

A VIEW FROM SUE UNERMAN

# The best leaders admit when they are wrong

[OPINION](#) [PEOPLE](#) [TRANSFORMATION](#)

SUE UNERMAN, CHIEF TRANSFORMATION OFFICER 01 NOV 2017

## The only thing worse than making a mistake at work is not admitting it

Five-hundred years ago, on 31 October 1517, Martin Luther nailed a poster onto the door of a church that changed history. Establishing, once and for all, the power of out of home media.

Actually, not the point of this blog. Sorry poster fans.

Five-hundred years ago Luther nailed a paper with 95 theses on the door of a church in Wittenberg in Germany expressing his objections to the Catholic Church and sparking the Protestant Reformation across Europe. As many of you know, in England this was spearheaded by Henry VIII who split from the Pope's authority and announced himself

head of the Church.

When this is taught at school reasons for the reformation are normally confined to: i) Henry didn't like control from Rome; ii) Henry wanted a divorce from older, and now slightly dull Katherine of Aragon who hadn't given him a son; iii) He had a crush on Anne Boleyn; iv) He wanted to acquire the considerable wealth concentrated in the monasteries. Less frequently cited is the reason Tudor historian Suzannah Lipscomb [gives](#): his absolute need to be right.

She writes: "To justify his actions he would ignore the ruling of the Pope, the highest authority figure of the time who he had previously defended; his own conscience; the trauma to his wife who begged him on her knees not to leave her."

She references a [book](#), Mistakes were made but not by me, which examines "psychological dissonance". That happens when someone holds two beliefs that contradict each other, when someone who needs to be liked or respected (as most of us do) does something that deep down they know is unlikeable or [shameful](#). The book argues that this is so uncomfortable that it's only natural to try to resolve it.

Some people will go to any lengths to do so. Like Henry VIII.

Like someone who expresses an opinion that he's believed deep down for years, finds that he is challenged on it by other opinion formers and then has to find a way to prove that he's still in the right. Perhaps he'll acknowledge a misunderstanding, i.e. that what he said was misinterpreted by everyone else. Or give a non-apology apology where he says he's sorry for upsetting people (but not for his beliefs or his lifelong actions based on those beliefs).

Lipscomb comments: "There may be exceptions but few people in history could not justify to themselves why they did what they did and why it was – contrary to all odds – actually the right thing to do".

You will be able to think of your own examples from history. You will be able to think of your own examples from the present day, on the world stage, in your personal life, and in

business.

The best leaders acknowledge when they are in the wrong. It's a characteristic to look out for in a manager or a leader. Does your boss admit when they were wrong and perhaps even when you were right?

The only thing worse than making a mistake at work is not admitting it and asking for forgiveness and help.

Our brains are wired for self-justification; our first recourse is to find a reason why everyone else is wrong. It is hard work however. The more wrong you are the more effort it is. Freeing yourself from this effort is not only healthier and happier, it will also make you more productive and a better leader.

OPINION PEOPLE TRANSFORMATION