

The right to commit errors but not faults

15.10.2019

Have you ever discussed life with American business people? You will find they speak with pride of mistakes they have made, setbacks that have experienced and overcome. In contrast with our European thinking, failure is perceived as positive, constructive, stimulating and necessary. Nothing is finer than being able to pick yourself up after a setback, learn from your mistakes, try again and go on to make a success of things. This gives success a very special appeal and enhances its value.

In addition, it develops confidence and strength of character, not only in the individual but in society generally.

In this article, I want to draw your attention to two points:

1. The difference between errors and deliberate faults
2. The importance of analysis, reflection (self-reflection) and learning together (the notion of “organizational learning”).

Firstly, according to Wikipedia, for educational theorists making mistakes is normal: errors have to be accepted. According to this theory, people of good faith who want to learn and/or experiment should not be automatically punished for the mistakes they make when acting with good intentions.

For teachers and educators, the fact that learners (pupils, interns etc.) make mistakes is a normal part of the learning process. The learner learns and makes progress by a process of trial and error. It is up to teachers and their pupils to make the best of this, to draw the right conclusions from the mistakes made. Improved understanding and fewer mistakes mark the road to success, encouraged by recognition on the part of teachers and learners’ satisfaction in their achievements.

Therefore, positive application of the right to make mistakes:

- is not intended to diminish the learner’s sense of responsibility,
- is intended to free the learner from what could be a paralysing feeling of guilt,
- is a counter to the illusion of utopian perfectionism: no one is capable of acting perfectly at all times and in all places,
- relieves the unreasonable social pressure that demands ever better performance.

The difference between errors and deliberate faults

A **fault** (from the Latin “fallere”, meaning to deceive, to dupe, to abuse, to break a promise), is failure to comply with a rule or norm, whereas an **error** (from the Latin “error”, meaning to wander, take a wrong route) is an honest mistake or misjudgement.

To commit an error is to make a mistake, but without any intention of doing so and without being negligent. Error is involuntary or the result of ignorance (a temporary lack of knowledge). We say that to err is human precisely because no one is perfect.

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“An error doesn’t become a mistake until you refuse to correct it”. **John Fitzgerald Kennedy**

Where a fault is concerned, as suggested by its etymology, we perceive an intention to break a rule or deceive, resulting in a deliberate mistake which may have harmful consequences. A deliberate fault therefore has a moral connotation and implies that the perpetrator bears the responsibility for it.

It is therefore important, within companies and organizations, to have rules (and indeed processes and procedures) that are clear, universally known, carefully considered and monitored. To err is human, yes, but negligence is not acceptable.

One of the best examples is the aviation industry. Millions of people catch a plane every day, but the accident rate is minuscule. I think I am right in saying that the safety level is around 99.999985%. Even an experienced long-haul airline pilot with more than 5,000 flying hours under his belt will always go scrupulously through his checklist before a flight. If he failed to do so, he would be guilty of negligence and so of committing a fault!

The same is true for doctors, surgeons and, closer to home, all of us at work or when we are driving a car: if I look at my mobile phone while behind the wheel, I am committing a fault, not making an error. If I fail to comply with the safety rules in the production facility or warehouse, that’s a fault, not an error.

On the contrary, if I take an initiative, wanting to do the right thing, but fail to take into account a factor which later will prove to be important, that is an error, not a fault, because I was ignorant of the fact... So I need to learn from my mistakes, and that is a crucial point for enterprises and organizations.

Organizational learning

In 1977, Chris Argyris¹ set out the foundational principles of the “learning organization”. He highlighted what he called “learning loops” (single and double). As far back as 1950, the statistician William Edwards Deming (1900-1993) had introduced the celebrated PDCA (plan-do-check-act) wheel.

These principles based on wheels and loops emphasize the importance of systematic and systemic reflection on the things we do.

For instance, whenever an error is committed, it is essential that we systematically consider the causes and reasons that have led to it. This can be done as part of an individual’s self-reflection, in a planned debriefing or in a monthly feedback session. The important thing is to do it, then learn from the experience.

This will reinforce your existing skills, boost your confidence and intuition, and, if you share it with others, strengthen both them and your institution/organization.

Systemic reflection is in fact very valuable. Think of the other players who may be able to profit from what you have learned, and of the processes and activities that might be affected, and give others the benefit of your experience.

¹ 1923-2013, American university teacher and researcher in the social sciences, exponent of organizational theory, professor at Yale and Harvard, mentor of Peter Senge (The Fifth Discipline), known for his learning theories and contributions to the theory of tacit knowledge).

This systematic/systemic approach will contribute to the development of your institution or company as a learning organization, laying the foundations for innovation, creativity and initiative.

By giving people the right to make honest errors (but not to commit faults), you will provide a sense of security and create the climate necessary for facing present and future challenges.

I hope you will make mistakes and learn from them, for the benefit of others and your organization.

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