



# Kill Your Darlings

How High Performers Achieve Extraordinary Growth

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# In 2012, on the day of the election, Mitt Romney only had one speech prepared. A victory speech.

He impatiently watched CNN, ready to celebrate the greatest achievement of his career. Instead, he ended up receiving the most devastating news of his life.

Romney's surprise that day is somewhat confounding, since in the final weeks, an overwhelming majority of the polls showed him behind by a substantial margin. How did Mitt not see what everyone else did?

It was later revealed that Mitt and his team had [dismissed the independent polls](#). According to one top aide, "when anyone raised the idea that public polls were showing a close race, the campaign's pollster said the poll modeling was flawed and everyone moved on." Instead, Mitt relied on his own internal polls that ended up being significantly biased in his favor.

Clearly, Mitt Romney didn't apply the same skepticism to his own polls that he applied to the public polls. But why?

# The Instinct to Protect Our Favored Beliefs

More than we'd like to admit, we all engage in the same type of ludicrous reasoning as Governor Romney.

Just think of all the times that you've come across an article in your Facebook newsfeed supporting a position you already hold. You read it, you love it, and then you share it with your friends, all in the span of five minutes.

But how do you treat an article that attacks a position you care about? You either ignore it, or scrutinize the hell out of it. You read the article as uncharitably as possible, trying to find counterexamples for every argument or passages that reveal the author's "true" agenda, so you can safely dismiss it as inane drivel.

Or how about the way you responded to the infamous deflate-gate? If you were a fan of any other team but the Patriots, you might have been quick to label Tom Brady as guilty. But what if it had been your quarterback? "Innocent until proven guilty. Where's the evidence!" you'd cry.

Thanks to the confirmation bias, human beings have an absurd double standard. We are quick to believe information that supports our favored beliefs, and quick to dismiss information that threatens them.

But what are favored beliefs exactly? They are beliefs that are tied into our relationships, our material self-interest, or our identities. For this reason, we don't want to see them harmed.

Many of these favored beliefs are hopeful. We desperately want to believe that all is well with our family, our business, our reputation, our health, our prospects for the presidency, our star quarterback. So when information threatens any one of these beliefs, we resist. We either bury our heads in the sand or we rationalize away the evidence.

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Can we just pause for a second and admit how irrational this is? Failing to believe bad news doesn't make it untrue. Wouldn't we want to know if "all is *not* well" so we could do something about it before it's too late? Had Mitt Romney confronted the brutal facts that he was indeed behind, perhaps he could've shaken up his strategy in the final weeks, giving him a prayer of a chance.

Unfortunately, human beings are driven to maintain a favorable self-concept more than they are an accurate one. We have the tendency to see ourselves as exceedingly moral, attractive, smart, funny, athletic etc., and we don't want to disturb that vision. For many of us, ignorance is bliss. But not all of us.

Many of the world's top performers prioritize an accurate self-concept over a favorable one. They strive to treat beliefs that they don't like in the same way they treat beliefs that they do. They want to know when "all is not well" because, then, they can do something about it. But these high performers are not only receptive to information that might threaten their favored beliefs, they go out of their way to seek it out themselves. In doing so, they kill their darlings.

*“Killing your darlings is often fraught with anxiety.  
That's why it's helpful first to mentally prepare.”*

# The Power of Killing Your Darlings

Writers are a neurotic bunch. We get attached to every chapter, page, paragraph, even sentence that we write. So attached, in fact, that our words can begin to feel like our babies and we lose all sense of objectivity. When an editor points out that a particular part of our writing needs to go, we automatically balk because we don't want to abandon our offspring.

This is a somewhat pathetic state of affairs. Every writer who's worth her salt knows that editing is a critical part of the writing process. It's only by letting go of old ideas that we can make room for new ones. After all, as Ernest Hemingway said, "the only kind of writing is rewriting." So, the quicker we're willing to abandon bad ideas, the quicker we can invent better ideas to take their place, improving both the work and the writer.

That's why for decades, writers have been given this piece of wisdom: kill your darling. Instead of reluctantly letting our editor drag our darlings away from us as tears run down our cheeks, authors should grab the knife, and do the damn thing ourselves. It's a twisted metaphor, I know, but it's empowering, because it puts writers in control.

Killing your darlings isn't just good advice for writers; it's important for every kind of leader, from teachers, to politicians, to dentists. Every day we cling to bad ideas that stand in the way

of personal growth, for fear of hurting our self-concept or short term self-interest. We shouldn't wait for evidence that will disprove our favored beliefs; we should take an active role, lean in to the discomfort, and seek out the information. This habit of searching for evidence that threatens favored beliefs ignites a powerful feedback loop that leads to extraordinary improvement.

Killing your darlings is how CEO Alan Mulally [saved Ford Motor Company](#). Ford was going through a time of unprecedented turbulence. In the midst of this change, Mulally's predecessor often complained that his team was only telling him what he wanted to hear. But the truth is, he didn't want bad news. Mulally was different.

Mulally had a plan that would drive Ford into a new age, but he knew that as setbacks inevitably occurred and circumstances changed, his plan would have to change, as well. So he organized a weekly Business Plan Review meeting for the primary purpose of soliciting bad news.

For weeks, his team stayed quiet. They didn't believe Mulally really wanted negative feedback. But week after week, Mulally was persistent in demanding the truth. Eventually, one of his staff decided to go out on a limb and reveal a significant setback. Mulally began to clap. He was thrilled his team was finally giving him the unpleasant information he needed to continually improve his plan.

High performing therapists also kill their darlings. One important predictor of the success of therapy is the level of empathy that the client feels she's experiencing. As it turns out though, therapists have an often inflated sense of how empathetic they're being.

The most results-oriented therapists are unwilling to tolerate this. After each session, they ask clients to [fill out forms rating them on several measures](#), including empathy. This can be a very humbling experience. After all, who doesn't want to believe they're doing an excellent job? But the sooner they pinpoint their weaknesses, the sooner they can improve them, becoming a better partner for their client.

Elite football players kill their darlings. When you're paid a multi-million dollar salary and adored by thousands of screaming fans every Sunday, it can be hard to see yourself as anything less than a stellar athlete. But the best NFL players make sure they're not stuck in a bubble that prevents them from spotting their weaknesses, learning, and improving. One way players do this is by watching recorded footage of their games. While watching games they performed well in is easy, players are no doubt tempted to skip watching the disastrous ones to preserve their own self-concept. But the best athletes spend more time studying their most embarrassing mistakes. Their attitude: to hell with my ego, I want to win the Super Bowl!



# Imagining the Worst Case Scenario

Killing your darlings is often fraught with anxiety. That's why it's helpful first to mentally prepare. One of the reasons why killing our darlings is so difficult is that we tend to catastrophize. We're unwittingly led to invent horrific images in our mind that are wholly detached from reality.

A writer might envision that trashing a paragraph will make the entire book worthless.

A presidential hopeful might believe losing may cause his family to leave him.

A product manager might think that pulling the plug on his product may result in becoming homeless, or even worse, *dead*. While in actuality, no marketing manager (that I know of) has ever been killed for a poor performing product, even if our mind has a funny way of making us feel like it's a real possibility.

What can we do to stop catastrophizing and manage our anxiety? Ask yourself two questions: What's really the worst that might happen? And is that *so* bad?

These questions may sound pretty unremarkable, but they're incredibly potent. These questions force you to rationally examine the *real* worst case scenario. Once you do, you're bound to

realize that, as bad as the scenario might be (and believe me it might be bad) it's not nearly as bad as the catastrophe scenario. Coming to this realization, some of the anxiety will subside, and you'll be ready to kill your darlings.

So what are you waiting for? If you're an investor who is bullish on a certain stock, Google critics of the company and see what they have to say. If you're about to marry someone whom your friends have expressed concern with, write out a pros and cons list. Make sure you spend twice as much time on the cons as the pros. If you're a leader about to make a decision on launching a new project, conduct what psychologist Gary Klein calls a premortem. Pretend it's several years into the future and despite your best efforts, the project has failed. List all the reasons why.

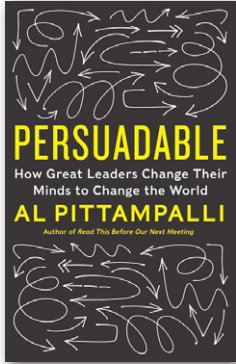
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These exercises will rarely yield a definitive answer as to whether you should kill your darlings. But if you're willing to remain dispassionate when performing them, you're more likely to make a decision that is guided by the evidence rather than the confirmation bias.

But also, be aware of the limitations of engaging in this process by yourself. The confirmation bias is an undeniably powerful force. No matter how hard we try to falsify our own favored beliefs, we may not try as hard as someone else. Consider recruiting someone else to help play devil's advocate. Give them permission to challenge your favored beliefs. Just like an editor points out sentences that need to be fixed, an outsider can point out beliefs that need to be changed.

But in the end, it's you who needs to grab the knife. **It's up to you to kill your darlings.** 🗡️

# Info



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