

Learning from Mistakes

Does your organization promote a culture of learning through mistakes or a culture of learning through punishment?

The other evening when my wife, daughter and myself had the opportunity of spending quality time together, we decided to watch a humorous video and settled on 'Faulty Towers.' I remarked at the beginning of the video, that I enjoyed John Cheese's acting and our daughter almost immediately responded that it's not John Cheese, but John Cleese, and she went on to add, 'it's OK; don't feel embarrassed, we all make mistakes.'

When was the last time you said that to an employee who had made a mistake?

During my previous employment we had a great need to roll out a Consumer Sales Management Process Training Program for our bank's branch managers spread out in the gulf. Since our global system did not have a bank developed program of this nature at that time, we decided to outsource the development and delivery of this program. This was a rare occurrence, as all programs are usually high-quality bank-owned and delivered programs. Given the background of the participants, all of whom were well educated and experienced Arab nationals, we had to source a sophisticated program to pitch at a higher level to that of the participants.

It was my responsibility as head of human resources to contract the best program and after much discussions and evaluations of several programs with the head of distribution, we settled for a program offered by a company based in an European country. It was the most disastrous program in my career and we stopped the four-day program at the end of the second day itself. The disaster was due to the program-leader's inability to conduct the program to match the program content. He lacked thought, experience and depth.

On returning to the bank after the program, I wrote to the chief executive officer, (a hard-driving American and a stickler for excellence), accepting full responsibility for the debacle. He replied in one line 'Sunil it is not your fault.' The lesson I learnt here is not to buy training programs without testing the quality of its delivery.

When was the last time you said ‘it’s not your fault’ to an employee?

I share with you below a couple of statements which was publicized in this bank to encourage employees to learn from their mistakes. You will understand from the real life situation quoted above that what’s said in the statements are practiced as well.

Independent Initiative

‘Promoting personal freedom to act and allowing people to succeed and to learn from failure.’ The Chance to Make Mistakes ‘Don’t laugh. We are serious. How can you learn if you are never allowed to take a meaningful risk? To develop habits of success, you need the freedom to try things your way and to learn as you go sometimes even by making the wrong decisions. There are lots of places where as a younger or new employee you’d never be given enough authority to make any real mistakes.

But those companies are unlikely to be innovators.” When was the last time you said to an employee ‘don’t worry about it, when an employee had made a mistake? A culture of learning through mistakes does not however mean encouraging your employees to keep making the same mistake all the time. If that happens you have a competence problem.



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