



UNFORTUNATELY,
SUFFERING
OFTEN PRECEDES
TRANSFORMATION

But what about the things we're all wrong about?

What about ideas that are so accepted and internalized that we're not even in a position to question their fallibility? These are ideas so ingrained in the collective consciousness that it seems foolhardy to even wonder if they're potentially untrue. It is impossible to examine questions we refuse to ask. These are the big potatoes.

—Chuck Klosterman,
But What If We're Wrong?

They had that stereotypical government vibe about them. Dark suits, white shirts, style-free ties, sensible shoes, six-dollar haircuts.

Helping to further set the mood was the fact that they brought along a chain and padlock with them, as well as a notice with the word “Seized” in red, 120-point font. They were in the process of attaching both to the door of my company when I arrived.

When I woke up that morning, I thought it was going to be just another normal day as a struggling entrepreneur. I had no idea that I’d encounter a pair of humorless, robotic IRS agents when I came to work.

I’ll fast-forward through the “oh shit” conversation I had with myself, as well as the stammering, pleading “I had no idea” vomit of verbiage I threw at them both. Suffice it to say, my twenty-nine-year-old mind was racing, my blood pressure was skyrocketing, and I was thrust into a desperate plea to stave off a death sentence for my business.

Yes—eventually (after what seemed like hours but was probably only about six or eight

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minutes)—agents “unfriendly” and “unfeeling” finally shared with me the basis for their mission that morning. I had a problem—a big problem.

It turns out that our “business administrator,” due to cash flow shortages, had just been paying net payroll for several months. In other words, the IRS had never received the withholding we should have been paying it. The federal government is both unfriendly and unfeeling when you mess with withholding taxes. Imagine that!

My unsophisticated, ignorant, and plain poor approach to running my business had caught up with me. I’d trusted the wrong people and had abdicated my responsibilities as the owner.

I was screwed. Or so I thought.

Then something incredibly simple turned the whole situation around—almost immediately. You see, IRS agents are trained and prepared for belligerent, angry, low-accountability responses when they take their business-seizure show on the road. What they’re not expecting is this: vulnerability, authenticity, contrition, and flexibility.

I wasn’t trying to not pay taxes. I wasn’t trying

to avoid my responsibility. I was blissfully ignorant (and a bad business manager at the time), but down deep, I was a rule-following, high-integrity person.

Here's the bottom line. Once I realized what my situation truly entailed, I surrendered to it. I stopped trying to convince the agents of anything. I accepted the reality that was in front of me. Then the next big thing happened. I took full accountability for what had happened and requested, in as selfless a manner as I could muster, some time to work out a "both-and" solution to everything.

I asked for the opportunity to *both* keep the doors open *and* find a way to make things right with the IRS.

After a few terse phone calls with their supervisors, some supersecret hallway conversations between the agents, and some scribbling on their low-bidder-manufactured yellow pads, "unfriendly" and "unfeeling" had a response to my proposal.

"Yes, you may keep operating your business. *And* you will agree to a comprehensive audit of all your business operations over the past two years. Plus, you will enter into a binding legal

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agreement—including the requirement to guarantee repayment of your tax liability through your personal assets.” Or something like that. That was more than twenty-five years ago now, but those are the highlights.

The next six months were the most challenging of my professional career, but they were also the most educational. I learned (and lived) the difference between “saying” you’re committed and *being* committed. I had to make some *very* difficult decisions, including the need to be fully transparent. I also found a new respect for myself when it came to doing the right thing, the right way.

More importantly, I pulled my head out of my “I’m a twenty-something entrepreneur, and this is *fun!*” thinking, and I became open, vulnerable, and genuinely committed to learning what, how, and when to do what we needed. It was time to do the right thing and not be stuck on justifying my position or assigning blame. Clearly, I needed to listen.

Yes, this is a true story, and yes, we repaid every cent to the government.

Questions, Insights, Implications

1. Describe a situation when you needed to just shut up and listen. No justifying, no pleading, no trying to convince someone that you were right—just a time your mouth needed to close, and your ears needed to open. How did you feel?
2. When have you felt a strong sense of accomplishment and pride as a result of you doing the right thing—even when it was extremely difficult?
3. What value might you see in offering to be contrite, vulnerable, and truly remorseful in a situation where you've wronged someone else?

Take a moment—by yourself or with your spouse, friends, coworkers, teammates, or staff—to reflect on these questions. Give yourself room to be willing to be wrong, to be open to new perspectives, and to find answers in the most unusual places. Are there examples you are able to cite where these

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study questions have been applicable for you? Do you disagree with me in terms of what I've shared about them? Look deeply, but keep this “rule” in mind: With yourself and with others—as you look at your perspectives and feelings about these items—make sure you're looking through the lens of “what's right” and not “who's right.” I expect you'll gain new insights immediately as a result.