

July 30, 2015, 1:28 PM ET

The Power of Admitting Your Own Errors—Like Tom Brady?

By Thomas H. Davenport



New England Patriots quarterback Tom Brady takes his helmet off during warm-ups ahead of the start of the NFL Super Bowl XLIX in Glendale, Ariz., Feb. 1, 2015. Lucy Nicholson/Reuters

As a scholar of decision-making, I've long believed that one of the most important things you can do to improve your decisions is to freely admit your own errors. I'll start by admitting some of my own in advocating this idea.

I first encountered this notion in a book by Jonah Lehrer called *How We Decide*. I liked the book so much that I assigned it to my MBA students in a decision-making class. Mr. Lehrer was later caught by journalists and readers in numerous instances of fabricating quotes and recycling his own work. In July 2012 publisher Houghton Mifflin Harcourt halted digital book sales of Mr. Lehrer's nonfiction book "*Imagine: How Creativity Works*" after the author admitted to fabricating quotes from Bob Dylan. He later resigned from the *New Yorker* after discoveries that he sometimes recycled his own material, from older *New Yorker* blog posts and other past columns, for newer stories.

My assigning the book was an error, if an innocent one.

One of the passages I loved in Mr. Lehrer's book was about Tom Brady, my hometown Patriots (former) hero, now accused by the NFL of instructing his assistant to destroy a cell phone that may have included text messages linking him to the NFL deflated football scandal. Mr. Lehrer described Mr. Brady as a

“student of his own errors.” By that account, and others I’ve read as well, Mr. Brady devotes considerable attention to reviewing and analyzing his quarterbacking mistakes. He watches game films of his interceptions and incompletes over and over. I touted his focus on his own errors in books and speeches, which turns out to be another error of mine.

Who knows how this will all turn out, but if Mr. Brady is connected to Deflategate, the biggest error in his life would be in denying it. If he did play a role and admitted his complicity from the beginning, he probably would have been punished less and his reputation would be better off. Mr. Brady denies any involvement. “I did nothing wrong, and no one in the Patriots organization did either,” he said in a recent Facebook post.”

Patriots owner Robert Kraft has criticized the NFL’s decision to suspend Mr. Brady for four games next season. “I was wrong to put my faith in the league,” he said at a news conference Wednesday.

There are many other examples of successful error admission. Gary Loveman, the former CEO and now Chairman of Caesars EntertainmentCorp., admitted often that he made a big mistake in not buying a gaming license in Macau. Mr. Loveman is known for his analytical approach to decisions, but the numbers just didn’t add up to the right answer in this case. He once told me that admitting to the mistake in front of Caesars employees made it much more likely that they would make the effort to learn quickly from their own errors.

In health care, it’s long been the policy of doctors and hospitals not to admit their mistakes—in part for fear of malpractice suits. But this culture has begun to change. The University of Michigan Health System in 2001 created a new approach to admitting medical errors, apologizing to patients, and compensating them when justified, and found that its malpractice costs were substantially lower as a result. The average legal expense per case went down more than 50%, the hospital system’s chief risk officer told the WSJ in 2007. Teaching hospitals at Harvard University established a similar policy of admitting medical errors and apologizing to patients for them.

In the U.S. Army, the idea of admitting your errors is baked into the “After Action Review,” a formal or informal process for discussing what happened in a recent military operation. This process has been conducted for a couple of decades now, although I think it may have lost some energy in recent years. But it’s a great opportunity for leaders to admit that they may have screwed up, and to ask others how they might improve.

There is some useful research and writing on this topic. Amy Edmondson, for example, a professor at Harvard Business School, wrote a great article on learning from failure(which means you have to admit failure) a few years ago in Harvard Business Review. It’s a great place to start if you are serious about learning from your own errors.

We tend to focus on complex technical aids to decision-making, like better data, strong analytics, and even automation. But in many cases, just admitting that we may not have made the best possible decision—and we’ll try to do better next time—is just as valuable an intervention. Tom Brady may not be the best example of a “student of error,” but you can be.

Thomas H. Davenport is a Distinguished Professor at Babson College, a Research Fellow at the Center for Digital Business, Director of Research at the International Institute for Analytics, and a Senior Advisor to Deloitte Analytics.