



Empower Employees to Have Their Own Experiences and Make Mistakes

A Grounded With Data Philosophy

BASIC PREMISE

Mistakes happen every day in organizational life. The question is what to do with mistakes and those who make them. Classic business theory suggests corrective disciplinary action, retraining or dismissal, and a formal write-up in the personnel file are tools to avoid further issues. This harsh approach sends a profound message to the perpetrating employee and a clear message to cohorts. After all, employees are units of attrition and can be swapped as easily as parts on a machine, right? This style of management is typically associated with the transactional theory. We've all seen TV shows with bosses barking at subordinates who made a seemingly innocent mistake, or perhaps you may have sadly experienced it firsthand. A newer take is from the movie "Office Space." The faux-empathic, coffee-swigging boss hangs over a cubicle discussing how an employee feels about their error while passive-aggressively banishing another employee to the basement with a red stapler as his only friend.

GROUNDED WITH DATA

EVERYONE MAKES MISTAKES

One of our philosophies is "it is ok to make a mistake, just make it original." We are human; stuff happens. We all know the saying, "to err is human; to forgive is divine." However, many do not know the third element: "to persist is devilish." Let's assume that your organizational hiring process places qualified people into positions instead of warm bodies. Putting the wrong people in the wrong positions is another issue for another day. Likewise, the occurrence of big significant mistakes is also a topic for another day. I will note as a teaser that they are often the result of system breakdowns. Today, an easy way to reduce mistakes is by positioning your team for success by empowering them with the tools and the appropriate space to execute.

MAKE MISTAKES ORIGINAL

Classical economic theory holds that land, labor, and capital are any organization's three primary assets. As such, protecting your organization's labor and treating people with respect is a way to increase the value of an existing asset with little extra investment. There are ways to manage most common innocent one-off mistakes without raising your voice, feigning empathic abilities, or filing a Warren Commission-sized report for someone's personnel file. Transformational leadership empowers employees to perform and execute in the moment of truth. One tenet is to create a safe space for employees to ask questions or help without feeling diminished or fear backlash, including the loss of their job or demotion. You can proactively avoid many mistakes by creating a safe space, allowing employees to ask questions in earnest rather than guessing in fear. Mistakes often result from simple communication missteps or not understanding an assignment's myopic but essential details. Having the communication channel open in a safe way can help to offset many common mistakes.

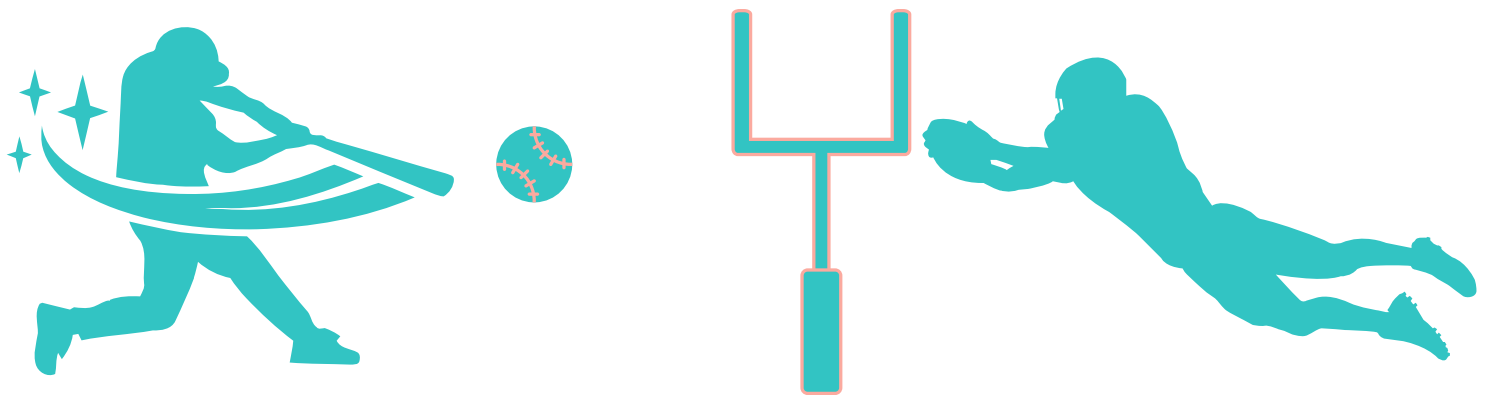


GROUNDED WITH DATA

EVERYONE MAKES MISTAKES

WHAT ABOUT NON-ORIGINAL MISTAKES?

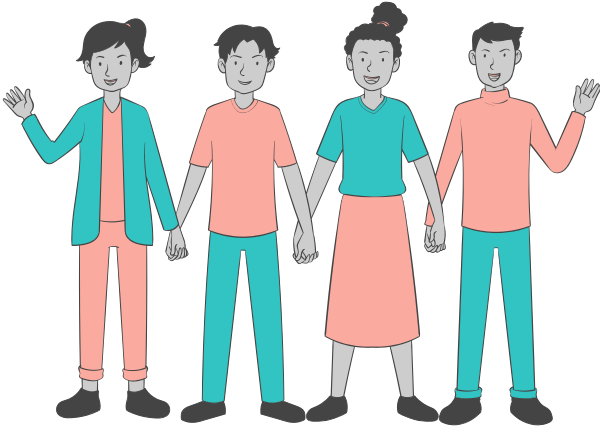
Still create the right environment and feeling of safety to perform while learning from the mistake. For example, Boston Red Sox's David Ortiz (Big Papi) had a batting average of 0.286, which is not very good for an organization outside of professional sports. Another way to consider Big Papi's batting average is he failed to get a hit nearly three-fourths of the time. Big Papi spent his career working to improve his batting average, as do most baseball players. He optimized the predictability of his performance through continuous practice and working with his coaches. In an organization, a repeated error is an opportunity to train and coach. Maybe start by inviting the employee into building a solution to reduce the risk of error while also building safeguards to allow time for correction. By providing a safe space for the employee to learn from their errors, you are helping to develop all-star players.



If the same devilish errors persist and are no longer original after considering the process and engaging the employee within a safe space, then consider other options. First, if the employee is absolutely the wrong employee for that position (i.e., assuming no personal issues for the employee are contributing to the less-than-desired performance), consider reviewing the hiring process. The hiring process may result in the wrong person being put into the position, thus significantly increasing the probability of failure. For example, say you needed a quarterback, and HR runs out and hires Joe Montana, arguably one of the best in NFL history. However, putting Joe Montana on the field at 66 years old in a high-stakes game may be novel and may even result in some impressive plays in the short term, but in the long-run, the move likely would have set your team and Joe up for failure. Alas, Joe's spirit probably would be willing. Having Joe coach may be the more competent role for his skillset and your team. Like a professional athlete, know that injuries and significant individual life events can affect performance. Know the difference between cannot perform vs. unable to perform. It is ok to give an employee space to heal without the fear of demotion or losing their jobs if needed; that is all part of open communication and positioning your employees, your team, and your organization for success.

GROUNDED WITH DATA

EVERYONE MAKES MISTAKES



Lastly, allowing employees space to make mistakes without fear of retribution has been shown within the research to benefit an organization, such as innovation, morale, and process improvements. De Clercq, Azeem, and Haq (2022) found that employees are emotionally drained by the perception that organizational bosses are unforgiving of their mistakes, which contributes to counterproductive processes and complacency.

According to Saksvik et al. (2020), intervention management is the process of purposefully empowering employees with the space to learn and grow, and make mistakes, but having designed interventions that result in positive and sustainable effects, which is built through empowerment, trust, and appropriate support groups. "Empowered employees are given time and space to have their own experiences and make their own mistakes. For example, they might be given challenging tasks without unnecessarily strict rules or supervision. Several positive associations between empowering leadership and other variables have been reported, such as, for example, employee autonomy, intrinsic motivation, and creativity" (Zhang & Bartol, 2010, as cited in Saksvik et al. 2020, p. 90).

The notion of employee empowerment is not a new concept. According to Forrester (2000), often organizations claim to empower staff members without truly understanding of the meaning of the word, "empowerment" itself. Forrester (2000) recommends the following to make empowerment more effective: enlarge power, be sure of what you want to do, differentiate among employees, support power sharers, build fitting systems, and focus on results.



YOU CAN PROACTIVELY AVOID MANY MISTAKES BY CREATING A SAFE SPACE, ALLOWING EMPLOYEES TO ASK QUESTIONS IN EARNEST RATHER THAN GUESSING IN FEAR.

GROUNDED WITH DATA

EVERYONE MAKES MISTAKES REFERENCES

De Clercq, D., Azeem, M. U., & Haq, I. U. (2022). You're draining me! When politically inept employees view organization-linked emotional exhaustion and unforgiveness as reasons for diminished job performance. *Management Decision*, 60(8), 2272–2293. <https://doi.org/10.1108/MD-04-2021-0484>

Forrester, R. (2000). Empowerment: Rejuvenating a potent idea. *Academy of Management Executive*, 14(3), 67–80. <https://doi.org/10.5465/AME.2000.4468067>

Saksvik, P. Ø., Christensen, M., Fossum, S., Lysklett, K., & Karanika-Murray, M. (2020). Investigating Managerial Qualities to Support Sustainable Intervention Effects in the Long Term. *Nordic Journal of Working Life Studies*, 10(2), 81–99.

Zhang, X., & Bartol, K. M. (2010). Linking empowering leadership and employee creativity: The influence of psychological empowerment, intrinsic motivation, and creative process engagement. *Academy of Management Journal* 53: 107–128. doi: <https://doi.org/10.5465/AMJ.2010.48037118>

