advice chief

Don't be skittish about mistakes

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In carrying out duties as a manager or performing a role as a leader, you'll make an occasional mistake. Somewhere, some place, you'll exercise bad judgment and ask yourself afterwards, "What the heck was I thinking?" Or: "How did I not see that coming?" Don't crucify yourself, it happens to all of us. How you view and handle these mistakes is important not only to your own development, but also in how others perceive you.

During these instances, be completely honest with yourself and everyone with whom you associate. Don't try to cover up a mistake, rationalize it, or worse, imply that it might be someone else's fault. Many managers have trouble getting the following two statements out of their mouths: "I made a mistake" and "I'm sorry." It's as though the words are stuck in their throats and can't be expelled. Many feel these kinds of statements are signs of weakness. They are not. They are signs of confidence in your humanity.

There are also managers who have difficulty accepting responsibility for the mistakes of people who report to them. Rather than deal with the scrutiny from upper management, they would rather handle the more complex work themselves. They'll soak up 12- to 16-hour workdays, burning themselves out while everyone else heads home on time without a worry in the world. And the cover-up is quite noticeable when they appear out of breath at staff meetings.

These types of managers may feel they're saving the day but in reality, they're just patching up holes in a tire. Eventually the blowout happens--and probably at the most inconvenient time.

If you find yourself managing like this because you're skittish about mistakes, either by you or your people, it's time to enhance your managerial role by doing these four things:

1) Become a better trainer. Either you or another qualified person must conduct better training to equip your people with the necessary knowledge and skills to accomplish both simple and complex tasks.

2) Provide the proper tools. No matter how well your people are trained, if they don't have the right tools for the right jobs, they become useless. Program and budget for these tools to make your people's capabilities real.

3) Hire quality people. Qualified people with the proper tools are certainly capable of getting complex jobs done, but are they consistently willing? Are they properly motivated with positive attitudes? Do they value the same things as you and your organization? If not, start cycling them out.

4) Develop better internal controls to minimize mistakes and their impact. Let's face it, some functions can't tolerate mistakes. If a potential mistake can cause bodily harm or death, or the substantial loss of something extremely valuable (like money), then procedures must be implemented to prevent these things from happening. Programmed decisions or checklists can save time, reduce risk, help prevent a catastrophe, or even keep people out of jail.

For the most part, though, the majority of decisions and actions by the typical manager are relatively simple and routine. Some degree of flexibility, judgment, and trust are okay, but they are vulnerable to mistakes. People aren't perfect and mistakes happen. And if you're the one who makes the mistake, admit it, correct it, learn from it, and most importantly, don't agonize over it.

Don't be skittish about mistakes --they're often the best opportunities to learn.

~ The End