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recognizing failure

*In his book *Business @ the Speed of Thought: Succeeding in the Digital Economy*, Microsoft founder Bill Gates wrote, “Once you embrace unpleasant news, not as a negative but as evidence of a need for change, you aren’t defeated by it. You’re learning from it. It’s all in how you approach failures.” If we are not open to failing, we fail to learn to grow.*

In business, the word ‘mistake’ comes burdened with an attached weight of worry and fear. By very definition, mistakes indicate that something, somewhere, has gone wrong. While there are a few exceptions,¹ for the vast majority of workplaces, attitudes towards mistakes—and how to handle them—remain unproductive. When a company’s culture feeds employees fear of making mistakes, it also inhibits creativity and its own potential for future growth. The truth is, mistakes are unavoidable. We are only human, and while AI remains in its infancy, workplaces continue to be made up of humans and their errors. So, the question is not whether mistakes will happen, but how they should be handled when they do, inevitably, occur. The art of managing mistakes well starts before any mistakes have actually taken place. What

employees know and understand about errors in business come primarily from leadership and culture. It is essential that every employee knows that taking calculated risks is a good thing—providing, of course, they have good motivations and appropriately balance the potential benefits against the possible fallout.

Ask yourself this: how do you talk about mistakes in your workplace? Think about the tone you use; the way we frame our language contributes to the bigger picture of how things are viewed company-wide.² For example, it is common for an accusatory tone to become the fallback in discussing any work blunders; people say things like ‘was this your mistake?’ and so blame gets batted about from team-to-team, person-to-person with no one to benefit from the lesson to be learned from that situation.

Changing this tone is the first step to transforming how mistakes are dealt with in the workplace. You can even try changing the literal word you use for mistake—after all, you may be able to control how mistakes are talked about within your company, but you have no control over the weight a word carries outside of the office. That is why Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts decided to start using the word glitch rather than mistake—it was a way the company could quickly and effectively transform collective employee feelings regarding mistakes. In addition to this, they also asked their employees to provide daily glitch reports.³ Establishing a framework like this not only removes the negative connotations of the word mistake, but also weaves learning constructively from individual errors into the fabric of company culture, which is exactly what every business leader should be aiming to do.

Language changes are one way to set about redirecting company attitude towards mistakes, but what happens when the real thing comes along, and mistakes are made in the workplace? Of course, there is a subjective nature to every blunder. While I cannot give you a guide on what to do in each specific situation, I can give you the knowledge to take each error as it comes and handle it appropriately. Remember, not all mistakes are created equal. They



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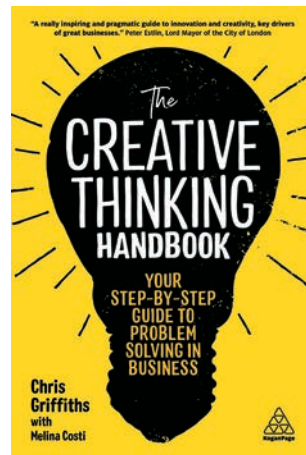
come from different places, and being able to recognize where a mistake has come from is an invaluable skill. For example, has an employee made a mistake because they are neglectful and lazy, or, has the mistake arisen because they were striving to achieve something great? Of course, the essential thing anyone can take from a mistake is the lesson learned from it. Repeating mistakes should be avoided. Allowing the same mistakes to be made again and again, more often than not, moves a company past the realm of a creative and free environment and into one of incompetence or sloppiness. Every mistake serves as a lesson, but neither you, nor your employees, should have to relive that lesson multiple times.

Naturally, leaders are less worried about small, individual mistakes—what really eats at them is fear of the big kind, ones that can knock an entire company off course and leave employees reeling. Maybe it will come in the form of losing a large amount of money or irritating shareholders—whatever it is, an adjustment in attitude is the best way to reunite teams and boost morale. In times of anxiety, people look to leaders for reassurance; if all they see is panic or anger, then they are not going to be able to ease their worries and carry on with work. The knock-on effect of this is that a company already going through a rough patch begins to break down as employees and daily duties cease to function correctly. Alternatively, if senior management are able to own their mistakes and respond well to them, the rest of the company will quickly follow suit.

Establishing goals, as opposed to methods, is one of the most effective ways of instilling a positive process for

handling mistakes in your company or team. Goals allow people to be more creative in reaching their endpoint, while methods tend to be more prescriptive and so can impede the risk-taking that ultimately leads to greater success. This does not have to mean allowing everyone in the company to go off completely free rein; setting boundaries is fine and even recommendable. The key thing is leaving some wiggle room for employees to use their imagination. One way of aiding this thinking is ensuring that employees do not view failure and success as opposites. Being able to rewire company culture in this way will help the company overcome fear of failure, and ultimately achieve more. Just think about the boldness and confidence of employees who are not afraid of failure; how quickly would they soar beyond the safety net of repeating competitor techniques and into a different realm of new ideas? Surely, a few productive and insightful mistakes made along the way is a small price to pay for such a reward.

Many people assume that as companies become more successful they become more comfortable with making mistakes, when in fact, the opposite is true. The higher you climb, the further there is to fall—that is to say, fear of failure grows with the size of success.⁴ That is not to mention that the bigger the organization, the more infrastructure and red tape begins to tie up employee



flexibility. When ideas and work are moved through slow-moving pipelines of review and approval, the ideas that make it through to the other end are far more likely to be tried, safe, and ultimately, less effective. That is why an upheaval of culture and establishment of company policy surrounding mistakes needs to be a management priority of today, not tomorrow. Setting up a measured, yet bold policy on mistakes and a ‘no blame’ culture is something you need to be doing now. It does not matter how high you climb, if employees are scared of making mistakes, that success will quickly stagnate and drop

without the generation of new ideas and ultimately a new, more innovative company will be there waiting to take your place.

Removing the concept of failure, while simultaneously learning to accept and be open about mistakes is no mean feat. But it is also a feat that merits accomplishment. Once upon a time, knowledge was power but now, in the information age, it is not a differentiator. To compete in the modern business world, your company must learn to create new ideas and knowledge to keep things moving forward. A mistake-free environment will never allow you to achieve that. From Pixar,⁵ to Microsoft,⁶ some of the world’s most famously successful and creative companies are built upon foundations of risk-taking. After all, freedom to fail is also freedom to learn, experiment, and achieve more than you ever could have imagined when locked in the confines of safe thinking. So, if you ever find the fear of failure creeping back in, just remember, ‘Winners fail more times than losers even try’. ■



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01 <https://www.happy.co.uk/8-companies-that-celebrate-mistakes/>
 02 <https://hbr.org/2012/07/how-language-shapes-your-organization>
 03 <https://www.joshuascott.com/articles/the-glitch-report>
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 06 <https://www.cnn.com/2018/01/23/mark-cuban-bill-gates-steve-jobs-why-failure-is-key-to-success.html>