Owning up is easy

We get more out of our mistakes if we work in an environment
where there is no shame in admitting to them

Writing
Tracy Powley

There is plenty of advice around concerning the importance of learning from mistakes and cultivating a 'growth mindset' in order to continually improve. And it's all good, solid guidance. But what is often not considered is that there is a dual responsibility to ensure this is really possible.

We are encouraged, as the person who made the mistake, to be honest and open about it, and to be prepared to analyse what went wrong. But responsibility also lies with those around us, specifically our managers, to ensure the environ-

ment is such that we feel able and comfortable to own up to our mistakes – and that this environment is nurtured and maintained.

Managing the cost of human error

A few months ago, Stella, my business partner, was embarking on a week of business travel. It wasn't until she got to the train station that she realised she had picked up the wrong set of train tickets. The pack for her week's travel was sitting in a neat pile back on her desk and she had picked up the pack for the following week. It was an easy mistake to make (the two packs looked almost identical), but her mistake had a significant cost implication for a small business.

Because Stella felt able to own up quickly, we were able to act swiftly as well, minimising the impact of her error. Any delay in admitting what had happened would have resulted in more cost. She was able to admit to this mistake because she felt comfortable with those around her. She knew, for example, that there would be no eye rolling, tut-tutting or sarcastic remarks.

A willingness to be open and honest is key. In 2008, *The Guardian* cited occupational psychologist Dr Peter Honey's three-point plan for making sure you learn from any mistakes:

"First, there needs to be an honest assessment of the whole situation. Next, you need to tease out some lessons – could you improve any processes so that this cannot happen again? Lastly, work out how, specifically, you would implement the lessons learned, so they're not just left as good intentions."

Again, this is sound advice, but there is a vital additional factor, which will enable learning from mistakes to happen: other people's responsibility for creating and maintaining an environment in which it is possible for the person to own up.

Black box thinking

Partly this means no blaming or finger pointing in the moment. Partly it means analysing, in a supportive way, what went wrong after the problem has been dealt with. But it also means not referring back to the mistake time and time again afterwards. Once a workplace incident 'passes into folklore', as we often term it, the story of that incident can become very wearing. More critically, it can prevent people from being so open and honest next time something goes wrong.

Imagine what would happen if Debbie, our support manager, and I started to quip to Stella every time she went on an extended spell of travel: "Are you sure you've got the right tickets this time?" However well-meaning we were, it is likely we would start to make Stella feel uncomfortable and less than competent. And once we feel inade-

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⊙ TURNING NEGATIVES INTO POSITIVES

How can you create an environment where it's safe to learn from mistakes?

- Ensure that learning from mistakes is part of your behavioural framework or team expectations. Talk about how important it is to see mistakes as a way of progressing and getting better at something.
- As a manager, make sure you are the role model – be prepared to be open and honest when things have not gone according to plan, and share your experiences with the team.
- Proactively look for opportunities to draw learning from different situations. Many teams feel under such time pressure that they don't evaluate tasks and projects. Make this a key part of what you do.
- When people make a mistake, don't dwell on it. Mistakes can often lead to jokes, sarcastic comments and even give rise to nicknames – none of which will make people feel happy to share mistakes in the future.
- After mistakes have been made, focus on drawing positive lessons from the situation. We associate mistakes with things going wrong, but there is often a positive outcome.
- If mistakes have been made, make an effort to catch people doing something right. Then give them feedback on how they have positively implemented the learning.
- Create support networks. Peer support, in particular, can give people an opportunity to talk through issues and mistakes, and solve problems more effectively.

ONE OF THE KEY BARRIERS TO PROGRESS IS A CULTURE OF EVASION AND COVERING UP

quate or exposed in this way, most of us will start to close down as a form of self-preservation.

One sector that seems to get this open environment right is the airline industry, where people place a huge emphasis on learning from mistakes. There, they dub this approach 'black box thinking'. Since it operates in a field where mistakes can be devastating, the industry actively shares examples of where things have gone wrong, so that everyone can learn from those errors and improve safety.

How many industries can truly say that they take the same approach?

In his book *Black Box Thinking*, author Matthew Syed suggests that one of the key barriers to progress is not a lack of resources or time, but a culture of "evasion and covering up". He talks about needing a "progressive attitude to failure" and how all workplaces can be more successful with open reporting and honest evaluation.

In an environment where people are actively encouraged to share mistakes and learning, continuous improvement is more likely. We were able to share Stella's train ticket mistake at our next team meeting as a way to reinforce how vital it is for us all to feel comfortable about owning up – and that we all have a responsibility to create this environment.

The challenge, of course, is to identify which practical steps managers and teams can take to create that open environment and, more importantly, how they can maintain it. ◼

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