

In This Issue: “Why Mistakes Are A Good Thing”

Test for Success  
Tools, Tips, & Techniques for Avoiding  
Hiring Mistakes and Developing People  
From Helm and Associates, Inc.  
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Have you ever watched a baby taking its first steps? She wobbles and weaves, finding her balance, and takes more than a few tumbles, but she gets right back up and tries again. Or a small child learning how to ride a bicycle? At first, there are more falls than measurable forward progress, as he learns to find that point at which he is balanced and moving on two wheels.

These two images are useful in showing us why it’s GOOD when employees make mistakes! We learn when we “get outside the lines” – when we make mistakes in execution and then teach ourselves how to correct the mistake! Just as a baby learning to walk has to figure out how to stand upright, balanced, by losing balance over and over, we all learn how to solve problems by identifying what’s wrong and figuring out how to fix it.

Does this mean that all mistakes are good, and that we should not have standards that we expect employees to meet? No, of course it doesn’t! It means, instead, that HOW we respond to mistakes that employees make (and they are going to make them!) is every bit as important as having high standards. Put another way, it means that while our goals should be high, we can’t expect employees to avoid making mistakes simply by having a “zero defects” standard. Training employees in how to manage errors contributes directly to their being able to achieve high standards.

It is important, first of all, to create a working environment that is “error-management” friendly. In an error-management friendly working environment, the emphasis is on using mistakes, when they occur, as opportunities for employees to teach themselves about how to notice and correct problems. Error-management friendly environments can actually teach problem-solving skills.

What's the opposite of an error-management workplace? We've probably all been in one at one time or another: this is the type of job where employees know that they will be "dinged" for mistakes that they make, if they are not actually punished or fired. The employee who makes the mistake is usually not given the opportunity to fix it; instead, the supervisor takes over, makes corrections, and then tells the employee not to do it again. This kind of environment leads to one in which employees hide mistakes, and it shuts down creativity and innovation. In this workplace, it becomes more important not to make mistakes than it is to solve problems.

If you are not given the opportunity to learn from mistakes, you keep making them. So let's look at how we can create an error-management friendly environment:

1. Don't punish employees when they bring information to you about a mistake that has been made. (Watch your facial expressions and your body language; it's all too easy to send mixed messages, and if there's one thing that the bulk of psychological research tells us, it is that we believe someone's actions more than we believe their words if the two contradict one another.)
2. Encourage active learning when employees are trying to solve a problem or perform a task and they get stuck. Hold back from providing direct help; ask questions that will help the employee re-frame the problem or call upon skills or knowledge they have already mastered that could help develop a solution.
3. Make the employee who made the mistake, or who is trying to learn the task, part of the solution. Don't just take it over, or re-assign it; let the employee participate in finding a way to fix the mistake. Doing so helps the person develop problem-solving skills.

Here's a technique that I found very useful when my son needed help with math homework. I used to get him to ask himself, out loud (and that's important), "What do I already know about this problem that could be useful?" Asking the question and then answering it out loud stimulates a person to look for commonalities with other situations. And, even more to the point, it reinforces this fundamental approach to managing mistakes: "OK, something isn't right here; what do we need to do to fix it?"

Over the years, I've developed a set of three questions to change my employees' focus from the mistake to the solution:

1. "What do you know about this problem that could be useful?"
2. "What other problems, if any, that you have solved are similar to this one, and in what ways?"
3. "What is the outcome that you want to create?"

Are you providing an error-avoidant or an error-management environment? Do your employees avoid telling you about mistakes? You'll know they are doing so if you never hear about them until what started as a little problem has become a big one. Remember that little boy on the bicycle—he'll never learn to balance on his bicycle if you are

holding too tightly to the seat.

Remember, People ARE your most important asset!

To Hire the Best, Test!

To Reveal Management Potential, Test!

To Diagnose Problem Behavior, Test!

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