

How to Make Mistakes

Your organization can't succeed in the long run unless you accommodate mistakes.

Paul Lemberg

It's a mistake to try to avoid all mistakes.

Why? Doing things wrong is the number-one source of innovation. James Joyce said it poetically: "Mistakes are the portals of discovery." Think about it. What did you ever learn by doing something right the first time?

The people not making mistakes are playing their game without risk, without novelty, and without progress. World leaders and scientists have a wonderful legacy of being wrong in a big way. Edison's tolerance for "mistakes" is renowned. The European "discovery" of America was a mistake. Even the invention of Teflon was a mistake.

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Since the road to success is paved with failures, the faster you move through mistakes, the faster you'll find a way that works. Fail faster to succeed sooner. In the spirit of failing quickly, here are a few ideas for you to try out. Some will work for you. Others won't. Try and fail.

Don't penalize mistakes. Encourage them. Reward them. Create a bonus for the most brilliant (or most flagrant) mistake of the month. Commemorate mistake-makers as heroes. One reason mistakes go undetected—and progress is slowed—is that people aren't willing to take "credit" for their errors. Rather than calling attention to things that are off course (and risking their careers), they bury problems for as long as possible. That's fatal for productivity and growth.

Walk the walk. Many organizations say they encourage mistakes, but instead they intimidate and punish mistake-makers. As soon as you do that, you foster a better-safe-than-sorry attitude. Instead, put your money where your mouth is, and show that you believe in the value of learning from mistakes. Lead the way by admitting to your own mistakes as quickly as possible and emphasizing all you've learned from them.

Schedule regular meetings to dissect errors and absorb the lessons failure teaches. Train people to savor their mistakes and understand the strange paths which lead them astray.

Create an organization of learners by getting together at the end of every project and asking these questions: What worked? What didn't work? What was missing? What do we do next? What can we do differently as a result of what we've learned?

Use rapid prototyping. This technical-sounding phrase simply means doing things quickly without trying to get them into final form, making mistakes and swiftly fixing them. Get something up and running—anything that resembles your desired solution. Then fix what isn't working. And fix, and fix, and fix. This strategy, also known as creative trial and error, may be the best way to develop solutions in Internet time. Unless the outcome of your project has a life-or-death impact, the cost of perfection can't be justified. Use the errors you generate as opportunities to improve your production process and practice great customer service.

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Extend the 80/20 rule. Forget about total quality and zero defects. You can't afford them in this day and age. Instead of the 80/20 rule, follow the 90/10 rule, which states that you should put 90% of your effort into the 10% of things that make a real difference to your results. ■

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