

How effective entrepreneurs deal with colleagues in denial



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When was the last time a colleague said something so ridiculous that it made your jaw drop?



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A four-year study by LeadershipIQ.com found that 23% of CEOs were fired for denying reality, meaning refusing to recognise negative facts about his or her organisation's performance.

Entrepreneurs typically respond when people deny reality by confronting them with the facts and arguments. But research suggests that's exactly the wrong thing to do.

Research on confirmation bias shows that we tend to look for and interpret information in ways that conform to our beliefs. There is an emotional investment in continuing to believe what you want to believe.

Furthermore, studies on a phenomenon called the backfire effect show when we are presented with facts that cause us to feel bad about our self-worth or worldview, we may sometimes even develop a stronger attachment to the incorrect belief.

These mental blindspots are two of over 100 dangerous judgment errors that result from how our brains are wired, what scholars in cognitive neuroscience and behavioural economics call cognitive biases.

Fortunately, recent research in these fields shows how you can use pragmatic strategies to address these dangerous judgment errors in your professional life.

Use EGRIP

Rather than arguing, it is much more effective to use a research-based strategy I developed called EGRIP (Emotions, Goals, Rapport, Information, Positive Reinforcement), which provides clear guidelines on how to deal with people who deny the facts.

For instance, consider the case of Mike, a new product development team lead in a rapidly-growing tech startup. He set an ambitious goal for a product launch, and as more and more bugs kept creeping up, he refused to move the date.

People tried to talk to him, but he hunkered down and kept insisting that the product would launch on time and work well. I was doing coaching for the company's founder, and he asked me to talk to Mike and see what's going on.

• E – Connect with their emotions

If someone denies clear facts you can safely assume that it's their emotions that are leading them away from reality. While gut reactions can be helpful, they can also lead us astray.

What works better is focus on understanding their emotions and to determine what emotional blocks might cause them to stick their heads into the sand of reality.

What I discovered in my conversations with Mike was that he tied his self-worth and sense of success to "sticking to his guns," associating strong leadership with consistency and afraid of appearing weak in his new role as team lead.

He believed team members were trying to undermine him by getting him to shift the schedule and admit he failed to deliver. This false association of leadership with consistency and fear of appearing weak is a frequent problem for new leaders.

• G – Establish shared goals

Then, you need to establish shared goals, which is crucial for effective knowledge sharing. I spoke with Mike about how we both shared the goal of having him succeed as a leader in the company. Likewise, we both shared the goal of having the new product be profitable.

• R – Build rapport

Next, build up rapport by establishing trust. Use empathetic listening to echo their emotions and show you understand how they feel. I spoke to Mike about how it must hard to be worried about the loyalty of one's team members, and also discussed what he thinks makes someone a strong leader.

• I – Provide information

At this point, start providing new information that might prove a bit challenging, but would not touch the actual pain point.

I described to Mike how research suggests one of the most important signs of being a strong leader is the ability to change your mind based on new evidence, giving examples such as Alan Mulally saving Ford Motor Company through repeated changes of course. If I had begun with this information, Mike might have perceived it as threatening.

However, slipping it in naturally as part of a broader conversation after cultivating rapport built on shared goals. Mike accepted the information calmly.

- **P – Provide positive reinforcement**

Then, after the person changes their perspective, provide them with positive reinforcement, which is a research-based tactic of shifting someone's emotions. The more positive emotions the person associates with the ability to accept negative facts as an invaluable skill, the less likely anyone will need to have the same conversation with them in the future.

With Mike, I discussed where he can best exhibit these characteristics to show those who might try to undermine him what a strong leader he is, and at the same time make the new product as profitable as possible.

I directed the conversation toward how he can show strength by delaying the launch of the new product. Eventually, he agreed, and I praised his ability to show strength and leadership by shifting his perspective based on new evidence.

Good luck, and remember that you can use EGRIP not simply in professional settings, but in all situations where you want to steer others away from false beliefs that cause them to deny reality.

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