Looking at ourselves objectively isn't easy. But it's essential if we ever want to get better. And if we don't do it, we leave ourselves open to con artists and ethical compromisers who prey on our desire to believe we're perfect. There's no one solution, but here are some tricks I use to get a more accurate sense of myself:

Embrace your failings. Be willing to believe the worst about yourself. Remember: it's much better to accept that you're a selfish, racist moron and try to improve, than to continue sleepwalking through life that way as the only one who doesn't know it.

Studiously avoid euphemism. People try and sugarcoat the tough facts about themselves by putting them in the best light possible. They say "Well, I was going to get to it, but then there was that big news story today" and not "Yeah, I was procrastinating on it and started reading the news instead." Stating things plainly makes it easier to confront the truth.

Reverse your projections. Every time you see yourself complaining about other groups or other people, stop yourself and think: "is it possible, is there any way, that someone out there might be making the same complaints about me?"

Look up, not down. It's always easy to make yourself look good by finding people even worse than you. Yes, we agree, you're not the worst person in the world. That's not the question. The question is whether you can get better — and to do that you need to look at the people who are even better than you.

Criticize yourself. The main reason people don't tell you what they really think of you is they're afraid of your reaction. (If they're right to be afraid, then you need to start by working on that.) But people will feel more comfortable telling you the truth if you start by criticizing yourself, showing them that it's OK.

Find honest friends. There are some people who are just congenitally honest. For others, it's possible to build a relationship of honesty over time. Either way, it's important to find friends who you can trust to tell you the harsh truths about yourself. *This is really hard* — most people don't like telling harsh truths. Some people have had success providing an anonymous feedback form for people to submit their candid reactions.

Listen to the criticism. Since it's so rare to find friends who will honestly criticize you, you need to listen extra-carefully when they do. It's tempting to check what they say against your other friends. For example, if one friend says the short story you wrote isn't very good, you might show it to some other friends and ask them what they think. Wow, they all think it's great! Guess that one friend was just an outlier. But the fact is that most of your friends are going to say it's great because they're your friend; by just taking their word for it, you end up ignoring the one person who's actually being honest with you.

Take the outside view. As I said before, we're always locked in our own heads, where everything we do makes sense. So try seeing what you look like from the outside for a bit, assuming you don't know any of those details. Sure, your big money-making plan sounds like a great idea when you explain it, but if you throw that away, is there any external evidence that it will work?

Next in this series: [Lean into the pain](#)

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1. “[Ignaz Semmelweis](#)”, *Wikipedia* (visited 2012-08-13).
 2. Carol Tavis and Elliot Aaronson, *Mistakes Were Made (but not by me): Why We Justify Foolish Beliefs, Bad Decisions, and Hurtful Acts*, (2007), ch. 1.
 3. *Mistakes Were Made*, ch. 8. A larger study of public companies also found that companies which admitted screwing up tended to have higher stock prices. Fiona Lee, Christopher Peterson, and Larissa Z. Tiedens, “[Mea Culpa: Predicting Stock Prices From Organizational Attributions](#),” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, **30**: 12 (December 2004), 1636–1649.