TALK SUMMARY | MARK GRABAN

The Mistakes That Make Us

Learning from mistakes as individuals and as organizations

> When mistakes get **punished**, they get **hidden**. When they get hidden, they get **repeated**.

On my podcast, *My Favorite Mistake*, I ask every guest the same question: what's your favorite mistake? Not your biggest. A favorite mistake is one that stuck with you because it led to learning, because you learned not to repeat it, or because something unexpectedly good came out of it.

When I polled my LinkedIn followers (not a scientific sample), 87% disagreed that successful people make fewer mistakes. Nearly half said successful people make *more* mistakes, and learn more. If we recognize that as individuals, why do so many organizations still punish people for mistakes?

Four moments that decide whether an organization learns

A
Admit
Leaders go first, so admitting a mistake becomes normal instead of risky.

R
Respond
Kind and constructive, not punitive. Kind is different from nice.

R
Reflect
Look at what happened and why, focusing on the system instead of blame.

P
Prevent
Mistake-proof the process instead of posting another warning sign.

Punitive, nice, or kind?

Punitive
Blame and punishment. People learn to hide the next mistake.

Nice
"Don't feel bad; it's not your fault." Better than punishment, but nothing gets fixed.

Kind
Focused on what will help the person learn, grow, and improve (Karyn Ross's definition), and on preventing the next one.

When a colleague accidentally ended a webinar we were hosting by starting another meeting on our shared Zoom account, the lesson wasn't "be more careful." We asked what happened, not who did it. Ask "How are you feeling?" before you jump into the five whys. And small mistakes only prevent big mistakes if you take the right action: we'd had a smaller warning sign months earlier, and our countermeasure (just avoid joining live) didn't fix the real risk, the shared account.

Same lesson, half a world apart

In 1966, new Toyota hire Isao Yoshino loaded the wrong solvent in a paint shop, and 100 cars needed rework. "Nobody ever blamed me," he said. His leaders told him it was their mistake for not giving him detailed instructions, and focused on stopping it from happening again. Twenty years later in Kentucky, David Meier put the wrong chemical into a bumper molding machine: an $8.3 million loss. Same response: why did the process allow it? Meier says it took him a couple of years to clear his brain of the impulse to blame the worker.

> *It's a leader's responsibility to create a system in which people can be successful.*
>
> Darril Wilburn, former Toyota leader

"Human error" is not a root cause

If that's your conclusion, keep asking why. Why was it so easy for a person to make that mistake? Greg Jacobson, KaiNexus CEO and an emergency physician, points to the belief that about 85% of errors come from inadequate processes, and only 15% are true human error. Mistake-proof the process. Call it mistake-proofing or error-proofing, not "idiot-proofing." And when you discover a new failure mode, turn it into a new line on the checklist.

Make it safe to speak up

As a resident, anesthesiologist David Mayer watched a surgeon operate on the wrong side of a patient, then tell the patient they got "two surgeries for the price of one." The hierarchy kept him quiet. That mistake drove his career in patient safety. You can't just tell people they should feel safe, any more than an "open door policy" works if the first person who walked in got yelled at. At Garrison Brothers distillery, people sign their name on the wall where a mistake happened, and founder Dan Garrison didn't fire master distiller Donnis Todd for dumping thousands of dollars of over-aged bourbon. As Donnis put it, Dan has always given him the time to learn from his mistakes.

Reflect, but don't agonize

Former NFL cornerback Lenny Walls learned to have a short memory on the field, and to reflect on the sideline, at halftime, and in practice. Find the right time to stop and learn. These questions, from the team at Value Capture, help:

1. What decision did I make?
2. What did I expect to happen?
3. What actually happened?
4. What did I learn from the gap?
5. What would I do differently?
6. What would I expect to happen?

Questions to take back to your team

- When someone tells me about a mistake, is my first response punitive, nice, or kind?
- Where are we still writing "human error" as the root cause?
- When did I last admit a mistake of my own, out loud?

Go further

- *The Mistakes That Make Us: Cultivating a Culture of Learning and Innovation*. Free preview: mistakesbook.com/chapter
- Free guide, *Accountability Without Blame*: markgraban.com/accountability-without-blame
- My Favorite Mistake podcast: mistakespodcast.com
- All links from this talk: markgraban.com/talk-resources/learning-from-mistakes