

That Didn't Turn Out Nearly As Well As I Thought It Would: Learning From Our Mistakes

By Bill Stinnett, Ph.D.

Let's face it. Sometimes we are going to mess up. The best of us make mistakes, make bad decisions, overlook important details or take on tasks we are not qualified to accomplish. Certainly, we should take steps to prevent errors when possible. Many leadership training programs teach us to anticipate problems, identify potential "choke points," incorporate mechanisms to alert us to obstacles before they become serious problems and develop systems to monitor progress. Certainly, the work of W. Edwards Deming taught us to be more attuned to prevention than to inspection. All that is to the good but even under the best of circumstances, we will still make mistakes. So, the question becomes, "What do you do about it?" It's easy to get caught up in the blame game and go after the poor slob who wrote the bad line of code or dropped the circuit board or sent out the wrong memo. It's a whole lot more challenging to look at the situation as a learning opportunity.

Those of us who have attended leadership training workshops have likely heard the story of the [invention of Post-it notes at 3M](#). "...Post-it® Notes were not a planned product. No one got the idea and then stayed up nights to invent it. A man named Spencer Silver was working in the 3M research laboratories in 1970 trying to find a strong adhesive. Silver developed a new adhesive, but it was even weaker than what 3M already manufactured. It stuck to objects, but could easily be lifted off. It was super weak instead of super strong.

No one knew what to do with the stuff, but Silver didn't discard it. Then one Sunday four years later, another 3M scientist named Arthur Fry was singing in the church's choir. He used markers to keep his place in the hymnal, but they kept falling out of the book. Remembering Silver's adhesive, Fry used some to coat his markers. Success! With the weak adhesive, the markers stayed in place, yet lifted off without damaging the pages. 3M began distributing Post-it® Notes nationwide in 1980 -- ten years after Silver developed the super weak adhesive. Today they are one of the most popular office products available."¹

That is, of course, one of the most famous stories about how to turn a "mistake" into a great success. Another occurred at [Zappos](#), famous for having a "Chief Happiness Officer" (Oh, brother!). A programmer made a mistake in the pricing software and an offer appeared on one of their websites indicating that no item would cost more than \$49.95. Since many items were valued at far more than that, it was a very costly mistake (about \$1.6 million). Even though the company would likely have been legally in the right to demand full payment for the items sold at the lower, mistaken price, the CEO decided to honor the agreement and absorb the cost. The result – lots of happy (and returning) customers, lots of free publicity, lots of priceless goodwill! The learning?

- You learn more if you know why the mistake occurred and you are less likely to repeat it.
- No CYA. You avoid the time and energy spent covering your "you know what."
- Strengthen creativity. You never know what new ideas can come from "blips."
- Opens new doors. You may decide to take more risks. Proceed down new paths.
- Make fewer mistakes. People don't mess up as often when they are not always afraid of being punished. ([People who work under pressure are less effective, resist reporting bad news, close their eyes to signs of trouble.](#))

A story I have heard oft repeated is about a forklift operator at Procter and Gamble. Apparently, the operator made a mistake and backed the forklift through a concrete block wall causing considerable damage. Expensive mistake! Some of the corporate leaders wanted him fired. His manager, however, saw the situation differently. He argued that rather than firing the forklift operator, he should be assigned the role of Safety Team Leader (There had been no such role). His job would be to make sure everyone in the plant was up to snuff on all of the safety rules and regulations and that the organization achieved its safety goals. The manager figured, "No one understands better what not to do than this guy." Guess what? Lost time accidents hit a new all time low and none of the few remaining accidents were due to the faulty operation of a forklift.

Another story (maybe apocryphal) is the executive at IBM who made a 10 million dollar mistake. Following the disaster, he presented himself to his boss with his tail tucked between his legs ready to accept his humiliating dismissal. Contrarily, his leader said, "I am certainly not going to fire you. I just spent \$10 million on your education."

There are a lot of good reasons to view mistakes as opportunities for learning and growth rather than a chance to assign blame. Dave Ellis in [Falling Awake](#) suggests: Five reasons to celebrate mistakes:

- Mistakes get our attention.
- Permitting mistakes allows us to take risks.
- Noticing mistakes shows our commitment to quality.
- We can use mistakes to practice.
- Mistakes make powerful teachers.

In my own career, one of the biggest mistakes I ever made was accepting a team-building job that I should have turned down. One of the cardinal rules of facilitating team building is that all the team members should, at a minimum, want things to get better. Even if some are skeptical about whether it is possible to make things better, their belief that it would be a good thing is sort of a minimum starting point. In this particular case, however, two of the team members looked me in the eye and said, in so many words, "I don't want things to get better." Puzzled by this response, I used my razor sharp analytical skills to discover that the new manager of the group had been appointed by senior managers without any consideration of potential leaders within the group. These two team members each believed that he should have been given the job. So, when it came to team building, they reasoned that anything that would make the team more effective would just go to justify the leadership's decision to ignore their candidacy. To their credit, they were honest with me. Should have been a clue to the "high-priced" consultant conducting the team building! Well, a fatal combination of arrogance and the need to make money led me to move ahead with the team building anyway. Bad idea. The whole session was a series of agonizing silences, folded arms, and eye rolling. How humiliating! After this calamity, I went to the team leader and apologized. He was more than gracious and assured me that it was not my fault. How nice of him!

Surprisingly, about six months later one of the team members called me and asked if I might be available to do some team building with a non-profit organization where he was a board member. After I recovered from the shock, I said, "Quite frankly, I'm a little surprised that you called me after that fiasco last year." He said, "Yeah, that was pretty painful. But, it is interesting what happened. The two team leader wannabes did not change. They continued trying to sabotage the efforts of our new team leader. One of them is gone, the other is still at it. But, the rest of us have just stopped listening to him. We decided to get on with the job and try to make the best of the situation and work as a team." Stunned, all I could think



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to say was, "Thank you." So, a dumb mistake was turned into an opportunity for the team to take control of their own situation and make it better. With their help, I learned a few things about myself, both personally and professionally. What a gift!

Some organizations have taken the step of formally debriefing any major mistakes (or any project) by asking a few simple questions. The following debriefing process illustrates the kind of thing that many teams do. After the project is complete, they call a meeting with an agenda much like this.

- What is the Project?
- Who was involved?
- What went well?
- When things went well, why?
- What didn't go so well?
- When things didn't go well, what was the cause? (Not, "Who is to blame?")
- What should we do differently in the future?
- How can we best capture that so that we remember it next time?
- Are there any immediate next steps we should take?

Your organization's leadership training could, of course, include a customized, unique version of this. Or, it might not be useful to have such a formal process. But, the idea that the leader's first response to errors or mistakes is to think of them as opportunities to learn is extremely important. The ultimate cost of finger-pointing, scapegoating, and blaming can be highly destructive to the climate, and to the bottom line performance of your organization. So, go ahead! Take a few risks. Don't be afraid to "mess up" occasionally. Just be sure that the lessons are learned.