



Healthy Business, Healthy Mind

To avoid exacerbating your own unjustified fears, act from a sense of self-confidence.

*“Respect your efforts, respect yourself. Self-respect leads to self-discipline.
When you have both firmly under your belt, that’s real power.”*

— Clint Eastwood

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Your Bright Future

From 1990 to 2007 I developed, sold, and serviced business automation software for small, rapidly growing firms. I dealt with founders and principals, most of whom were overachievers. Before that, I was a university research scientist and most of my colleagues were insecure. Before that, I was a recreational pilot and most of my club-mates were anal compulsive. Before that, I was a mountaineer and most of my climbing partners were crazy. Now I’m a therapist.

A recent TechCrunch article titled **“Investors and entrepreneurs need to address the mental health crisis in startups”** points out the mental vulnerability of entrepreneurs. According to this article, the founders of startups are:

- 2X more likely to suffer from depression
- 6X more likely to suffer from ADHD
- 3X more likely to suffer from substance abuse
- 10X more likely to suffer from bipolar disorder
- 2X more likely to have psychiatric hospitalization
- 2X more likely to have suicidal thoughts

It didn't mention the incidence of criminal behavior but it should have. A 2017 *Academy of Management* article titled "Why Good Firms Do Bad Things" says, "performance above internal aspirations and external expectations increase the likelihood of illegal activities." This is consistent with my experience.

Of my own 30 clients, one stole from me, another stole from the government, and a third was convicted of embezzling millions from his company. Compare this with roughly 0.1% of the population who are indicted for white-collar crime annually, add the estimated 90% that goes unreported, and this implies one percent of the population is engaged in white-collar crime. In my experience with entrepreneurs, the number was ten times this average.

Add to this the number of founders or CEOs who subscribe to what I call "the Steve Jobs management strategy"—which means they act mendacious, insufferable, or insane—and that number easily jumps to 20%, and I'm being generous. These people are clearly "mentally vulnerable."

We don't hear about mental health in business because finance and management are supposed to be sciences. Of course, that's ridiculous. If you're an entrepreneur or you're heading into the corporate world then mental health is something you might like to think about, both yours and that of the people you'll be dealing with.



Illness or Opportunity

I've always wondered why people behave badly. I still wonder, but now that I have clients who are explaining it to me I'm finally learning. You'll never get an honest explanation from family, friends, or colleagues. No one truly reveals themselves in a relationship that they're trying to manage. To do so is worse than texting while driving. It's more like flipping out while driving. Full revelation entails chaos, contradiction, vulnerability, and fear. Don't engage in full revelation while operating machinery and you generally won't if you're trying to hold your ego together.

The Steve Jobs School of Management, which doesn't really exist but might as well, teaches striking fear into others is a time-tested form of control. Bombast and belligerence is mostly for effect. While authentically frightening, these people are able to turn it on and off at will. But beneath their aggression is a reservoir of anger, fear, and guilt that lies at the core of their personality. To be rewarded for employing these emotions reinforces a destructive addiction.

In a 2014 article titled "The Psychology of Entrepreneurship," Michael Frese and Michael Gielnik refer to what's called "entrepreneurial alertness." This entrepreneurial orientation is characterized by autonomy, innovativeness, risk-taking, competitive aggressiveness, and proactivity. They explore whether these skills are innate, emotional, or analytical.

I've come to psychology late in life because I never liked it as an academic field. Now that I've stepped into that stream I feel it's gone over my waders and I don't find most of these academic discussions to be useful. What I find useful is my experience with people and projects, in particular, invention in science and ideas surrounding the Agile approach to software development.

It is not surprising that those most responsible for getting things done are the first to discover the best ways to do them. The plodding analysis of early software development was famous for its high failure rate. Rapid software development was the first step toward salvation which then led to the Agile and related approaches. This happens over and over: the people who do it, whatever it is, are the ones who know it best. Just as there are no armchair explorers, there are no armchair entrepreneurs.

I believe the prevalence of Steve Jobs-style management—the berserk kind—is that most growth management is reactive, and reactive management is known to be prone to failure. Just because some successful dictators are crazy does not mean crazy dictators are successful. And if you want to be successful, and you don't want to go crazy, I suggest that you start learning about the psychology of yourself and others before the chickens come home to roost, or whatever more direct aphorism you'd like to use.



Passive Aggressive

My city of Victoria, BC has an epidemic of passive aggression. I don't know how long it's been going on—

probably for along time—but it hinders the city’s growth in many ways. It causes enmity and separation between people which halts partnership and collaboration. It is a nasty emotional dysfunction.

Passive aggression is where a misguided anger motivates a disguised personal attack. It’s disguised because it’s presented as advice, usually of a condemnatory nature, and it’s misguided because it dishonestly camouflages the underlying issue, which has little to do with the issue at hand. It is a surprise attack on your person disguised as a criticism of your action.

What’s really happening is that the aggressor is attacking a false presumption of your attack on their personal worth, and they’re doing so by attacking your personal worth. The insulting nature of the aggression creates rancor, halts discussion, and prevents progress.

The tactic designed to amplify and justify the aggressor’s sense of injury, not resolve it. It is an example of the other person’s unconscious mind creating a firestorm to draw you, who they perceive as an enemy, out into the open. Much like bullying, it is someone else’s pain projected outward. It is a kind of paranoid delusion.

You cannot deal with passive aggression directly because it is rooted in another person’s delusion. If you defend yourself, you’re seen as confirming your aggressive intentions. If you are conciliatory, you’re admitting your aggressive intentions. If you call out their behavior as deluded, misguided, or dishonest—all of which are true—you’re seen as taking a more aggressive stance. And you cannot defend the issue because the issue is irrelevant.

The only reliably successful approach is to create for the other person a safe environment, disengage from the issue, and behave in a manner that lies outside of the aggressor’s sense of combat. In short, you must do all at once the things needed to reconcile a conflict and you must do them without any apparent logic or support. This is also how you deal with someone who’s having a psychotic episode, otherwise known as a melt-down.

It should be clear from this description that passive aggressive behavior plays no constructive role in building relationship. The behavior may represent a psychic episode that’s necessary in a therapeutic sense, but you would be excused for not wanting to be a therapist, and for refusing to act as one.



An Example

Here is an everyday example of passive aggression, lest I give you the impression that those who engage in it are raving psychotics, which they are not. I’m offering a workshop on psychology in business and I’ve sent personal invitations to 150 technology companies in Victoria. I researched each company and addressed and email to the principals of each if I could find them. I also created my message in each company’s own response form to demonstrate that I was sufficiently interested to take the time to cut, paste, type, and personalize each message. The project has taken me more than one long day. One of the people to whom I wrote responded as follows:

Hi Lincoln,

Thanks for your email but I am interested, and your email copy is boring as hell. Just some pointers from a guy that analyzes 10-20 sites a day:

- 1. At least visit the website and try to get a real person's name before you add them in your list for an email blast ;)*
- 2. If you're going to address by the company name then at least get the company name right ;)*
- 3. Please get a decent logo that would actually look like a logo and represent your brand.*
- 4. Think about getting a new website with a set colour scheme that is optimized for your visitors to contact you.*
- 5. 10,000 dollar tip ;) get a membership with VIATEC if you haven't already and get them to mention your event in their weekly/monthly newsletter ;)*

I know I should be charging you for all these pointers, but I really hope that these will help you in your future campaigns. Good luck with your Workshop.

This author probably believed he was acting with good intention; aggressors are always self-righteous. Aside from my typo of this company's whimsically spelled name, nothing in this message is true. It was true enough to sound sincere but not to the point where it be clearly understood, was factually correct, or could be acted on. There is always the intent to leave you feeling helpless.

Of particular note are the claims that this author would have been interested if I had not demonstrated my incompetence and that, in addition to feeling stupid, I should feel grateful. And I am grateful, but not for the reasons that are supposed. The authors primary intention is to humiliate me, and I do feel humiliated. This is what is meant by "psychic arrows."

At a deeper level, the author is raising his self-esteem by presuming his expertise, which is a defense from his inner feeling that he is lacking . His self-satisfaction will be short-lasting. The long-lasting effect is to alienate me from both him and his company, and to foreclose any chance of further interaction between us. The ubiquity of this kind of behavior generates a palpable disquiet between professionals in Victoria. Socially accepted hostility plays a role in the cliquishness that everyone ascribes to everyone else. We all engage in passive aggression to a small extent because we're all slightly deluded. Our version of reality is never exactly right. When we misperceive the need to defend ourselves we act in a passively aggressive manner. When we're under real or perceived attack our behavior can be very off-base.

The best way that I know of to avoid exacerbating your own unjustified fears is to act from a sense of self-confidence. If your actions are motivated by gratitude, honesty, and a desire to be of service then you probably won't perpetrate aggression on others. You may still be the victim of another's aggression, but being a victim can be a good thing if you see it coming and protect yourself. Being the victim of the illusions of others brings these illusions into focus so that they can be corrected. Those of us who are uninjured victims bear witness and can act as therapists.



A Better Path Forward

I've been in several professions and I have university degrees but I never understood this stuff until my therapy clients started teaching me. We are led to believe that we are all functional people. I see little evidence of this. For my own part, this has stimulated new questions of how people succeed. Is it innate or

learned behavior? Are the skills emotional or analytical? And what's the difference between aiding those who've fallen and preventing the fall of those at risk of it?

I feel it's emotional. I feel that way about just about everything these days. Partly that's because emotions underlie my clients' motivations, and partly because academic and clinical research is converging on this conclusion: the emotions we have so flippantly overlooked for the last 200 years are at the bottom of everything we do.

In Victoria, a town not known for its emotional expressiveness, this is a problem. Perhaps it's not a problem if you're in government, law, or health care, but it's definitely a problem if you're an entrepreneur. As an entrepreneur, emotion is fuel. People's hearts are the reactors that make things go. Yes, you've got to have a plan, a product, and a market but the plan and the market are human and humans run on trust, rapport, and sense of purpose. This is not an analytical skill, though you can analyze it. It's not innate, though we do a lot of our learning about people before we're aware of it, as children.

Much of my therapy work involves accompanying clients back to their childhood to relearn things. It's amazing how badly we've been taught. If you've been brought up well, then you're probably good with people and skilled in sales and marketing. The rest of us still need to prove ourselves. We aspire to success as redemption and, if you're reading this, you're probably an entrepreneur. If I believed in therapy, I'd say you need therapy. But I don't believe in therapy in any traditional sense. I believe in learning. I advise being proactive in letting your environment teach you emotional insight before you charge unarmed in the dark corners of people's minds.

As I mentioned above, I'm offering a course on this starting October 2nd at a technology incubator called Viatec. The title of the course is "Psychology in Business," and the goal is developing the insight you need to maintain your own emotional balance and to be a guiding force for the development of emotional balance in others. You can visit [the course's webpage](#) for more details. It's my intention to turn the materials in this course into a book. That's a project for next year.

*"I have no right, by anything I do or say, to demean a human being in his own eyes.
What matters is not what I think of him; it is what he thinks of himself."
– Antoine de Saint-Exupery*



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