

Unlock the power of mistakes

by Frank Devine

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How do we achieve both the minimization of variability crucial to reliability and the creation of a culture that values the ‘healthy mistakes’ that have been known to drive innovation, psychological safety and competitiveness? Let’s look at how we can unlock the power of mistakes and learn why the way we react to them, at every organizational level, is crucial to creating high-performing organizations even in the most competitive of global markets.

Reframe and clearly differentiate between different types of ‘mistakes’

As the comedian John Cleese memorably demonstrated¹, mistakes are inevitable. They are similar to a guided missile in that it does not matter how many times the missile is off target on its journey provided it adjusts to the feedback received and is accurate on arrival. Despite this inevitability, employees and leaders alike will naturally see mistakes as universally bad. This is such a powerful instinct that equally powerful antidotes are necessary to avoid mistakes classified as ‘healthy’ being squashed by fear, risk-aversion, and negativity. To avoid this, start by defining terms clearly so everyone can distinguish healthy mistakes from those mistakes that can be predicted and prevented and that require powerful ‘why never again’ processes. The former are inevitable as we strive to do things no-one has done before or better than has ever been done before.

The latter are preventable. Failing to ensure that a hospital has the right specialists in the right combinations 24/7 - by tolerating reliance on unreliable voluntary overtime - produces entirely predictable lapses in patient care. This should be unacceptable and urgently reformed so it can never happen again. In contrast, a surgeon, under immense pressure and applying the correct medical best practice, making a decision in good faith that failed to save the life of a patient has not really made a ‘mistake’. This is an example of a ‘best effort that did not succeed’. Patients die in both cases, but the former could have been prevented by robust resource planning and refusal to accept restrictive practices that harm patients.

¹ John Cleese, The Importance of Mistakes, 2004

Manage on green

Walk in the shoes of employees preparing for a team performance review with their senior management. The team's experience of previous reviews is a relentless focus on the metrics showing 'red', i.e. not meeting the standard. This is combined with a total lack of interest in the green metrics, those that are meeting or exceeding standards. In that atmosphere, imagine how employees feel going into these reviews and how easy it is for them to admit mistakes? Imagine if we changed the model. Imagine the difference leaders can make by asking how the team achieved 'green' and, indeed how the 'reds' were made less red. If employees feel appreciated and understood, rather than audited or criticised, imagine the change in atmosphere and trust for future performance reviews. Consider the impact on the openness and the diagnostic and problem-solving quality of such reviews.

In general, 'manage on green' when reviewing performance and ensure that your organization rejects the conventional 'management by exception' approach which systematically takes good performance for granted and makes it difficult for employees to admit mistakes.

Create bottom-up behavioural standards to set expectations around mistakes

Top-down corporate values are an important integrating mechanism in any organization. To powerfully address the natural tendency to fear even healthy mistakes, local differentiation is also needed. To achieve this, managers can set, or better still, agree with employees locally-owned Behavioural Standards. Organizations implementing The Rapid Mass Engagement process² have created powerful, locally owned Behavioural Standards³ demonstrating what to do when something goes wrong and how to report bad news upwards in the organization.

Lead by example by admitting mistakes and by modelling 'why never again?' responses when appropriate

Employees know their bosses are human and make mistakes, and they lose respect for leaders who deny or overexplain their mistakes or try to cover them up. If you model admitting to mistakes then others will follow. Employees also know that not all mistakes are healthy ones. Ensure that this type of mistake is minimized by providing robust 'why never again?' processes and management routines.

If national or regional culture is a barrier to healthy mistakes

² See Rapid Mass Engagement, McGraw-Hill, 2023 for examples across multiple sectors

³ Behavioural Standards are more behaviourally specific than values. They are written in the local language and style thus providing differentiation and local ownership and, crucially, enhanced accountability

In many parts of the world, differences in cultural dimensions⁴ such as Uncertainty Avoidance and Power Distance inhibit mistake-friendly behaviour. To overcome this hidden barrier, identify those cultural differences that are benign and those that inhibit the approach outlined here. Once identified apply countermeasures to adjust. This equips the organization's leaders to predict and prevent any potentially damaging cultural differences when operating in any global market and working with people from any culture.

Avoid The Heathrow School of Business

Publication bias is the reporting of successes and the omission of examples of when the advocated drug/medical device/leadership approach failed or sub-optimised. I often come across what I call 'the Heathrow School of Business', named after an Airport where books infected by publication bias are often purchased. The authors of these books are often well-known celebrity leaders and the content can be summarized as: "I developed a perfect strategy and perfect plans which I implemented perfectly". The ghost writer often has little practical experience of how to build globally competitive organizations but is very skilful in making it an entertaining and intellectually undemanding read. A more authentic book title, consistent with the theme of healthy mistakes, would be: "We created the best strategy we could given all the known and unknown unknowns, we created plans, some of which worked and some did not, we made lots of mistakes and we relentlessly learned from them"

On reflection, this is probably not catchy enough for the publishers!

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LINK - [Unlock the power of mistakes \(aima.in\)](http://aima.in)

⁴ Hofstede "Cultures and Organizations" McGraw-Hill 2010 (3rd Edition)