

DO YOU SUFFER FROM 'SEMMELEWEIS REFLEX'?**By Rick Boxx**

Ignaz Semmelweis was a Hungarian physician and scientist who in the mid-19th century implemented hand-washing procedures for doctors at Vienna General Hospital. This practice decreased the incidence of maternal death, then called “childbed fever,” from 18% to 2%. Semmelweis, the “savior of mothers,” was a pioneer in medical antiseptic policy and practices that have become commonplace today.

At the time, however, many in the medical community were offended to be told a “gentlemen’s” hands could possibly carry disease. Because of this attitude and resistance to change, doctors unanimously continued their deathly procedures. Happily, the wisdom offered by the “father of hand hygiene” was not ignored forever, and death rates during childbirth were reduced dramatically.

Resistance like what Semmelweis received was hardly a unique response. Many of the great advances in history initially were opposed or rejected because they ran counter to conventional wisdom. This behavior, sometimes termed ‘groupthink’ or ‘confirmation bias,’ is known as the Semmelweis Reflex.

We see this in the marketplace all the time. Maybe you have responded in similar ways yourself. We do not seem to mind change when we initiate it, but when significant change is being imposed on us, we might dig in our heels and complain, “But we have always done it this way!”

This happens with new technology. When mobile phones were introduced, many were reluctant to try them not only because of cost but also because they were unfamiliar. A writer friend, when offered his first desktop computer, initially resisted. He thought, “My electronic typewriter works perfectly well.” Once he tried using the computer, however, he quickly asked to have his trusty typewriter taken away.

In the Bible we see many examples of minds set in old ways, resistant to change. Especially with the Pharisees and Sadducees – religious leaders who were rigid and hard-hearted. They might not have heard of the Semmelweis Reflex but behaved as if they had invented it.

In the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John we see numerous incidents where these ‘experts of the Law’ presented strong opposition to the ministry and teachings of Jesus Christ, regarding him as a radical and troublemaker, a threat to the religious practices and rituals they were espousing.

When they resisted His teachings of repentance, forgiveness and mercy, they hurled many accusations at Him. In response, Jesus said things like, “You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good?” (Matthew 12:34). Another time, He rebuked the leaders for their hypocrisy: “You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?” (Matthew 23:33).

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However, Jesus spoke more kindly to His tender-hearted disciples. He said, “Blessed are the eyes that see what you see!” (Luke 10:23). This is especially important when we deal with spiritual truth, but it is equally valid when facing change in the marketplace. When fresh new ideas are being introduced, let us seek to see what the Lord sees, and not just what our industry embraces.

Knowing God is aware of circumstances we face we can find assurance in Proverbs 3:5-6, which tells us to, “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight.”

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Reflection/Discussion Questions

1. The “Simmelweis Reflex” is defined as “a psychological phenomenon where people reject new evidence or knowledge because it contradicts established norms or beliefs...that leads to dismissal of new, transformative ideas.” Had you heard of this before reading this Monday Manna? Have you ever observed something like this occurring in the workplace?
2. Why do you think that many people feel uncomfortable or even threatened when new ideas, principles, or practices are introduced?
3. How do you think the Semmelweis Reflex might be involved when the concept of integrating spiritual beliefs with everyday workplace practices is introduced? How do you respond when someone says the Bible and faith in Jesus Christ have no relevance for the marketplace?
4. When confronting unwanted change, how do you typically respond? Does trust in God and His involvement in every area of life helps you in dealing with such challenges? Explain your answer.

Challenge for This Week

Are you struggling to deal with changes that are being imposed upon you right now in the workplace? Or perhaps you are facing opposition in trying to introduce changes that you believe would be beneficial. If so, find a good friend, mentor, or advisor with whom you can discuss this and pray for you to have God’s wisdom in how to respond.

And if you are not currently dealing with troublesome changes, perhaps you can find someone to encourage as he or she needs to address such challenges. With the many changes we all experience in the marketplace, the question is not “if” we will have to find ways to cope with uncomfortable changes, but “when.”

NOTE:

If you have a Bible and would like to read more, consider the following passages:
Isaiah 26:3, 41:10; Jeremiah 29:11; Psalm 37:4-5; Matthew 6:33-34; Philippians 2:14-15

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