The Mistake Manifesto:

How Making Mistakes Can Make Us Better

Alina Tugend

I first started writing about mistakes after I made a mistake in a column that I write for *The New York Times*. It was a small error, but it upset me and started me thinking, "why are we taught that we learn from our mistakes, but in reality most of us hate and dread them?" So I wrote a column about mistakes, looking at some of the research, and discovered some fascinating information. My readers must have agreed, because I received numerous emails from people grateful that I had highlighted and attempted to explain this dichotomy: that we all make mistakes yet none of think we should.

That column became a book, a book that examines mistakes from a variety of angles: business, parenting, teaching, medicine, aviation, culture and gender. While I am not advocating that we all run around blundering and goofing up all the time—and certainly none of us like dealing with people who make the same mistake over and over—our fear of mistakes has a very high cost.

We exert enormous energy blaming each other when something goes wrong rather than finding a solution. Defensiveness and accusations take the place of apologies and forgiveness. Mistake-avoidance creates workplaces where making changes and being creative while risking failure is subsumed by an ethos of mistake-prevention—at the cost of daring and innovation.

Or, conversely, this ethos gives us workplaces where superstars are never challenged, and are rather rewarded for making really bad decision.

My first task was to define what a mistake is. After all, we call a typo a mistake and leaving a sponge in a patient during surgery a mistake. An accounting error that costs millions of dollars is a mistake and forgetting your daughter's piano recital is a mistake. Part of the trouble is that our society doesn't offer many gradations of mistakes; Charles Prather, a company president and senior fellow at the University of Maryland, notes that we don't have a word in English that means "a well-reasoned attempt that didn't meet expectation."

Here are a few attempts to define mistakes:

» Misjudgments and adverse consequences that were unplanned.
The scale of the consequences differentiates mistakes from lesser errors or slips.

» The failure of a planned sequence of mental or physical activities to achieve its intended outcome when these failures can't be left to chance.

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Bill Gore, founder of the company that produces the fabric Gore-Tex helpfully distinguished between "above the line" mistakes and "below the line" mistakes. The latter threaten to sink the ship, while the former do not. Above-the-line mistakes show that managers are willing to experiment, think and challenge, while their below-the-line counterparts are so enormous that they bring on disaster. But Gore also told each associate that it was his or her responsibility to know where the water line was. It doesn't mean risks shouldn't be taken, but that they should be considered very carefully and taken only after everyone who might be affected is consulted.

The trouble is that, too often, we confuse and punish the two types of mistakes equally. We react to minor slips as if they are huge blunders. We give equal weight to small above-the-line errors—breaking a deck chair, say—and major below-the-line ones, like running into an iceberg.

The result of this is that we fear making any mistake because we view them all as catastrophes.

We need to put aside the idea of flawlessness. It's not, as the adage says, failure that's not an option—it's perfectionism. That doesn't mean we don't strive to be the best we can be, but we must expect to fall and fail and come up short—and keep trying. Carol Dweck, a professor of psychology at Stanford University, has done groundbreaking research on how children and adults view mistakes.

She talks about **fixed mindset**, those who believe that, generally, whatever we're good at we're inherently good at—whether it be math, science or baseball—and whatever we're bad at we're just bad at, and that it's never really going to change. If we accept that as true, then mistakes really play no role except to highlight inherent failure. We don't believe we can learn from them because we don't believe we can get better at things.

Those with a **growth mindset**, on the other hand, see ability and intelligence as something that's malleable and believe that, with enough effort, we can overcome obstacles. This mindset allows us to see mistakes as inevitable and part of a growth process. In this case, mistakes are simply a way to grow and learn on the road to a greater potential.

This doesn't mean everyone has the same smarts and talents, but that we are far more capable of developing than we think.

Often parents and teachers unwittingly encourage this mindset by praising children for being smart rather than for trying hard. For example, in a study that Professor Dweck and her researchers did with 400 fifth graders, half were randomly praised as being "really smart" for doing well on a test; the others were praised for their effort.

Then they were given two tasks to choose from: an easy one that they would learn little from but do well, or a more challenging one that might be more interesting but induce more mistakes. The majority of those praised for being smart chose the simple task, while 90 percent of those commended for trying hard selected the more difficult one. The difference was surprising, Professor Dweck said, especially because it came from one sentence of praise.

The students were then given another test, above their grade level, on which many performed poorly. Afterward, they were asked to write anonymously about their experience to another school and report their scores. Thirty-seven percent of those who were told they were smart lied about their scores, while only 13 percent of the other group did.

Americans don't like to think that things take effort. Even if we know better, we prefer to believe that people who are great in business, sports or the arts effortlessly attain their success. This isn't true in other countries, particularly Asian ones. For example, in Japan, national surveys show that the most popular words are "effort" and "persistence."

As we get older, many of us invest a great deal in being right. When things go wrong, as they inevitably do, we focus on flagellating ourselves, blaming someone else or covering it up. Or we rationalize it by saying others make even more mistakes. What we do not want to do, most of the time, is learn from the experience. Because, if we have a fixed mindset, we don't believe we can.

Professor Dweck proved this point in another study, this one of college students. They were divided into two camps: one did readings about how intelligence is fixed, and the other learned that intelligence could grow and develop if you worked at it. The students then took a very tough test on which most did badly. They were given the option of bolstering their self-esteem in two ways: looking at scores and strategies of those who did worse or those who did better.

Those in the fixed mind-set chose to compare themselves with students who had performed worse, as opposed to those in the growth mind-set, who more frequently chose to learn where they had gone wrong by looking at those who had performed better.

So, knowing this, what are the most common ways we handle—or mishandle—mistakes in the workplace?

We do single-loop learning when we need to do double-loop learning. What does this mean? Harvard Business School Professor Emeritus Chris Argyris coined these terms. The phrase is borrowed from electrical engineering—a thermostat being defined as a single-loop learner. The thermostat is programmed to detect states of too hot or too cold and correct the situation by turning off or on. If the thermostat asked itself why it was set at 68 degrees or why it was programmed as it was, it would be a double-loop learner. Double-loop learning requires us not just to fix the problem, but to look at and question underlying factors.

For example, a CEO found out that his company inhibited innovation in employees by subjecting every idea to more than 275 checks and sign-offs, He promptly eliminated 200 of them and the result was higher innovation. That's a good example of single-loop learning. But what was really needed was double-loop learning to prevent similar actions in the future. The CEO needed to ask why the checks and sign-offs had originally started, and why employees hadn't questioned these practices and moved to have them eliminated.

Now, sometimes only single-loop learning is needed. We don't need to question every mistake—sometimes we do just need to correct what's wrong and move on. But, often, double-loop learning is necessary, even if many managers shy away from it because it can be difficult and embarrassing to question long-held and fundamental ways of doing things

We operate with hindsight bias. We tend to think that a sequence of events is linear and inevitably leading to one outcome. We don't take into account the stresses, lack of information and other obstacles that could have led to the mistake. We are looking down into a tunnel, not imagining what the person who made the mistake was going through. Such biases make it difficult to discover the root causes of mistakes and also lead us be hard on those who goofed up—whether it be ourselves or others.

We tend to blame "one bad apple" rather than look at systemic problems. Mistakes more often than not are caused by a series of latent errors that lead up to the active error. An active error, for example, is the pilot crashing the plane. The latent error is a design malfunction causing the plane to roll unexpectedly, which the pilot couldn't control. If we don't dig down to find the latent errors, then the active errors will keep happening. Singling out one worker may be easier in the short-term, but in the long run it's less effective. Only by looking for the latent errors can we uncover critical problems and resolve them in the long-term.

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We often send mixed messages. Most managers see themselves as fostering innovation and creativity, but in reality they don't. They often send overt messages that it's okay to offer honest feedback or confess to errors, but there is still a covert message that "you better not challenge me and you better not screw up," and that just creates cynicism.

So what do we do about this? How do bosses "fix the learning, not the blame?" It's not easy to change work environments that are focused on fixing the blame, but it can be done.

Research has shown that one of the key buildings blocks that make a company a "learning organization" is that employees feel **"psychologically safe."** There are numerous ways to work on creating a work environment where people feel secure enough to make—and admit—mistakes.

Teach supervisors about growth mindsets versus fixed mindsets. Research has also shown that when managers are offered workshops on such concepts and provided with scientific testimony on how the brain can grow throughout life, and/or given exercises to show how abilities can be developed, they become more flexible and open in their judgments, more invested in teaching employees and more accepting that mistakes are part of the process. They are also more likely to accept negative feedback, because they'll see it as less of a judgment of their competence and more as a potentially useful insight.

Make sure you don't say one thing and do another. When people are told it's okay to make mistakes, they are more willing to experiment and thus tend to become more proficient over the long-term. Studies of healthcare workers learning a new website system (there was no formal training so they had to learn by trial and error) were more willing to try out different software applications and test new features when their managers consistently did two things: explicitly stated that making mistakes would be okay, and didn't punish them for mistakes.

Experimentation was much more rare in those departments where managers gave mixed signals by encouraging experimentations verbally but maintaining a reward system that punished failure. These mixed signals also created confusion and mistrust among employees.

Mistakes shouldn't just be accepted, but rewarded. There's a great anecdote about Tom Watson, IBM's founder. A promising junior executive at IBM was involved in a risky venture for the company and managed to lose over $10 million in the gamble. When the nervous executive was called into Watson's office, he assumed he was going to be asked to resign. Instead, Watson said, "You can't be serious. We just spent $10 million educating you!"

Maybe that's going too far, and perhaps most bosses wouldn't be so understanding. But, the idea of making **deliberate mistakes**—doing something common wisdom says won't work—is a way to accelerate learning and creativity. That has to be within reason, of course. Drilling for oil where there probably isn't any would be a deliberate mistake, but would be so costly that it would be insane to try it. On the other hand, advertising pioneer David Ogilvy, when he tested ideas, deliberately included ads that he thought would not work in order to test and improve his assumptions.

Learn to communicate well. This has become a cliché, but the reality is, communication is more than talking to each other. Doing it right needs to be taught and practiced. For example, the former chief ethics officer at Northrop Grumman had managers practice unpleasant conversations so they could offer constructive criticism without being hurtful. Such methods are more likely to serve everyone's interests, as managers will be able to offer sound advice and the employee will be less likely to become defensive and more likely to learn. Ideally, the opposite would be true, as well.

So far, I've focused on allowing people to make mistakes and then addressing them. The other side of the coin is that those we consider **superstars** are allowed to make mistake after mistake and are never challenged or even questioned. This applies to many of the people who were involved in Enron, say, or the institutions that were part of the financial meltdown.

Many were men and women who had always been successful, and therefore they believed, and others believed, that they couldn't fail. They were considered so talented that they couldn't be touched. This is a sign of a different sort of fixed mindset: they're such successful that they can't possibly screw up. But to quote Bill Gates, "Success if a lousy teacher. It seduces smart people into thinking they can't lose." If you believe you can't make a mistake, then you can't learn. Everyone gets better if they are appropriately questioned and challenged.

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One other key ingredient in making mistakes intelligently is to **know how to apologize and how to accept apologies**. A proper apology has three elements: an acknowledgment of the fault or offense, regret for it, and responsibility for it—and, if possible, a way to fix the problem. Because we often don't separate these three aspects, we frequently get caught up in who is to blame and find it difficult to apologize.

Some apologies that violate these rules: "I'm sorry if you were offended." Or "I'm sorry I hurt your feelings." These somehow imply that the person wronged is at fault for being so sensitive.

And don't confuse reasons with excuses. Too many people are afraid to explain why a mistake was made because they're afraid to sound like they're rationalizing. But there are legitimate reasons that errors occur, and it's important to offer them up. That can help both sides develop a better understanding of what happened.

Apologizing needs to be a communication rather than an expression of regret, because expression is one-sided—more like a monologue that aims to get something off your chest. Communicating should be a dialogue that works toward a resolution. We need to learn this on a personal basis and companies need to learn this in the public realm.

We need to go back to our roots, or at least to kindergarten, where we were told that we need to make mistakes in order to learn—and we actually believed it. I think no one said it better than Nike founder Phil Knight, who changed the sports shoe industry: **"The problem in America is not that we are making too many mistakes, it's that we are making too few."**

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Alina Tugend has written about education, environmentalism, and consumer culture for numerous publications, including *The New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *The Atlantic*, and *Parents*. Since 2005, she has written the biweekly consumer column "Shortcuts" for *The New York Times* business section. She was recently awarded the 2011 Best in Business award for Personal Finance from the Society of American Business Editors and Writers.

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