

Simon says: It's safe to make (and learn from) mistakes

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Remember the game "Simon Says"? You take action only when the leader starts a command such as "sit down" or "stand up" with "Simon says."

It's a great way to tune up your listening skills, get everyone laughing and teach them a valuable lesson about making mistakes. We all make mistakes, but as embarrassing as they might be, they're integral to learning and growing in every part of the business world.

Smart leaders know that mistakes are necessary and useful. When a junior executive lost \$10 million for IBM on a risky venture, Tom Watson Jr. rejected his offer to resign. "You can't be serious," said IBM's head. "We've just spent \$10 million educating you!" But unlike trial and error, some mistakes indicate bigger problems.

Jim works for Bob, who is a direct report to the CEO. Jim often was late for meetings, but Bob didn't like confrontation. He would make sarcastic comments, but never talked to Jim about it directly. One day, Bob and Jim had an 8 a.m. meeting with the CEO. Jim walked in at 8:15 a.m., putting his career and Bob's reputation as a leader in jeopardy.

The first few times Jim walked in late to a meeting, it could be called a mistake. The first few times that Bob didn't deal with Jim's tardiness directly could be called mistakes, too. After that, dealing with the problem moves from being a mistake to being a behavioral issue. Behavioral issues have to be dealt with differently, but managers often have trouble distinguishing between the two.

A mistake looks different from ineffective, repetitive behavior. Ideally, when a mistake is made, the person 1) admits it, 2) takes feedback from a colleague or boss, and 3) agrees to make a change. Learning happens quickly, results improve and life is good.

Unfortunately, the person making the mistake often denies it, becomes defensive, assigns blame or launches into justification. These responses, just like the person who is repetitively late, can't be dealt with as a mistake. They have developed into blind-spot behaviors.

Dealing with behavioral issues requires what we call "behavioral interventions," which require a more sophisticated skill set: 1) self-awareness; 2) compassion for yourself and the person exhibiting the behavior; and 3) the ability to speak directly and authentically.

(1) Self-awareness is the ability to listen to what's being said and not said by others and most importantly, to your internal experience of the situation. You can then experience the truth of the situation without judging. To be self-aware:

- Decide up front that you'll hear what's going on with yourself and the other person.
- Don't interrupt unless the other person is rambling or repeating what's already been said.
- Notice any emotional charge in you or the other person.
- Know that any emotional charge you have is about you and your assumptions or interpretations.

(2) Having compassion comes from the knowledge that everyone, including you, has blind spots and ineffective behaviors. Compassion doesn't mean letting someone off the hook. It means holding someone accountable while knowing that everyone blows it sometimes and needs support to get back on track.

The best ways to demonstrate compassion are:

- Recognize that your discomfort is more about you than about what the other person is doing.
- Remember that the other person's actions are most likely a habitual, knee-jerk response and aren't personal.
- Realize that the person behaving badly usually isn't aware of the negative consequences of their behavior. They would probably be shocked and embarrassed if they saw it in someone else.

(3) Speaking directly and authentically is the most powerful and safest tool available in dealing with behavioral issues. It means to say what you're experiencing from your point of view. Imagine the difference between hearing, "As you are talking, several concerns have come up for me," versus "You had better be concerned about the way you're talking."

To speak authentically and directly:

- Say what's true for you and about you without blame, justification or putdown.
- Reveal your own complicity in the behavior up front. This will give you the moral authority to deal with the other's behavior and give the other person a model for the way you'd like them to act.
- Get the other person's permission to have what will surely be a challenging conversation.
- Ask them open questions to make sure they're still hearing what you are saying, such as "Do you know what I mean?" "Is this hard to hear?" "Am I saying this in a way that makes sense to you?"

Dealing with ineffective, blind-spot behaviors is one of the most difficult of all leadership tasks. In a volatile and emotional situation, it's the leader's job to go first and demonstrate the value of being self-aware, having compassion and speaking directly and authentically.

Remember, people always have some awareness that they're doing something that's causing them bad results and personal anguish. They just can't see exactly what it is or what they can do about it. Your willingness to support them in changing their behavior will result in a stronger relationship.

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