

# How to encourage employees to make mistakes, confidently

Unlike in the movies, mistakes happen. Many projects are launched with the best intentions and end up missing the mark. I remember being told a story about a young leader who tabled his resignation after a project went wrong, costing the organisation \$2M. His boss smiled at the resignation letter on his desk and replied: “Why should I let you go, when I have just invested \$2M in your education?”.

---

Why is it that some people see this as an opportunity to see what works whilst others run scared? And what can we learn from leaders who, like this boss, encourage people to not be afraid to fail? Here's four key things to consider if you're managing a team or running a business that can help you encourage your staff to make mistakes with confidence.

Here's four key teachings to consider in your own management style.

# Reframe 'success' and 'failure'

As Thomas Eddison famously demonstrated, he didn't fail hundreds of times to invent the light bulb. He got closer and closer to the invention each time.

Reframing how your employees view mistakes can make it easier for them to push the boundaries and try out new approaches until something succeeds. One way to encourage this kind of mindset is to remember that anything genuinely better than what existed before in organisational life is a step forward. It's likely to emerge from successive approximations in the direction of a challenging vision, from long series of:

- Hypothesis

- Predict what is expected to happen

- Seek to disprove your hypothesis (Popper)

- Check what happened

- Learn from the data

- Consolidate what worked

- Create a new hypothesis to address what didn't work

- Repeat

This is helpfully simplified as Plan-Do-Check-Adjust or Act (PDCA) in Improvement Science.

## 2. Don't be short-sighted!

Entrepreneurial people have a record for achieving results and demonstrating trait-based competencies like 'drive for continuous improvement', 'independent thinking' and 'learning speed', which will be in demand from the kind of organisations seeking to achieve competitive advantage in global markets.

But there's a caveat. These kinds of skills and a results-driven focus can often be<sup>1</sup> seen as maverick behaviours, which many organisations are intolerant of. Many talented people get fired by short-sighted managers who do not realise how talented they are. It happens in sport, where managers seeking to instil

standards of recruitment, discipline and conditioning are removed before their changes can be seen in their results, and it happens in business also. So, as a leader, make sure you give your employees time and space to experiment instead of rushing them to reach the 'right' conclusion.

### 3. Recruit and promote scientifically

Finding employees who will welcome the kind of 'mistakes' that drive innovation and market breakthrough needs recruitment and selection processes and practitioners that can seek them out scientifically. To ensure this, you should apply design countermeasures to known-about errors in assessing likely future behaviour. These include:

- Reliance on interviews

- Failure to separate data collection from data evaluation

- Misallocation of valid data to the wrong competency

- Reliance on only one source of data

- Ignoring factors that can't be measured but are important

- Ignoring psychological fit

- Unconscious incompetence of selectors and recruitment agencies

- Bias

It's also important to explicitly identify key *trait-based competencies* and be tolerant of *skills-based deficiencies*, for which training can be provided for once the employee is recruited or promoted.

### 4. Turn cultural difference into competitive advantage

A culture which sees the kind of mistakes that drive learning as the inevitable price of challenging the status quo must encourage challenge from below and minimise hierarchy. But as we've mentioned already, many people aren't comfortable with going against the grain so may need some encouragement to

get there.

In many parts of the world, differences in cultural dimensions such as Uncertainty Avoidance and Power Distance are unconscious barriers to achieving the type of mistake-friendly culture discussed here. This has been overcome by identifying cultural challenges and implementing countermeasures. Doing this has the added benefit of equipping the organisation's leaders to predict and prevent any potentially damaging cultural differences when operating in any global market and working with people from any culture.

Creating employees who are confident in their ability to make and bounce-back from mistakes requires leaders who can embody these qualities themselves. We need more mavericks to push the boundaries to find out what more can be done. In doing so, we as leaders must provide the support and inspiration for our people to change the world – one mistake at a time.

Frank Devine is a culture change specialist, founder of Accelerated Improvement Ltd. and author of *Rapid Mass Engagement: Driving Continuous Improvement through Employee Culture Creation*.

**[Buy Rapid Mass Engagement Now](#)**

---

Article by FRANK DEVINE