

Buck Up, It Doesn't Have To Be The End Of The World

How you deal with your mistakes can make the difference between career stagnation and advancement, writes Amy Gallo

Anyone who has worked in an office for more than a day has made at least one mistake. While slip-ups are inevitable, no one likes to be responsible for them.

The good news is that mistakes – even big ones – don't necessarily leave a permanent mark on your career. In fact, since most mistakes contribute to organisational and personal learning, they're an essential part of experimentation and a prerequisite for innovation.

So don't worry – if you've made a mistake at work you can recover gracefully and use the experience to learn and grow.

According to Paul Schoemaker, the research director for the Mack Centre for Technological Innovation at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School and co-author of the forthcoming *Brilliant Mistakes*, most people tend to overreact when they make errors.

They “make asymmetric evaluation of gains and losses so that losses loom much larger than gains”, he explains.

As a result, they may be tempted to hide their mistakes, or even worse, continue down paths that have proven unproductive. This “sunk-cost fallacy” can be both dangerous and expensive.

It is much better to accept mistakes, learn from them and move on. “Look forward and base decisions on the future not the past,” Schoemaker says.

Christopher Gergen, the director of the Entrepreneurial Leadership Initiative at Duke University and co-author of *Life Entrepreneurs: Ordinary People Creating Extraordinary Lives*, agrees. The Most productive thing you can do is “translate a mistake into a valuable moment of leadership,” he says.

Here are a few guiding principles to help you spin your gaffes into gold:

Admit your mistake

First and foremost, it's critical to be transparent and candid, and confess to the error. Don't try to blame others. Even if it was a group mistake, acknowledge your role in it.

In cases where someone was hurt, issue an apology. However, don't apologise too much or become defensive. The key is to be action-oriented and focus on the future. How can you remedy your misstep? What will you do differently in the future?

Once you've admitted your blunder, consider reframing it. This doesn't mean making an excuse, but rather making a genuine effort to help people see the mistake differently.

While poor decisions or flawed processes occasionally lead to mistakes, that doesn't mean that every bad outcome is a mistake. According to Gergen, it's important to understand what was external and internal, as well as what was and wasn't in your control.

Explaining in a non-defensive way what caused the mistake can help people understand why it happened and how to avoid making the same error again.

Change your ways

Mistakes play a critical role in leadership development. "The best kind of mistake is where the costs are low, but the learning is high," Schoemaker says.

If the error was a result of poor decision-making, explain to your boss and other interested parties how you will avoid committing a similar misstep in the future. You have to respond quickly before people make judgements about your competence or expertise.

"You need to get on top of it, get ahead of it and deal with it," Gergen says.

Demonstrating that of your mistake peers and direct reports equally important tasks

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Author, Paul Schoemaker

you've changed as a result reassures your superiors, that you can be trusted with in the future.

"If you are going to pay

the price for making the mistake, you need to get the learning," Schoemaker says. This is far easier in an office culture that is learning-focused rather than performance-focused, where mistakes are often treated more harshly.

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But regardless of the work environment, you need to figure out "how you can translate the mistake from a liability into an asset," Gergen says.

Use your support network

A strong support network can help you, "Our research shows that a healthy support network has three components: authentic trusting relationships, a diverse range of perspectives and is reciprocal," Gergen says.

Ask current or former colleagues or people outside the organisation for their perspectives and for advice on how you might recover from the mistake.

They are likely to have some useful feedback and how to frame the error and restore your reputation.

Get back out there

It can be hard to rebuild your confidence after a slip-up, but it's important not to let your errors make you afraid of experimentation.

If people question your expertise because of your mistake, rebuild their trust by putting more data points out there. Remember that mistakes are not signs of weakness or ineptitude; recovering from them demonstrates resilience and perseverance.

Both Gergen and Schoemaker emphasise that many employers look for people who've made mistakes and still come out ahead.

Not all mistakes are equal

Some can be tougher to recover from than others. Schoemaker notes that it's often easier to recuperate from group mistakes because there is a diffusion of responsibility. Mistakes that involve breaking someone's trust can have lasting consequences and contrition is critical.

If someone no longer trusts you because of a mistake you made, approach the person, offer a sincere apology and ask what you can do to restore their trust.

But be patient – forgiveness may take a while.

Harvard Business School

PRINCIPLES TO REMEMBER

DO

- Accept responsibility for your role in the mistake
- Show that you've learned and will behave differently going forward
- Demonstrate you can be trusted to make important decisions in the future

DON'T

- Be defensive or blame others
- Make mistakes that violate people's trust as these are the toughest to recover from
- Stop experimenting or feel inhibited because of a misstep

ROAD TO RECOVERY

As the associate director of the Science & Environmental Health Network, or SEHN, Katie Silberman manages the non profit organisation grant applications.

To keep track of important funding dates, Silberman created a calendar that included due dates for current grant reports as well as deadlines to reapply for future funding.

In late January, thinking she was ahead of schedule, Silberman emailed the foundation officer at one of SEHN's primary funders to check about its 2010 application. When the officer replied the due date had just passed, Silberman was shocked.

Her calendar listed a March deadline, which was when the report for the 2009 grant was due and when Silberman had assumed they would discuss reapplying. SEHN needed the grant to make it through the year.

"To lose a funder in this environment isn't just bad, it's catastrophic," Silberman says.

It turns out that each January someone at SEHN calls the foundation officer to confer about that year's cycle. Silberman wasn't aware of this informal meeting, but it was her responsibility to know each funder relationship intimately and ensure the organisation was on top of each funding opportunity.

Silberman immediately called her boss, explained the mistake and offered ideas about how to secure new funding sources to ensure the organisation stayed afloat. Because of Silberman's forthrightness, her boss and the rest of the SEHN team were extremely supportive. The foundation officer had alerted Silberman to a May deadline for a separate round of funding, so SEHN decided to submit a project idea conceived at a recent retreat. Silberman is optimistic her organisation will secure the necessary money.

While Silberman felt she had made an enormous mistake, she learnt from it. Her calendar now includes "unwritten" due dates and meetings as well as the firm dates issued by funders.

LEARN FROM MISTAKES

In the late 1990s, Christopher Gergen co-founded an online tutoring service for high-school and university students, called Smarthinking.com.

After the first round of financing in the early to mid 1999, the company grew quickly.

By the beginning of 2000, it had 30 employees and was ready to launch. Then the dotcom bubble burst, and the company's financing fell through in a matter of weeks.

With six weeks of cash in the bank, Gergen and his partner were facing one of the biggest mistakes of their lives.

Gergen's experience with companies facing hard times taught him that leaders frequently hide behind closed doors. However, he and his co-founder decided to take a different approach.

They gathered their whole staff together and explained exactly what needed to happen to save the company, emphasising that they couldn't pull it off alone.

They outlined what each person and function needed to do.

Although they "limped" through the next six months, they managed to raise US\$5 million (\$6 million) of funding in the following six months.

While Gergen could easily blame the economy for what happened, he takes full responsibility for jeopardising his organisation.

"While outside circumstances were not in our control, the ability to manage through it was," he says.

Most importantly, he learnt from the mistake and began to take a much more disciplined approach to cash flow.

As a result of how he and his co-founder handled the aftermath, the company indeed survived and now has a cohesive culture with practically no turnover.

The company just celebrated its 11th anniversary, having made it through the recent downturn with very few hiccups.