

**Can a team's error culture contribute to its success?**

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We should avoid mistakes. And yet, making them provides us with teaching moments and help us evolve. Especially, if we are part of a team that upholds an error culture based on trust and personal strengths.

**Mistakes are bad news...**

Mistakes are bad news. They cost money, time, and energy. Many enterprises have resolved to using programmes designed to prevent them – manuals, rules, and monitoring mechanisms. In reality, mistakes will usually be covered up or dragged out, so that there is no way people can learn from them. Instead, the focus shifts to finding culprits.

From a psychological perspective, owning a mistake is not a useful defence mechanism. Being blind to mistakes is an old evolutionary feature of thinking. Denying our own errors protects our self-esteem.

**... but helpful**

Mistakes do have their proponents. Thomas Edison, for instance, thought that whenever people were not successful enough, they should accelerate the speed at which they are making mistakes. We owe some major scientific achievements to blunders, the most famous example being the discovery of penicillin. Alexander Fleming forgot to close a window in his laboratory before leaving for summer holidays. While he was gone, fungal spores were blown into the room – and promptly killed off the pyogenic organisms on the test plates. If the example seems to ancient to be convincing, take Viagra. The drug had originally been developed to fight hypertension. Some disappointing test series showed unexpected, albeit helpful, side effects: In 1996, Pfizer ended up launching the agent as medicine against erection problems.

**How to cope with mistakes**

Everyone makes mistakes. Accordingly, «trial and error» is a recognised method of learning. The crucial question that remains is how we can deal with them. Extreme error intolerance leads to an atmosphere of fear. It paralyses

people and has them conceal their errors and point fingers at others. But exaggerated error tolerance is not conducive to success either. Granted, there should not be too many slips. Demanding diligence and concentration is legitimate. But creating a positive error culture by building trust helps team members evolve and get better.

**Strengths a prerequisite**

In my experience, the most effective error cultures are based on cultivating strengths. Whenever personal strengths come into play, mistakes become less frequent. Thus, instead of an empathetic team member who is great at coaching others, his or her precise and reliable colleague can proofread the manual that was drawn up by the team, leaving the empathetic person with more time to support trainees. This kind of division of labour requires team members to know about and value each other's strengths. If they do, self-confidence and trust in the team will grow over time.

**Why rather than who**

Trust can be destroyed in an instant, however. If our first reflex is to look for the culprit whenever a mistake occurs, we are quickly caught in a spiral of denial and of blaming others. It would be much more constructive to trust our strengths – our own ones and those of our colleagues. Such an attitude would lead us to a much better question: Why did the error occur? It would allow us to have a clarifying conversation that would not involve disparaging someone. Error management would become easier, as all teamers would be watching out for mistakes together. Staff members would feel more comfortable calling attention to errors and team leaders could admit to them more freely. As a result, a team's success could also be credited to appreciative error culture.