



Is Forgiveness Part of Your Culture?

Description

“We all make mistakes” is a phrase we all have likely heard. It is often used to reduce someone’s guilt over making a mistake and/or the fear of the consequences of that mistake. Because it is human to make mistakes, forgiveness is crucial inside organizations.

We know that some mistakes are much more serious than others. I recently heard a presentation from an engineer who worked in nuclear energy. The talk was on Human Factor Integration—in short, the study of how the “people” component must be integrated into the technology and processes. The more severe the consequence of mistakes, the more critical it is to build in systems to prevent mistakes.

My uncle Wilbur had two fingers cut off at the knuckle. It happened with a punch press. Today this would not happen due to the way the machines are designed. Human systems also need to be created with mistakes in mind. When receiving healthcare, we will be asked our name and birthdate by every care provider. When the potential of an injury or death is present, processes are implemented to eliminate or greatly reduce the danger. This column is not about those types of mistakes; yet even with severe mistakes, forgiveness can be a valuable part of recovery.

Many organizations are working to create cultures of replenishment using evidence-based tactics. We know that one key component in such cultures is forgiveness. People feel free to share their mistakes, knowing they’ll be forgiven for them. In looking at organizational values, I have yet to find *forgiveness* a frequently stated value. What do you think? Should forgiveness be part of the organization you are part of?

For this column, let’s look at mistakes that are not in the sphere of consequences of those examples above. Take a moment and think about this: What mistake made by someone you supervise would you *not* forgive? Let’s say a person steals from the company, or a person is a workplace bully. In those cases, the person will probably be let go. Of course, you can forgive a person who is let go for these kinds of mistakes; it’s a personal decision. Yet outside these types of mistakes, forgiveness is usually best.

Here’s an example: A person thought they had ordered supplies in time for when they would be needed, but the person miscalculated. The supplies took longer to arrive than expected. (This is not

that unusual with today's supply chain issues.) The result was anxiety, extra work, and extra expense for many. Yes, there can be consequences in cases like this. They might include a verbal warning, additional training, or more oversight. However, it's also important to let the employee know that it's time to learn from the mistake and move on.

I own a minor league baseball team, the Pensacola Blue Wahoos. This past season, for the first time in its history, the Blue Wahoos won the Double-A Southern League championship. It was a three-game series. The first team to win two games was the champion. The first game was in Pensacola, and the Blue Wahoos lost. This meant the team needed to win two games in Tennessee (a difficult task). In game two, a Wahoo player hit a double. He quickly stepped off the base to give the first base coach his batting gloves.

This is a common occurrence. The player is supposed to stay on second, get the umpire's attention, and *then* when the umpire signals time out, step off the bag to give the coach the batting gloves. Maybe due to the player's excitement of hitting the double in a big game he stepped off the base and was not aware a player on the opposing team had the ball. Before the player could get the time-out, he was tagged out. It was a serious mistake. When the team came back out on the field, the manager sent out a replacement for that player. The Wahoos won the game and moved on to game three, which would decide the championship.

During game three, the Blue Wahoos manager, Kevin Randel, put the player who had made the mistake in the previous game back in the lineup. The player hit a bases-loaded home run, which was key to the Wahoos winning the championship. The Wahoos radio announcer, Erik Bremer, after announcing the home run, connected the dots on how the manager helped the player move past the mistake by putting him in the lineup the next game. This signaled to the player, "The mistake is behind us; let's move on."

I was working in a hospital and due to some restructuring, a number of managers found themselves reporting to me. Some had not previously reported to me, and I could tell there was anxiety. Before the first meeting with both groups—those who had previously reported to me and those who were new—I asked each leader in the first group to think about a mistake they had made and to be ready to share it. I started the meeting by sharing a mistake I had made. The leaders then shared with the new members of the group a mistake they had made. When this was over, I asked the people who now reported to me what all the leaders had in common. I then said, "They are all working here." My point was that mistakes will be made, and we can move on.

Some tips:

1. Of course, take steps to prevent or eliminate mistakes. Taking time to provide training is important, as are excellent standard operating procedures. Even so, realize that mistakes will still happen, and how they're handled matters.
2. Create a culture where people are encouraged to share mistakes. It is always better for this to happen, whether it's an employee sharing they missed ordering something or a manager making a mistake in scheduling. Thank the person for doing so.
3. Discuss how the mistake happened and what can be done in the future so it does not happen again.
4. Do move forward. Let the person know it is time to move on. You might call it a *rearview mirror conversation*. I heard this statement from a military officer. She shared that this phrase helps

make the point that the mistake is behind us.

Taking these steps allows us to achieve better peace of mind. We will end up at either acceptance of the situation and/or forgiveness of the person. This does not mean there will not be consequences, depending on the situation. It does mean we move forward. We're all human, we all make mistakes...and we all need forgiveness.

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