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AS WE LIVE AND WORK



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Making Mistakes Pay Off

"There is a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in."
Leonard Cohen, Folk Singer

As the end of the year approaches, most of us tally up our gains and losses -- what we've accomplished and what we've let slip through our fingers. And for many conscientious people, the mistakes we've made seem to take on a disproportionate weight.

The fact is, mistakes are inevitable threads woven into the fabric of our lives. No one escapes this reality, no matter how smart, powerful or connected they are, how well they plan, or how cautious they act. History is replete with "experts" who wound up with egg on their faces after strong pronouncements like: "You ain't going nowhere son. You ought to go back to driving a truck." (the manager of the Grand Ole Opry's assessment of Elvis Presley)

Some mistakes transcend the boundaries of moral or ethical values, and leave a wasteland in their path. But other mistakes provide magnificent portals of discovery, yielding unique opportunities to learn and to grow. In fact, many discoveries like the ubiquitous Post-It Notes are byproducts of mistakes that were converted into revolutionary products.

What we have observed is that there's a wide range of reactions to how people manage their mistakes. Some cave in over minor errors. They tend to be perfectionists who have difficulty tolerating their limitations. Others remain glued to their errors, never liberating themselves from the heavy burden of regret, shame, and guilt, and clearly limiting their forward progress. Some fail to take personal responsibility for their errors. They are like the poor dancers who blame the floor for their awkwardness. And some have such remarkable self confidence, perspective, positive attitude, sense of humor, hunger to improve, and recovery power, that they convert their mistakes into a special bonus.

A successful entrepreneur recalled, as a young student, how one mistake changed his life--for the better. Before handing in a Latin exam, his teacher walked by his desk and noted that the student's careless erasures made his work look sloppy. In a stern voice, the teacher said, "Keep in mind, a messy paper means a messy mind. Those words became the entrepreneur's mantra. From that day on, he made sure his appearance and his work had a crispness and clarity. He took extra care to review his work and always put his best foot forward.

But there's a paradox that every successful person appreciates. To be successful, one needs to make good decisions. To make good decisions, one needs to get good experience. And to get good experience, one needs to make bad decisions. And lots of mistakes.

Don't beat yourself up over relatively small mistakes. Think of mistakes as an investment or "tuition" along the learning curve. And consider your slip-ups as conduits to new ideas, pathways, and solutions to sticky problems.

In your business, create a culture in which it is okay to make a mistake but not okay to make the same mistake twice. Learn how to fix mistakes quickly before they become serious problems.

Some of the best advice about fessing up to our blunders appears in Harold Kushner's book "How Good Do We Have to Be?": "Accept failure without being paralyzed and reach for forgiveness without excusing your own sense of responsibility."

May the New Year be filled with lots of wins and productive mistakes.

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