

Making Better Mistakes

Use this checklist as a guide to making magnificent mistakes.

By Gregory Lay

Is your organization in a rut because people are too worried about failing? It may be time to help change their mindsets by encouraging them to make mistakes.

Of course, everyone makes mistakes, but some kinds are better than others. The worst are those that people try to hide. Doing so makes it more likely that they'll repeat the error. They won't learn from it, and they certainly won't turn it into a learning opportunity for others.

The best screw-ups are the ones that lead to creative solutions. They're the ones that are shared, discussed, and used as a chance for everyone to learn, improve, and grow. Here's a checklist to help you and the rest of your team make the best possible blunders.

Dare mistakes to happen. Freezing to avoid slip-ups is not growing. Learning comes from listening to helpful feedback, and feedback comes when you're in motion. Mistakes become teachers when we recognize, communicate, and implement course corrections.

Don't kill an idea with research. It's beneficial to start a project by gathering information, but you don't need every bit of data beforehand. As soon as you have a reasonable fraction of the research results you'll need, begin your undertaking. The rest of the information will come as feedback when you're in motion. Don't worry if it involves a mistake; you're expected to make adjustments as you learn. Standing still to gather the last crumbs of information is indecision. If you wait too long, some of the results you've collected may even be outdated by the time you begin.

Analyze risks. Risk analysis isn't about avoiding risk; it's about identifying obstacles and knowing what you'll do when problems come up. Having a "Plan B" and a "Plan C" makes it more likely your exploration will carry the twin labels of "educational" and "successful."

Make bold plans. "Safe" plans have lower learning potential. And don't stick to your plan too tightly. When you see an opportunity, leap at it. Whether succeeding brilliantly or going "splat," you'll generate new feedback to enhance your learning.

“The worst mistakes are the ones people try to hide.”

“Let errors become your teachers.”

Consider values and objectives. If you plan only for immediate challenges, you'll often need to change shortsighted plans. Weigh ideas against long-range goals and organizational values, and be willing to take risks to achieve those worthwhile objectives.

Be accountable. The game is “no blame.” If a risk turns out to be a mistake, take full responsibility. Spearhead the effort to correct the outcome and document what you learned. Blame turns mere mistakes into failures and ruined relationships.

Share credit. When risks lead to success with no major mistake, spread credit lavishly. That's important not only so that others will enjoy working with you. It also inspires people. It lets them feel good about taking risks that bring forth good results.

Encourage and appreciate feedback. Remember to thank people for their input, regardless of whether it was delivered kindly or soaked in vinegar. Then, let people (especially your team) know what you learned and what you'll do differently next time. 

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Think Outside the Frame

Making smart mistakes means keeping an open mind. These articles will help widen your perspective (Nonprofitworld.org):

[The Joys of Risk](#) (Vol. 28, No. 3)

[Seven Ways to Be Unreasonable](#) (Vol. 20, No. 5)

[Outside the Comfort Zone](#) (Vol. 25, No. 3)

[Opportunity's Knocking – Are You Ready?](#) (Vol. 16, No. 5)

[How to Make Mistakes](#) (Vol. 30, No. 2)

[Six Ways to Get Out of a Rut](#) (Vol. 24, No. 4)

[Turn Your Stakeholders Into Risk-takers](#) (Vol. 20, No. 4)