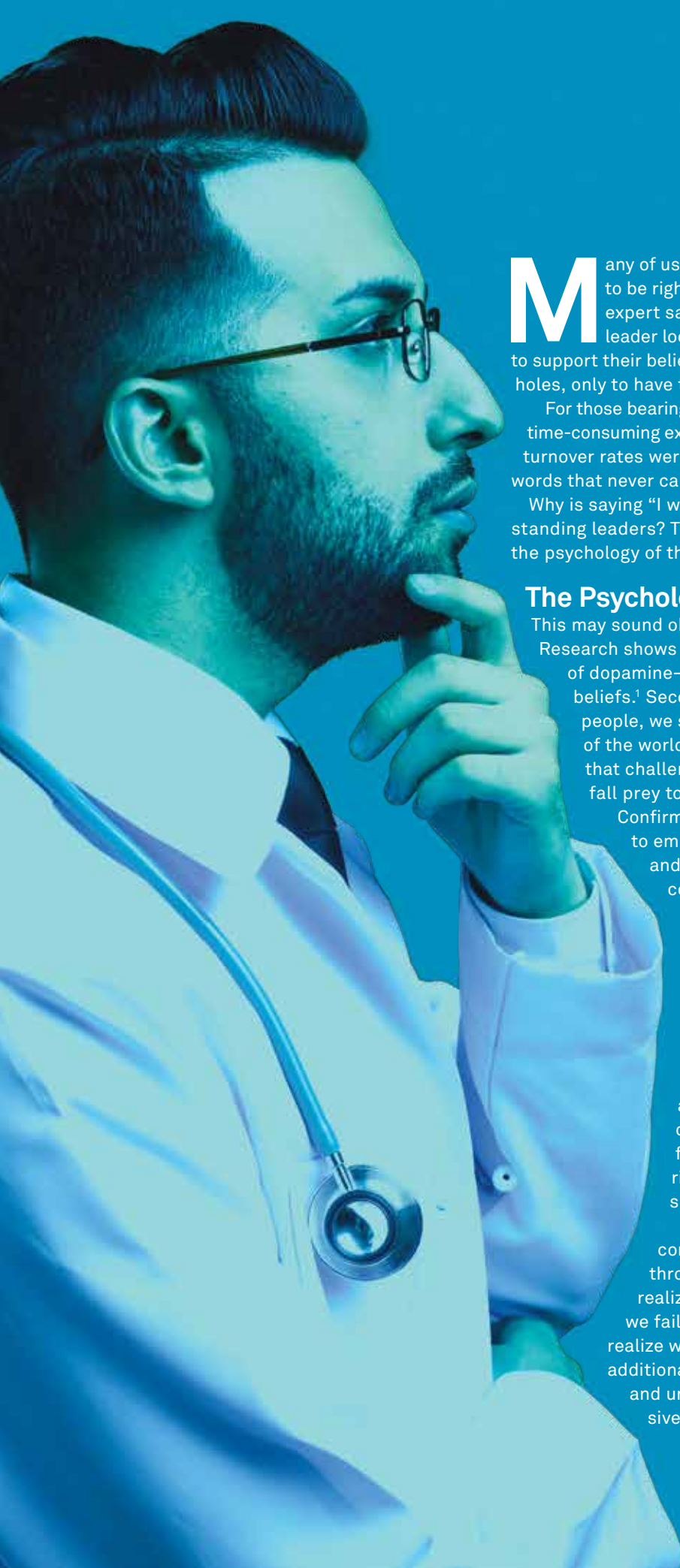


# The **Wrong** Stuff

*The three words outstanding leaders say*

■ **By Peter Valenzuela, MD, MBA**



**M**any of us can remember that one leader who always needed to be right, regardless of the topic or issue. When a subject expert said something the leader didn't agree with, the leader looked for a second—sometimes even third—opinion to support their beliefs. This resulted in chasing initiatives down rabbit holes, only to have to double back once it was far too late.

For those bearing witness, it was an extremely painful, time-consuming experience. Organizational ideas were often stale, turnover rates were high, and employee morale was low. The three words that never came out of this leader's mouth were, "I was wrong."

Why is saying "I was wrong" hard for some leaders but not for outstanding leaders? To answer that question, we first have to dive into the psychology of the problem.

## The Psychology Behind Being Right

This may sound obvious, but it feels good to believe you are right.

Research shows that people experience genuine pleasure—a rush of dopamine—when processing information that supports their beliefs.<sup>1</sup> Second, although we'd like to think we're rational people, we struggle with cognitive biases that skew our view of the world. It's a protective mechanism to avoid information that challenges our beliefs. This avoidance makes it easy to fall prey to *confirmation bias* and *motivated reasoning*.

Confirmation bias is the unconscious tendency for people to embrace information that supports their beliefs and to reject information that contradicts them.<sup>2</sup> A common confirmation bias is the feeling that others at work aren't carrying their weight; singling out a colleague as a lazy person makes everything they do seem subpar.

Confirmation bias leads to motivated reasoning. Motivated reasoning occurs when someone actively looks for reasons they are right and rejects facts and research that don't fit their beliefs.<sup>3</sup> Motivated reasoning occurs frequently at sporting events. When the referee makes a controversial call that favors the home team, local fans are likely to see the referee's calls as being right. The fans' emotional loyalty for the home team shapes what they see on the field.

Both confirmation bias and motivated reasoning contribute to *error blindness*.<sup>4</sup> Error blindness goes through three phases. First, we are wrong but don't realize it yet. We feel so confident in being right that we fail to double-check facts. In the second phase, we realize we were wrong—either by introspection or because additional evidence is introduced—so we feel vulnerable and under attack. In the last phase, we become defensive and deny being wrong.<sup>4</sup>

## Why Being Right Is Crucial for Some Leaders

Being wrong is hard to admit for the average person, but it can be even harder for some leaders because of perceived cultural expectations. Our society idealizes winning, so we fear that acknowledging mistakes may signal weakness. Studies show that refusing to apologize or acknowledge being wrong increases the feelings of power, control, and self-esteem of the offender.<sup>5</sup>

Many leaders may also suffer with “CEO’s disease,” a phrase coined by organizational psychologist Tasha Eurich.<sup>6</sup> CEO’s disease is caused by a lack of emotional intelligence (EQ)—specifically, low external self-awareness. This occurs when leaders receive less candid feedback as they are promoted to higher levels. Members who work around these leaders are hesitant to disagree with them and start filtering what they say. This occurs more frequently in organizations that lack a culture of safety.

**Leaders who are afraid to fail will create a status quo environment, which is the death of innovation and creativity.**

## The Two Mindsets of Leaders

Stanford University psychology professor Dr. Carol Dweck coined the phrases *fixed mindset* and *growth mindset*.<sup>7</sup> A leader with a fixed mindset believes that their abilities, intelligence, and talent are fixed and cannot change. In their world, success is about self-validation, proving they are smarter or more talented than others. To maintain this self-image, fixed mindsets avoid situations in which they might be wrong or fail.

A leader with a growth mindset operates under the premise that you can cultivate your basic qualities through your efforts. A person’s true potential can change and grow through passion, training, and experience. In a growth mindset, being wrong or failing are just additional learning opportunities that help with self-development. Growth mindset leaders also are very self-aware, which eliminates the risk of CEO’s disease.

In accepting responsibility, the growth mindsets of the world feel less threatened by accepting responsibility because they are more likely to view the situation as an opportunity for them to grow as a person and develop their relationship with the challenging party.<sup>8</sup> Leaders who are afraid to fail will create a status quo environment, which is the death of innovation and creativity.

## Why It Matters

From a relationship standpoint, outstanding leaders with growth mindsets and high EQ have stronger teams. Research shows that high self-awareness improves performance in key areas such as collaboration, decision-making, and conflict management.<sup>9</sup> Self-aware leaders also monitor their behaviors more effectively, keeping their annoying habits in check.

Contrary to growth mindsets, leaders with fixed mindsets and low EQs have weaker work relationships. They can appear overconfident, make reckless decisions, and ignore feedback. They can also severely affect the financial performance of the organization.

In the book *Egonomics: What Makes Ego Our Greatest Asset (or Most Expensive Liability)*, the authors point out that 53% of businesspeople estimate ego costs their company between 6% and 15% of annual revenue.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, 21% say it costs their business between 16%





**The most important skill for leaders to learn—and by far the most difficult—is humility.**

and 20%. These businesspeople associated “ego” with words like “arrogant,” “self-centered,” “closed-minded,” “defensive,” and “conceited.” According to the authors, inflated ego often breeds detrimental workplace behaviors including: fear of making errors, burying mistakes, failure to challenge the status quo, and hearing but not listening.

## How to Be an Outstanding Leader

► **Practice humility.** The most important skill for leaders to learn—and by far the most difficult—is humility. According to Jim Collins, author of *Good to Great*, humility is one of the key characteristics that distinguishes those who can lead top-performing companies from those who can transform their companies into outstanding performers.<sup>11</sup> One way to show humility is to get comfortable saying, “I don’t know.” It strengthens team relationships by showing others you’re human. Also, ask for feedback on what’s working and what’s not working from trusted advisors—people who have your best interest in mind and will tell you the truth.

► **Be curious.** Many leaders rush to implement solutions by making the mistake of starting with a perceived answer. Outstanding leaders ask questions. Begin with, “What’s the problem we’re trying to solve?” Once you know the problem, use lean techniques to ask more probing questions. According to Taiichi Ohno, who is considered the father of the Toyota Production System, we should ask

“why?” five times whenever we find a problem. By repeating “why?” five times, the solution becomes apparent.

► **Share mistakes.** A great way to get comfortable being wrong is to share mistakes. Much like morbidity and mortality (M&M) conferences, during which physicians review cases with adverse outcomes, leaders should meet regularly to share mistakes and what they learned from the experience. Pixar Animation Studios uses a slight variation of M&Ms: After each film is released, Pixar conducts post-mortems to learn what did and didn’t work, with input from all levels of the company.<sup>12</sup>

## Conclusion

Practicing humility, being curious, and sharing mistakes creates psychologically safe environments. These practices also build trust. Although society may want leaders to be courageous, innovative risk-takers, we also need to relate to them. Saying “I was wrong” doesn’t make someone a terrible leader; it makes them a human being. Admitting to being wrong and correcting the course is what makes them an outstanding leader.

When was the last time you admitted to being wrong? What did you learn from it? [GRU](#)

---

*Peter Valenzuela, MD, MBA, is a nationally recognized physician leader, cartoonist, and educator. He is the author of Doc-Related: A Physician’s Guide to Fixing Our Ailing Health Care System. Dr. Valenzuela specializes in family medicine and is chief medical officer at Mercy Medical Group in Sacramento, CA.*

## References

1. J. Gorman and S. Gorman. 2016. *Denying to the Grave: Why We Ignore the Facts That Will Save Us*. Oxford University Press.
2. S. Heshmat. 2015. What Is Confirmation Bias? *Psychology Today*, April 23, 2015. Accessed March 2, 2023 at [psychologytoday.com/us/blog/science-choice/201504/what-is-confirmation-bias](https://psychologytoday.com/us/blog/science-choice/201504/what-is-confirmation-bias).
3. News Literacy Project. No Date. In Brief: Confirmation Bias and Motivated Reasoning. [newslit.org/educators/resources/in-brief-confirmation-bias-motivated-reasoning](https://newslit.org/educators/resources/in-brief-confirmation-bias-motivated-reasoning).
4. K. Schulz. 2010. *Being Wrong: Adventures in Margin of Error*. Granta Publications. 2010.
5. T.G. Okimoto, M. Wenzel, and K. Hedrick. 2012. Refusing to Apologize Can Have Psychological Benefits (and We Issue No Mea Culpa for This Research Finding). *European Journal of Social Psychology*, November 2012. Accessed March 2, 2023 at [doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.1901](https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.1901).
6. T. Eurich. 2018. Insight: The Surprising Truth About How Others See Us, How We See Ourselves, and Why the Answers Matter More Than We Think. *Currency*.
7. C.S. Dweck. 2007. *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*. Ballantine Books.
8. K. Schumann and C.S. Dweck. 2014. Who Accepts Responsibility for Their Transgressions? *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, September 24, 2014. Accessed March 2, 2023 at [journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0146167214552789](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0146167214552789).
9. E.C. Dierdorff and R.S. Rubin. 2015. Research: We’re Not Very Self-Aware, Especially at Work. *Harvard Business Review*, March 12, 2015. Accessed March 2, 2023 at [hbr.org/2015/03/research-were-not-very-self-aware-especially-at-work](https://hbr.org/2015/03/research-were-not-very-self-aware-especially-at-work).
10. D. Marcum and S. Smith. 2008. *Egonomics: What Makes Ego Our Greatest Asset (or Most Expensive Liability)*. Touchstone.
11. J. Collins. *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap and Others Don’t*. Harper Business. 2001.
12. E. Catmull, Creativity, Inc. 2014. *Overcoming the Unseen Forces That Stand in the Way of True Inspiration*. Random House.