

The Advisor

Resources for Supervisors, Managers, and Human Resources Personnel

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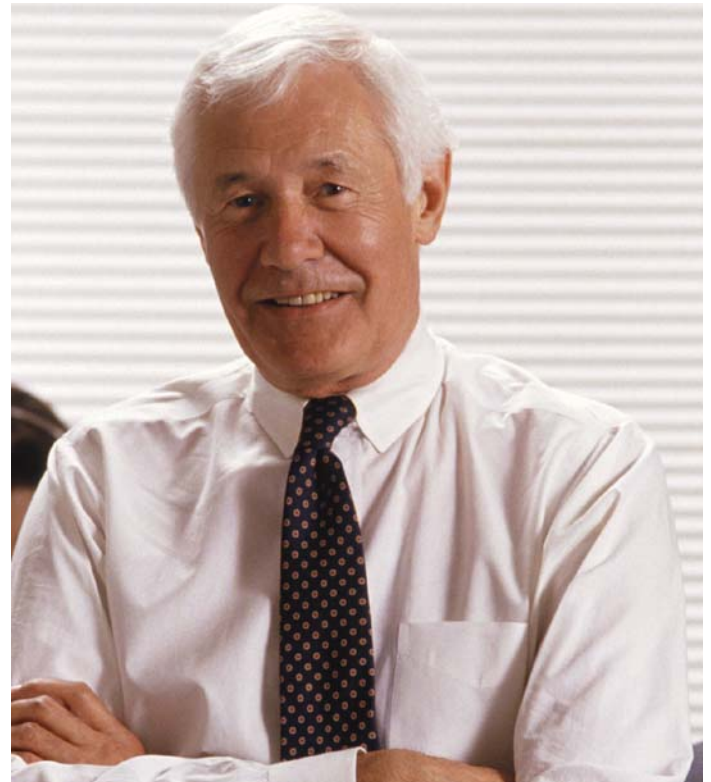
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The Benefits of Embracing Mistakes

Nobody likes to make a mistake, and in the business world, they can be costly. An improperly added column of figures, mistyped line of code, or poorly handled customer interaction can have a ripple effect that impacts many aspects of your team's operations. Mistakes that aren't caught in time can have enormous implications for a company's reputation and bottom line. Yet, ironically, mistakes are an effective way to find flaws in operations, provide teaching moments for employees and novice managers, and discover new approaches to vexing workplace problems.

One of the greatest tests of your skills as a manager is how you handle employee errors and omissions. How you address a mistake significantly shapes how comfortable your employees feel in bringing miscues to your attention. When you learn of an employee or team mistake:

- **Keep your cool.** If your response is to yell or immediately assign blame, employees are going to be less inclined to report mistakes — even critical ones — in the future. Do your best to stay calm and gather information. Don't make any rash judgments or pronouncements, and avoid a knee-jerk response to implementing "fixes," at least until you have all the facts. Whenever possible, react to a mistake as an opportunity to "fall forward," making it a valuable learning experience.
- **Investigate the mistake.** In some instances, it will be fairly clear what caused the blunder in question. In others, a series of events may have led up to the incident, and all the contributing factors may not be apparent.



Regardless, it may be useful to review and research the entire incident step by step, keeping your conclusions on hold. This may help reveal where your staff needs more training or which procedures need revision or improvement. It may also assist with pinpointing difficulties that can be addressed by creating automatic notifications, checklists, or other communication "edits" that can help busy people stay focused.

- **Look at systems.** It's important to examine not just who did what, but also those circumstances and methods that made a mistake more likely. Sometimes, an error is not the

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fault of any one person, but may result from a procedure that is too convoluted or an unusual confluence of multiple factors. Don't forget to consider the big picture as well as the details.

- **Create an action plan.** In the aftermath of a mistake, it's important to take proactive steps to prevent its recurrence. This is part of the "fall forward" approach. It may be helpful to hold a brainstorming session and enlist your team's input in determining new procedures that may prevent subsequent miscues.
- **Implement training, team building, or one-on-one mentoring.** In some instances, mistakes will reveal the need for a team or individual employee to be better trained on a specific procedure or task. In other instances, it may suggest that your team needs assistance with stress management, interpersonal communication, decision-making, or problem solving. **LifeMatters®** offers consultation, coaching, and resources that may assist with improving your team's functioning, or that can guide you in mentoring an employee in need of further skill development.
- **Follow up.** If you implement changes to operations following a mistake, it's critical that you follow up. Get your team's input on how effective the changes have been and whether further improvements may be necessary. If your response to the mistake is to implement training, mentoring, or a performance improvement plan for an individual employee, make certain you check in with that person on a frequent

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basis to evaluate his or her progress and provide support and encouragement.

- **Keep your team looking forward.** While it's important to acknowledge failures, it's best not to dwell on them. Constantly reminding team members of an incident that they may find embarrassing can undermine confidence and team cohesiveness. Take the necessary steps to recover from the mistake, but remember to refocus your team on meeting future goals.

While correcting a mistake can be frustrating and time-consuming, the recovery process itself may ultimately benefit your organization. You can turn a mistake into a positive for your team if you:

- **Embrace mistakes as learning opportunities.** There are instances in which a manager or CEO has personally thanked or even given a bonus to an employee who made a mistake. The reason? The mistake helped the organization discover a potentially disastrous flaw in its procedures. If you embrace a mistake as a learning opportunity, you help both your organization and your individual work group to grow.

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Avoiding Common Management Mistakes

For managers, the most challenging mistakes tend to be related to communication and leadership. Whether you are a first-time manager or someone with years of experience, here are some common pitfalls and ways to avoid them:

- 1. Focusing on tasks.** While a manager has many responsibilities that are task-focused (budgeting, scheduling, etc.), he or she always needs to maintain an awareness of the big picture. Your primary role is to motivate and encourage your team members to work together effectively and perform at a high level. If you're too busy keeping your nose "to the grindstone," you may fail to recognize opportunities for improving processes or lack awareness of a problem with team dynamics or an individual employee's performance. Stay connected with your people.

reports go far beyond just getting fresh ideas for improving productivity. Listening also increases rapport with your employees and helps them feel a sense of investment in both the organization and you as a leader.
- 2. Not delegating.** Knowing when to delegate is an essential part of being a leader, but it can be hard to do, especially for a first-time manager who is used to handling things independently. It may be helpful to make a list of all the responsibilities assigned to your role. Review the list and make a note of anyone on your team who can also perform the listed tasks. The ones that only you can do should remain your priority; some or all of the rest could be assigned to a qualified team member.
- 3. Talking, not listening.** A manager who is an active listener is far more effective than one who spends a lot of time talking. Periodically, go on a "listening tour." Ask team members to tell you about their roles, the problems they are encountering, and their ideas for how to improve efficiency and achieve team goals. The benefits of listening to your team and individual
- 4. Putting your own career goals ahead of those of the team.** There's nothing wrong with being ambitious or wanting to "make your mark." But your first goal as a manager should be to help both individual team members and the team as a whole to succeed in accomplishing assigned tasks. Over time, your team's success will demonstrate your value to the organization, resulting in other opportunities.
- 5. Not training your replacement.** Helping your employees become more experienced in their respective fields is an important part of being an effective manager. Regardless of your intentions for the future, it's important to give motivated staff opportunities to learn new skills so that they can improve the organization's overall depth of knowledge and experience.
- 6. Ignoring performance issues.** Unaddressed employee performance problems damage team cohesiveness and decrease productivity. If an employee's behavior or work output concerns you, it's important to address the situation proactively by making a referral to LifeMatters and creating a plan for performance improvement.

For additional suggestions on how to address mistakes and become a more effective manager, contact **LifeMatters**®.

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- **Encourage a culture of honesty.** In today's economy, many employees worry that admitting even the slightest error could put their job at risk. A thoughtful, measured response to mistakes encourages workers to own up to small errors before they snowball into large ones. In addition, employees who are focused on how to correct the mistake (rather than how to hide it) are more likely to come up with innovative fixes that will increase productivity and prevent errors.

The author James Joyce once wrote, "Mistakes are the portals of discovery." Trial and error is an essential component of learning and growing, both as a person and an organization. By acknowledging that mistakes are a necessary and sometimes useful part of the process of doing business, you will help your team handle them in a manner that benefits both your company and the bottom line.

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