

Use Your People's Mistakes as a Training Opportunity

When somebody makes a mistake you have a choice to make about how you react. You can go after them in an angry fashion or use the mistake as a training lesson. If you give in to your emotions and do the former, you are missing a huge opportunity to turn a negative issue into a positive learning event.

I heard a story about a mid-level executive at IBM who made a mistake that cost the corporation \$20 million. He was hauled up in front of the CEO and started the conversation by saying, "I know I made a stupid mistake, and I deserve to get fired". The CEO looked back at him evenly and said: "Why would I fire you when I've just spent \$20 million training you? No, you're here so we can both learn from this and get the maximum benefit".

Obviously IBM felt that the manager had potential, but do you have the wisdom and maturity to make lemonade out of lemons in this way? It isn't that difficult, but there are three rules you need to follow if you are to do this successfully.

1. **Sleep on it.** Don't react immediately, but give your anger a chance to subside. I once had a VP who was prone to attack people aggressively, creating a toxic atmosphere. The advice I gave him was "never react the same day...things almost always look different in the morning, and if they don't you haven't lost anything".
2. **Eliminate Anger.** Make the sure that the meeting you have is conducted without anger or recrimination. If you force the employee into a defensive posture you create fear and, while that may be very satisfying, fear has a paralyzing effect that gets in the way of learning.
3. **Look Forward.** Choose your words very carefully and reflect on *why* not *what*. You both know what happened, and the learning opportunity and the focus of the meeting should be on identifying why it happened and what the learning points are.

The trick here is to use the questioning method. Instead of attacking, ask the employee to tell you why they made the mistake, and to make clear that we are here together in a collaborative effort to learn what we can from what happened.

Here's a story from my past about how not to do it. One of my first jobs was in a bank and I was supposed to send out a regular transfer to a customer on vacation overseas. For whatever mysterious reason I didn't do it on time, and when the customer got back there was hell to pay. Instead of taking the blame and talking to me about the why, the Manager hauled me on the carpet in front of the customer and belittled me. We never did have the conversation about why, and all that happened was that I lost respect for the Manager.

He missed a big opportunity, and ten years later I was senior to him. There is huge upside potential in the approach I am laying out here, and I urge you to adopt it whenever possible in your business.