

Whoops... 5 Tips for Managing Your Leadership Mistakes

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Nobody likes mistakes. They can be honest, embarrassing, **unforgettable** or costly. But everybody makes them. Esteemed English writer Alexander Pope etched the phrase “To err is human” into everyday vernacular because everyone, from the mailroom to the boardroom, knows that nobody’s perfect. While that is easy to accept, it’s difficult to admit—no one wants to claim they made an error in hiring the wrong candidate or that their business model was flawed.

As a leader, you ~~don’t want to look like an idiot~~ want people to view you as being capable for your position, and mistakes can threaten that—especially the big ones. But protecting the image of always being right can be the biggest leadership mistake to make.

In his book *Failing Forward*, John Maxwell looks at making mistakes in a positive light if handled in the right manner. He writes, “In life, the question is not if you will have problems, but how you are going to deal with your problems. Are you going to fail forward or backward?” The concept of failing forward is that you may stumble with your mistakes, but as long as you do not land on your back and stay there, progress is being made. You can use errors to the benefit of your leadership role, team and overall vision by taking these appropriate actions:

Own Up

The initial response of making a mistake is to cover it up, or blame someone or some other outside factor. But those actions almost always magnify the mistake long-term. In 1985, the Coca-Cola Company did away with its original, famous soft drink formula, and **replaced it with New Coke**. Remember that? There was an immediate outcry—even outrage—from consumers with the move. Instead of pointing fingers at rivals or market conditions regarding the fiasco, Coca-Cola admitted they neglected to consider the

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emotional attachment to the original drink, and employed a simple strategy to correct it. Sergio Zyman, a key player in the new brand, [explained the process to Forbes magazine](#) and summed it up as so: "Ate a big slice of humble pie and brought Classic back 77 days later." It takes courage to admit to those you are leading that you were wrong, but it is the first and most important step for moving back in a positive direction.

React and Repair Together

Once you realize and admit a mistake has been made, don't let it worsen. Brainstorm with your team on how to correct the problem as quickly as possible. It can be disheartening to have someone you are leading offer the solution for the issue you might have caused, but if it protects your vision, it will be an easier pill to swallow. Don't lose sight of the fact that you assembled a team because you couldn't achieve your vision alone. Fixing your mistake with the help of others will quickly get you back towards realizing it.

Learn/Educate

"Appreciate your mistakes for what they are: precious life lessons that can only be learned the hard way... unless it is a fatal mistake, which, at least, others can learn from," observes satirist, and possible Minnesota Senator, Al Franken. As the leader, communicate what oversights and miscalculations led to the mistake, and discuss with your team what new information was gleaned and can be applied to upcoming strategy-making and challenges. No matter who errs, everyone should learn a valuable lesson from it.

Keep Perspective

Keep the mistake in perspective and your eye on the big picture. Just because the mistake, at the time, seems catastrophic, it doesn't necessarily mean the end is near. It's just another step in the process of reaching your goal. In fact, it may even spurn new ideas that would not have been realized otherwise. Don't aim for perfection with your team, but instead aim for making progress with both right and wrong actions. As renowned ad man Leo Burnett once said, "To swear off making mistakes is very easy. All you have to do is to swear off having ideas."

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Move On Fearlessly

As you get past your mistake, do not move forward with a sense of fear for making another one.

Management expert Peter Drucker explains, "The better a man is, the more mistakes he will make, for the more new things he will try." Communicate that philosophy so that there is no hesitation in your team's efforts. That way, when future mistakes do occur, they will be kept in a positive light rather than a burden that weighs everyone down.

Unless your "team" happens to be the Chicago Cubs, and your name is Steve Bartman...