

# The Price of Seeing Clearly

<https://gerolds.github.io/textbook/textbook/posts/the-price-of-seeing-clearly/>

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# The Price of Seeing Clearly

People talk about mindset change as though it were a setting you could toggle. Read the right book, attend the right talk, and something shifts.

That is not how it works.

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## 1. What it actually feels like

A real change in mindset does not feel like learning. It feels like falling. The floor you were standing on turns out to have been painted on air, and now you are somewhere lower, unable to understand how you ever mistook it for solid ground.

Before the shift, you are settled. You have a model that explains your situation. The model has never been seriously tested because you arranged your life so it doesn't need to be.

Then something breaks the arrangement.

A game ships and nobody cares. A funder says no and you realize the pitch was the only thing holding the project together. A colleague tells you, without malice, that the thing you spent two years on is forgettable.

The shift doesn't happen in that moment. In that moment, your defenses fire. You explain. You contextualize. You sleep on it and wake up with a narrative that protects the old model.

The shift happens later. Days, sometimes weeks. It happens when the narrative stops working. When you catch yourself repeating the justification and hear how thin it sounds.

Not a door opening. A floor collapsing.

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## 2. What prompts it

Nobody changes their mind because they decided to. They change because something made the old mind uninhabitable.

**Failure** is the most common. Not the dramatic kind. The slow, dull kind. You shipped. It didn't work. You shipped again. Same result. At some point the explanation that the market was wrong or the budget was too small stops being a shield and becomes a weight.

**Shame** is quieter. You see someone else do the thing you claimed to want, with less money, less time, a smaller team. They didn't have anything you lacked except a willingness to work differently. The gap between your story and theirs is not talent. It is honesty.

**Loss** is blunter. Someone leaves. Not angry. Tired. In their absence you see what you were relying on: not a process but a person's patience. When it's gone, the structure it was holding up sags, and you realize it was never structure at all.

**Pain** is physical before it is conceptual. Months of crunch. Health costs. Relationships strained by the same promise: this project will be different. You run the numbers forward. The trajectory does not improve.

**Embarrassment** arrives through an audience. You show the game to someone whose opinion you respect and they are polite. Not enthusiastic. Polite. You watch them search for something kind to say.

**Ridicule** is rare but surgical. Someone whose work you admire says something about yours you cannot unhear. Not cruel. Just accurate.

None of these are things you choose. They choose you. And they only produce change if the pain overwhelms the machinery protecting the status quo.

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### 3. Why it cannot be willed

You cannot decide to change your mindset. You can only decide to stop defending the old one.

A decision implies control. Mindset change doesn't work that way because the old mindset is not a position you hold. It is the lens you see through. You cannot examine a lens while you're looking through it.

This is why books don't do it. Talks don't do it. Information enters the old model and gets absorbed by it. You read about iterative development and nod, then go back to building systems for six months before testing anything. You watch a talk about cutting scope, agree in principle, then add three features because the pitch requires them. The model rejects good information not through ignorance but through immune response. It reframes threatening evidence as edge cases, bad luck, or somebody else's problem.

Willpower fails for the same reason. You can will yourself to wake up early. You cannot will yourself to see your own work honestly, because the dishonesty is not a choice. It is a structure you live inside. You built it over years. It is load-bearing: it holds up your identity, your plans, your relationships. Dismantling it on purpose feels like self-destruction, because from inside the model, the model is you.

This is why advice from outside almost never lands. The advice-giver remembers a floor collapsing. The advice-receiver hears a suggestion to remodel. They are not in the same conversation.

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## 4. The machinery of comfort

What keeps the old mindset in place? Fear. But not the kind that feels like fear.

The fear that prevents change presents as comfort. As reasonableness. It says things like:

“We need to be realistic about what the team can handle.”

“We can't throw away six months of work.”

“The market is unpredictable. You can't control outcomes.”

Every one of these is defensible in isolation. In the context of a studio that is slowly failing, every one is a wall between the team and the information it needs. They are not lies. They are load-bearing justifications. Remove several and the picture comes into focus: we have been doing the same thing for years and it has not

worked, and we haven't changed because changing would mean admitting the years were misspent.

That admission is what the comfort prevents.

Complacency is the same fear in a different suit. We have a process. We have values. But the process doesn't produce results and the values are never tested against outcomes. The steadiness is not stability. It is stagnation in flattering clothes.

Justifications are the narrative layer. Every studio persisting in a failing pattern has a story explaining why the pattern is not failing. The story is always internally consistent. It is always wrong in the way that matters: it explains the past without changing the future.

The machinery runs on its own. No villain required. It is the natural result of building an identity around a way of working and then encountering evidence that the way doesn't work. The identity protects itself. That is what identities do.

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## 5. What a powerful driver does

The shift happens not because someone got enough information, but because something broke through the defenses faster than the repair mechanisms could work.

This is why the drivers are always intense. Trauma. Shame. Loss. Pain. Embarrassment. Failure. These are not educational tools. They are demolition. They destroy the old way of seeing and leave you in the rubble, forced to build something new.

The driver has to overwhelm three things:

**The fear of wasted time.** If you change now, what were the last five years? The sunk-cost reasoning is emotional, not financial. Most people will endure enormous ongoing costs to avoid sitting with the weight of time they cannot get back.

**The fear of identity loss.** "I am the kind of leader who values Y." When the mindset is woven into identity, changing it means becoming, temporarily, nobody. Most people will cling to a failing identity rather than step into that void.

**The fear of social consequence.** Changing how you work means changing what you ask of others. Some will leave. For a small team where every relationship is also a friendship, that feels catastrophic.

A powerful driver overrides all three. Not by arguing them away. By making the alternative worse. When the pain of staying exceeds the pain of changing, the change happens. Not before.

The mechanism is impersonal. It operates on one principle: the mind protects its current model until the cost of protection exceeds the cost of collapse.

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## 6. After the collapse

The other side is not confidence. Not at first.

First there is disorientation. The old model is gone and the new one isn't formed. You second-guess decisions you would have made automatically a month ago. You feel slower, less competent. You are less competent, temporarily, because competence was built on the old model.

Then grief. A quiet recognition that you spent years inside a framework that wasn't working, that the signs were there, and that you explained them away. People who skip the grief build a new model just as brittle, because they never sat with the question of how they fooled themselves.

Then clarity. The new model is smaller. Less ambitious. More honest. It doesn't promise as much, but what it promises, it can deliver. You cut things you would have defended before, and the cutting feels like relief.

The people around you notice. Some are unsettled. Some are energized; they were waiting for someone to say out loud what they had been thinking. The shift reorganizes relationships. That is part of its cost.

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## 7. Why this matters for studios

Studios are made of individuals, and a studio's mindset is the aggregate of what its people are willing to see.

A studio cannot change its operating system until enough people inside it have had the floor drop out. Usually the founders. They set the model, maintain it, and benefit from it even when it's failing, because the model includes their identity as leaders.

The dream that won't compound (<https://gerolds.github.io/posts/the-dream-that-wont-compound/>) persists not because the team lacks information but because the cost of seeing clearly has not yet exceeded the cost of staying comfortable. The grants keep coming. The games keep shipping. The results keep disappointing. But the disappointment is manageable, and as long as it can be managed, the machinery runs.

The shift usually follows a convergence. Not one failure but several. Not one person leaving but a pattern. The weight accumulates until the founders look at each other and one says what both know: this is not working unless we change how we work.

That sentence is the beginning. Not the solution.

What follows requires the primitive (<https://gerolds.github.io/posts/studio-os/>) and the commitment (<https://gerolds.github.io/posts/finding-the-commitment/>), but those are tools. The prerequisite is the collapse that makes the tools necessary. Without it, the tools are just more information absorbed by the old model and never used.

You cannot schedule a mindset shift. You can only do the work honestly enough that the evidence accumulates, and be brave enough not to explain it away when it does.

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*Drafting assistance: Claude. All claims mine; errors my responsibility.*