



Let it go

Dan Fine explains why your ego is not your amigo

Humans have foibles: egos. We tell stories about ourselves and what we're doing and hold on to them so tight that sometimes we miss important information that could be good for us.

(There's a infamous experiment to highlight this, it's called the 'invisible gorilla test'.)

These stories are some of the biggest blocks we face when advising business leaders.

Before proceeding, I should give the caveat that the reason I am familiar with this phenomena is that I am frequently guilty of it. It is an issue that we are all guilty of to a greater or lesser degree.



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Fact or fiction?

Most dental practices are idiosyncratic because the people running them are too. That can benefit a business, but it can just as easily mean myths hold it back. These probably come from one, two or three people wielding authority.

An example is opening on weekends and for longer hours during the week. A principal might say: 'We can't do that because patients don't show up on Saturdays', or, 'Our associates will refuse to work weekends and evenings,' or, 'No one wants to go to the dentist on Sundays'.

All these responses are stories, and they are believable because they have a bit of truth in them.

Perhaps it is difficult to get associates to work weekends and evenings, although current events feel like a mandate to shake things up and clean shop. Maybe it's a good time to stop perpetuating the old kind of business so common in dentistry that is irrevocably tied to the foibles of the senior individuals in it.

Often, a leader or manager will reject a simple idea because it demystifies their position and skill.

In *The Great Mental Models: General Thinking Concepts*, former spy Shane Parrish writes: 'We reject the simple to make sure nobody else can come up with the solution, thus protecting our authority and position.'

THE INVISIBLE GORILLA

Daniel Simons and Christopher Chabris conducted the 'Invisible Gorilla Test' to demonstrate inattention blindness. For the study, subjects watched a short video in which six people (three in white shirts and three in black shirts) pass basketballs around. The subjects were asked to keep a silent count of the number of passes made by the people in white shirts. During the video, a gorilla strolls into the middle of the action, faces the camera and thumps its chest, and then leaves, spending nine seconds on screen.

The subjects were then asked if they noticed anything out of the ordinary taking place. Half of the people who watched the video and counted the passes missed the gorilla, as though the gorilla was invisible. According to Simons and Chabris, the experiment reveals two things: that we are missing a lot of what goes on around us, and that we have no idea that we are missing so much.

This is what I mean, and I don't think you can afford to do it in your business going forward.

Perfectly imperfect

Most dental practices are chronically underleveraged in terms of the resources they have available to them. Usually the reason is the leadership.

On top of that, up until now, it felt like enough to grow with what you had. It was easy. This is not to be critical, but practice owners are going to have to find a way to make things possible today that they would have said were impossible last year.

Not to ignore complexity, but much of this is about ego. If I, as your adviser, say: 'How about this?', you might say: 'We tried that before and it doesn't work'.

BEING SUCCESSFUL AND EFFECTIVE ISN'T POSSIBLE IF WE ARE PREOCCUPIED WITH ALWAYS BEING RIGHT

It's better to open up the dialogue and explore how to try things a different way. The ego doesn't like this. It wants us to defend our position and become entrenched, resulting in stalemate.

We get stuck in stalemate because letting go can feel like admitting we're not perfect, and maybe even wrong.

You must be okay about being wrong if you are going to engage with the process of developing your business.

Distorted truth

What would it be like to assume that a lot of what you're saying and thinking is not necessarily coming from a helpful place but a defended ego position?

We all carry deadwood, elements of our personalities that work from these defended places, running old scripts that distort the truth.

We should regularly identify our deadwood and burn it off. Being successful and effective isn't possible if we are preoccupied with always being right, which is as true in a marriage as a business.

Parrish writes: 'Good analysis in the hands of managers who have good judgment won't naturally yield good decisions.' Why?



Because narrow lines of thinking that are comfortable and familiar aren't enough.

It's chaos out there. Can we step into the chaos and hold nuanced, uncertain positions, remaining curious and open to the possibility that we might be missing the gorilla? That is a humbling position.

Effective dental practice leaders of the future will, above all, be humble. ■

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