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Embrace Mistakes to Build a Learning Culture

Article

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Embrace Mistakes to Build a Learning Culture

Mistakes and critical incidents inevitably happen: Websites crash, products break, customers get angry. How leaders react and respond can inform an organization's culture — for better or worse. Blame leads to finger-pointing, resentment, distrust, and unproductive behavior. It can cause an organization to stagnate, with people feeling that their efforts are not valued. In contrast, responding without blame creates an environment of learning and growth in which employees recognize that mistakes are part of the process and that their efforts are appreciated — a blameless culture.

Within a blameless culture, leaders blame processes, not people. They focus on understanding *why* something happened, not who is responsible. By striving to identify the root cause of an issue, they create systems that prevent it from happening again. Leaders in blameless cultures also recognize that they are part of the system, so they take responsibility for their own mistakes — such as communicating insufficiently about an important issue or making a poor decision — and don't expect perfection of themselves or others. This encourages employees to be open about their mistakes and use them as learning opportunities instead of hiding them in fear of retribution.

As Amy C. Edmondson's psychological safety theory suggests, by acknowledging that mistakes are inevitable, organizations allow employees to experiment and take risks without fear of punishment or embarrassment. This encourages creative problem-solving, collaboration, and innovation — all essential components of successful businesses. Creating spaces where employees feel safe to try something new and, crucially, to make mistakes without fear of repercussions or judgment helps to encourage them to step outside their comfort zones, learn from their experiences, and develop innovative solutions that help propel the organization forward. Ultimately, the goal should be to create an environment where everyone feels comfortable making mistakes and learning from them in order to become better — a culture of continuous improvement. This doesn't mean that mistakes should be overlooked; rather, they should be dealt with constructively. Here are three ways to use failures to move forward.

1. Reframe incidents as opportunities. There's an old saying: If you make something the metric, it will become the goal. In theory, it makes sense for a leader to want to see the number of incidents decrease over time. But when this becomes the metric, engineers who are measured against it may delay acknowledging incidents or close them out before they are fully resolved. This can lead to a culture of incident avoidance and have teams working around the clock to avoid making mistakes.

Culturally, it's better to encourage employees to try, even if they might fail, than to avoid failure at all costs; after all, the best way to learn is through experience. Instead of basing performance metrics on incident avoidance, it's essential to incentivize employees to learn. Focus your metrics on understanding how quickly incidents are resolved and how prepared teams are to handle them — not just on avoiding them. This can help foster a culture where failure is accepted as part of the process, which encourages innovation and creativity. Promoting an environment of growth and learning in this way may spur employees to try new things, learn new skills, and become more engaged in their work as they grow, which may help drive better performance and productivity in the long run.

At the same time, it's essential to ensure that employees feel supported and have access to the resources they need to succeed. For example, teams may need project management software or a database of best practices to help them work more effectively, or they may

benefit from mentoring programs. Ensuring that teams are equipped with the right tools and training can go a long way in helping them learn from their mistakes.

2. Reward people for sharing knowledge. We've all heard the story of the "on-call hero"—an employee paged in the middle of the night because the website was down who jumped on their computer and saved the day. Why did they get the call? Because they were the only one who knew how a particular service works. While this person certainly deserves to be lauded for such efforts, the fact remains: Relying on a single employee to resolve an issue can become a dangerous single point of failure. What if they're sick when the next urgent issue arises? What if they leave the company entirely?

Leaders should incentivize and congratulate those who share their institutional knowledge with others just as enthusiastically as they celebrate the on-call hero moments (if not more so). For example, leaders could create rewards for team members who document processes and share information with colleagues, or create an education budget for external training or internal shadowing opportunities.

Leaders also need to ensure that team members have the right tools, templates, and processes to easily share information with their teammates. This will help create a culture where everyone, not just solo heroes, can contribute — and, of course, avoid future incidents by pooling employee expertise. This could look like establishing a wiki page for team documentation, creating video recordings of process walk-throughs, or using software that encourages collaboration.

3. Review what went wrong to move forward. In order for a company to truly learn from an incident, team members must be comfortable discussing failure or raising potential problems without fear of punishment or reprisal. One way to create this type of culture is by using post-incident reviews as learning moments, not inquisitions. By doing this, organizations can continuously improve, grow, and reach their goals and objectives through these lessons learned. Team members must be comfortable discussing failure or raising potential problems without fear of punishment or reprisal.

By taking the time to document, reflect on, and discuss critical incidents, organizations will be better equipped to understand how particular problems affect operations, identify areas that need improvement, and use those insights to make changes and develop more effective strategies. This also helps create an environment where everyone feels empowered to take risks and speak up when they see something is wrong — and helps build employees' sense of ownership within the organization. To build a culture of open questioning, develop a process for reporting errors without repercussion and encourage team members to speak up if they notice something that might cause a problem in the future. This approach builds trust within the team and can lead to better communication in identifying risks and addressing them quickly. Ultimately, the goal is for teams to work together to identify and address potential risks before they lead to more significant issues or crises.

Critical incidents make for outstanding learning opportunities, and the most successful organizations recognize the importance of learning from mistakes. By actively seeking out areas where improvements can be made, measuring the impact of changes, and investing in a culture of growth and continuous improvement, organizations can create an environment where everyone works together to achieve success. Learning from mistakes helps foster a culture of growth and collaboration that will help your organization thrive for years to come. Don't be afraid to make mistakes; instead, embrace them as opportunities to help your employees and your organization reach its full potential.