Forgiving an Employee after a Mistake: A Case Study

A presentation of **Emotions** MATTER

Mistakes, which are inevitable in human life, could lead to initial feelings of embarrassment and shame but when used as a tool for self-reflection, it could turn out to be a wonderful opportunity for learning and growth.

But, in a professional environment, sometimes mistakes can lead to serious repercussions. Yet, we all know that innovation can only be fostered in an environment where making mistakes is considered to be okay. As natural as the process of making mistakes is, we cannot forget that managers and entrepreneurs are humans too and when they feel as though they have to bear the burden of a mistake which was made by someone else, it is likely to ignite unpleasant emotions like annoyance, irritation, anger, frustration in a leader.

Dealing with a mistake using a calm mind is easier said than done yet this is one of the crucial skills that managers and leaders need to develop so as to not demoralize their employees and subordinates after they make mistakes. To understand how managers and entrepreneurs can choose to deal with a mistake productively, we, the team of My Emotions Matter had a conversation with seven Nepali managers. Hopefully, the experiences of these managers act as valuable reference points for other managers and leaders and employees too, who often make mistakes as well as deal with mistakes in the process of working for a greater goal.

'Prevention is better than cure', is a saying which holds true not only for diseases but also for blunders that happen in organizations with external stakeholders. In the case of organizations too, it is more important to prevent a blunder from occurring than investing time in finding ways to minimize loss once it is made. When mistakes are made internally and are only going to affect the internal stakeholders of the organization, risk-taking can be encouraged fully and freely.

However, in the case of high-pressure environments where mistakes could affect the external stakeholders as well, managers need to be careful. Considerations that the managers could make to prevent blunders when working with external stakeholders are:

TAKING CALCULATED RISKS:

While risk-taking is considered to be beneficial for fostering innovation in any organization, there are a few things that supervisors might have to be aware of while providing full autonomy to their subordinates to take on creative projects.

As stated by Mr. Harshwardhan Vira Shahani, CEO of V-Chitra Nepal, which is an advertising agency, "The supervisors need to have a proper understanding of the abilities of their subordinates and then delegate work to them accordingly. Supervision, whether overt or covert, is absolutely important to avoid major blunders. This becomes even more crucial when we produce adverts for our external clients. If supervisors delegate responsibility to their subordinates in a way that cannot be handled properly by the subordinates, then the chances of errors definitely increase. And when working in a sector like an advertising agency, where our clients put full trust in us we have to be extremely careful when working."

Mr. Harshwardhan added saying, "In order to foster innovation, I have developed a simple management style. While delegating work to any of my subordinates, I clearly state the deliverables I expect and the deadline by which the work needs to be completed. I have developed a system in place and for subordinates who like following the system they can do so and for employees who want to develop their own system, they are free to do so. The two things they will have to take care of is — providing good quality deliverables right on time! They can choose to be as creative as possible in the process of getting the work done."

In the case of high-pressure industries where mistakes could lead to large consequences for external stakeholders, it is important that risk-taking is fostered but in a calculated manner, and supervisors constantly should be present for support when delegating work to new subordinates which have just started afresh. This could help in the growth of the employees while ensuring that errors are minimized.

The key to taking well-calculated risks is to become aware of the strengths and weaknesses that one one's subordinates have. Such awareness of skills helps a supervisor assess and understand what kind of projects can be delegated to subordinates and what kind of projects would require personal involvement.

FACING THE FEAR OF MISTAKES:

A Ted Talk given by Sian Leah Beilock on 'Why people choke under pressure and how to avoid it', the speaker talks about the enormous amounts of stress that people go through when put under pressure. The talk makes it evident as to how when working under enormous pressure, people can underperform as compared to their abilities. This often leads to people making more mistakes when working in a high-stress pressurizing environment.

As Sian Leah Beilock states, during instances when people feel that a task is too important and they are being evaluated constantly, people can become so conscious about everything, that their chances of messing up increases.

Niharika Mainali, Executive Director at Changing Stories Nepal, has been leading a team of young people in her NGO for education of young children since quite some time. She has faced situations where her subordinates have been terrified of making mistakes. Upon having a conversation with her, she stated, "I have observed that employees feel nervous while leading projects due to two reasons: one they undermine themselves and second they feel that the project is beyond their capability."

Ms. Mainali also shared her way of dealing with such a situation. She is of the opinion that it is important to have conversations with employees when they are feeling nervous about a project.

She said, "I personally sit for a reflection meeting with my subordinates when such a situation comes up. The reflection we have helps us understand where the problem lies and then we tackle the problem area together. I would rather invest in training my sub-ordinate for a few hours rather than having to spend time rectifying the mistake once it's made. "
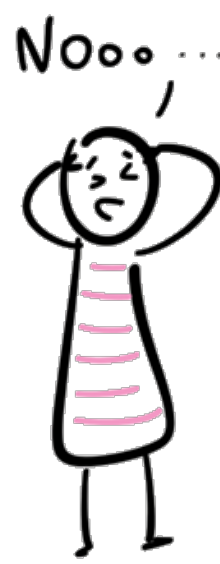
She added saying, "I however ensure that I am only guiding my subordinate when such a situation comes up and not actually completely doing the work on behalf of them. I am of the belief that it is important to give subordinates that push so they learn. Spoon-feeding every time can be fatal to both the employee's growth and the organization culture."

The example shared by Ms. Mainali shows how having conversations with subordinates can make subordinates feel that they are being supported in the process of doing work rather than igniting feelings in subordinates where they would feel judged. When subordinates feel less judged and more supported in the process of doing work, the pressure eases off thus reducing the chances of errors.

From what Ms. Mainali shared, one important lesson that can be learned is that it is important for a leader to be aware of the emotional states of his/her subordinates. Through emotional awareness, the manager can figure out whether the subordinate is anxious to take the project forward because of fear of making a mistake or the subordinate is feeling insecure because of lack of skills in himself/herself.

When the subordinate lacks skill or experience to tackle the project single-handedly, it is important for the supervisor to guide the subordinate and supervise his/her work regularly. However, if the subordinate is anxious of making a mistake despite having all the skills, having a reflective conversation and helping the subordinate manage such feelings through conversations can be helpful.

Such conversations can also help the employee feel supported. It is important for an employee to feel supported when doing their work rather than feeling judged because fear judgments have the potential to increase pressure rather than helping employees feel at ease.

MISTAKES SHALL BE MADE!

After the series of interviews that we did for this topic, we realized that the first step in the process of dealing with a mistake is apologizing in the right manner. We had a conversation with Mr. Aashish Adhikari, the Founder of RedMud Coffee and Owner and Founder of Dropout Creation, and he shared his experiences of working in the food and hospitality industry.

He cited a real example of his own organization. There was this case when one of his freshly joined employees was serving a customer and the customer had a complaint against something which was served. In the process of attending the customer complaint, the freshman ended up getting offended and he demonstrated a demeanor which was considered to be rude by the customer.

The customer got so triggered by the employee's rude behavior that he wrote a long negative review about the café on their social media page. When this review came to Mr. Adhikari's notice, he demanded an in-depth analysis to know where and how things went wrong. Mr. Adhikari also ensured that he personally apologized to the customer as well as demanded the particular freshman employee send an apology to the customer.

Here, the major point made by Mr. Adhikari was that you shouldn't feel embarrassed to say sorry after making a mistake. Mr. Adhikari stated, "There have been a few cases of service failure where I intervened and personally apologized to my customers. This has two major benefits — one it helps the customer feel that the mistake has been acknowledged and second, your subordinates understand that it is okay to make mistakes but apologizing after a mistake is important."

While running a business like that of a café, you have to ensure that your customers leave the place satisfied. Unsatisfied customers could lead to a lot of financial costs for the organization. Having said that, it is unrealistic to expect that mistakes won't happen especially in a business like that of a restaurant.

So, then the only way to maintain the brand reputation of a service organization despite making a mistake is to embrace the mistake. As Mr. Ashish Adhikari stated, "It is important to be able to say sorry after making a mistake."

An article by the Harvard Business Review titled, "When Should a Leader Apologize - and When Not?" has stated that one generic principle for an apology by leaders is that 'Leaders will apologize when they calculate that staying silent threatens a current and future relationship between them and one or more key stakeholders' (Kellerman, 2006).

An apology can help the affected/hurt party understand that their emotions are valid and the wrongdoing has been acknowledged which can save a relationship. It is important for organizations to help their employees become comfortable with accepting and apologizing for mistakes if they are made. Sometimes, employees can struggle with saying sorry, that too, immediately after a conflict.

As one of the articles in Harvard Business Review points out, people can often struggle with saying sorry because they consider the losses to be much greater than the gains of making a mistake. As a result of this, the tendency to hide mistakes or do things that are unproductive after making a mistake can persist amplifying the consequences of the mistake (Gallo, 2010).

This could also be the reason why so many frontline employees also get defensive when receiving customer complaints. Hence, it is important to train employees on self-awareness so that they can notice when they become defensive. Once employees become aware of when and how they get defensive, they can take the appropriate actions to deal with such emotions in a productive way so that a temporary emotion doesn't cause a long term-loss.

LEADER ERRORS OCCUR TOO!

While states of fatigue and emotions of anger are generally experienced by every leader during their course of work, such states and emotions can cause a higher leader error (Hunter et al., 2011). A leader can make errors too during the course of work, and one such highly impacting leader errors is making mistakes when managing people. When having a conversation with Mr. Sudeep Bhatta, Operations Coordinator at Jivanas, he talked about a leader error that he had made by lashing out at his subordinate.

Jivanas is a Nepalese footwear company and a social enterprise and most of the workers in Jivanas are people who come from underprivileged backgrounds and are not well educated. As a result of this, a few workers don't understand the importance of a hierarchical structure. One such subordinate was having a difficult time understanding why couldn't her supervisor do the work that was delegated to her. She demanded a justification from Sudeep and he tried explaining to her calmly that the reason why her supervisor couldn't do the work which was delegated to her was that he had other things to take care of. Despite having explained this to her, she still wasn't convinced why couldn't her supervisor do the work instead of delegating it to her. And in the process of explaining and re-explaining her as to why it is important for her to do the work, Sudeep ended up lashing out at the subordinate. He later came to find out that his subordinate didn't even have her lunch which made Sudeep realize that his lashing out had increased the tension in the room and he regretted lashing out on her.

So, in Sudeep's case lashing out only increased frustrations in his office environment. Neither did it help bring a mindset change in the subordinate nor did it help him deal with the situation productively. This instant lashing out was partially caused by the stress and anger Sudeep was already going through before the situation occurred. And as stated above, leader errors can increase in situations when leaders are feeling fatigued or angry. Hence, taking a pause to become aware of one's emotional state of mind is important so that leaders can have calm communication with their subordinates rather than projecting their emotions onto them.

WHEN NOT TO WRITE AN EMAIL!

Especially in a world where written communication and the Internet have made it easier for people to lash out immediately, it is important to avoid all sorts of written communication after a mistake has been made.

We interviewed Mr. Manohar Adhikari, Founder and Chief Technological Officer (CTO) at Foodmandu, which is an online food delivery business to know how he deals with situations when his employees make mistakes.

As stated by Mr. Manohar Adhikari, "Right after an employee makes a mistake, I try to avoid dealing with the situation by using written communication like text or email. I make it a point to contact the required subordinate only through oral communication and among modes of oral communication too, I prefer having a face-to-face conversation. I think it helps me assess the emotional levels of the other person and also allows me to explain my perspective about the mistake in a clearer way."

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Manohar believes that when you choose to deal with such a sensitive situation through text or an email, there is a likelihood that misunderstanding would increase further worsening the situation. The reason being that through such text conversations you are not able to assess other people's emotional levels and it becomes difficult to understand where the other person is coming from.

As found by one of the studies, it is difficult to convey emotions and tone through electronic email because of which an online message can be interpreted differently by the sender and receiver (Kruger et al., 2005). So, when it comes to dealing with a sensitive situation like when blunders have been made, it is important to communicate through verbal modes because as the same study had found emotions were more accurately understood when the message of the email was rather communicated through a call.
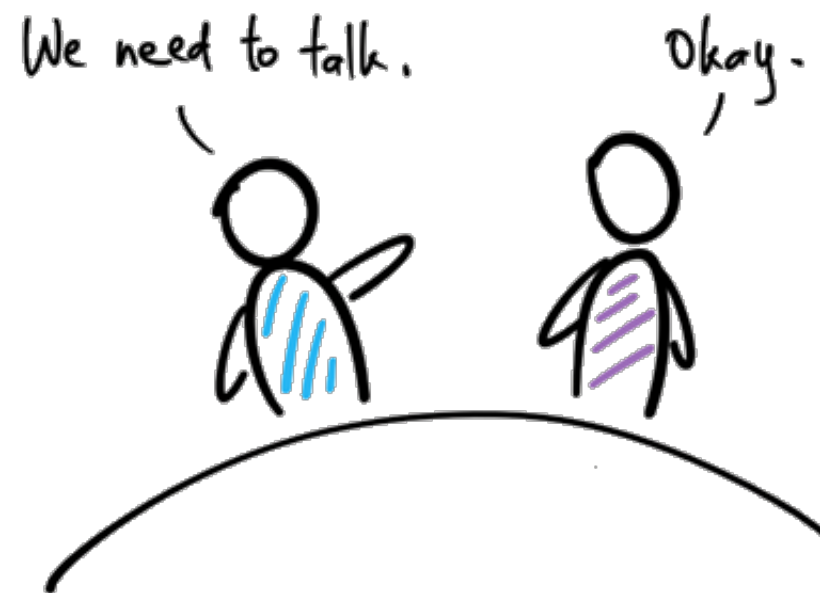
Key Take-Away:
Hence, one simple thing that one can do while dealing with a situation when an error has ben made in an organization is to remember that oral communication shall be the most effective way to go about it, preferably a face to face conversation and if not that then at least a phone call.

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CONFRONTING IN THE RIGHT WAY!

When we say that it is important to refrain from having written communication in a situation where blunders have been made, we do not want to promote a culture where confrontation does not happen. After mistakes have happened, confrontation is crucial. If the confrontation is not made in the right time and manner, it could lead to the birth of the elephant in the room. Grudges can be developed in the organization which can turn out to be unhealthy in the long run ultimately increasing the employee turnover rates in organizations.

For instance, Ms. Niharika Mainali, the female leader from Changing Stories, stated that when she was working as a subordinate in one of her previous organizations, rather than having direct confrontation on mistakes, her supervisors used to avoid the matter. This often led to the creating an environment of tension inside the office. Though it was not seen in the exterior of the organization clearly, it was something that was viscerally felt. Working in such an environment led Ms. Mainali to experience anxiety and frustration very often until she decided to leave the organization.

This personal experience shared by Ms. Mainali shows how having direct confrontation after a mistake has been made is so important in order to keep the organizational environment healthy.

We had a conversation with Mr. Radip Tandukar, who has been leading a team of young members at Youth Thinkers Society Nepal. Mr. Radip agreed that having confrontation is important after a mistake is made in the organization and Radip also believes that there is a right way to confront.

He stated, "When confronting there are two things that I try to keep in mind. One is that I acknowledge the positives and the good work done by the person rather than just focusing on the mistakes s/he made. I always highlight positive things that the person did in the past projects and then slowly move towards the current mistake the person conducted. The reason being that, when I keep in mind the positives done by the person and express those things well, it makes them feel good, and the chances of them taking the critical feedback in a genuine way of self-improvement increases. If I only focus on the negative and highlight only the mistake done by the team member, the chances of the team member feeling demoralized is going to be higher and that is what we don't want. "
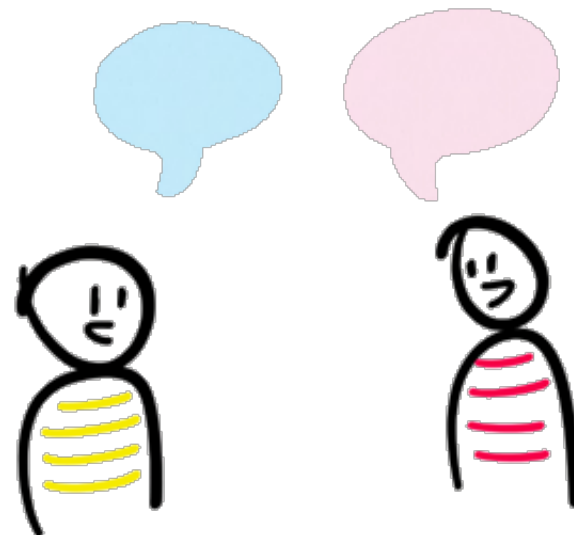
He added saying, "The other thing that I remain mindful about when confronting a mistake by an employee is I try not to question their values or intentions. I know blaming their value system will leave an indelible mark on their heart and it would not only demoralize them but they will never be able to forgive me for doing so. Hence, the assumption with which any confrontation should be done is that the person's intentions were not wrong."

However, one thing which we need to remember clearly is that there is a difference between a mistake and misconduct. Since, the thin line between mistake and misconduct is often vague and unclear, an example of a real-life incident has been provided below to help you visualize and understand the differences between the two.

Mr. Aashish Adhikari from RedMud gave an example of two young employees in his organization. These two young employees were in a relationship. This was considered to be okay as there was no such rule in the organization which put a red flag on office romance. However, when being in a romantic relationship within a professional context, one has to be very careful about not crossing boundaries. Mr. Adhikari had given a few warnings to this young couple asking them to stay within boundaries yet they crossed it. There was an unpleasant scene that was created because of this. During this situation, Mr. Adhikari had to intervene and he called a meeting whereby all of the employees of his organization were present and he called out on the misconduct done by this young couple. The reason why Mr. Aashish called out a meeting in everyone's presence was because he wanted other team members to be clear about what is and is not acceptable.

Mr. Adhikari is of the belief that when employees do not stay within their boundaries despite getting warnings time and again, their mistake starts to become misconduct. And it is important to bring light to such misconduct happening in an organization. Once the supervisors start sweeping misconducts under the rug, it can lead to a situation of indiscipline and ruckus in an organization.

Here, the mistake became misconduct because the boundaries were crossed despite having gotten warnings. The place of intention was unsafe here and hence the action was classified a misconduct.

Misconducts are those situations when the place of intention is not appropriate and safe. For instance, one of the sensitive misconducts that often happens in the workplace is that of sexual harassment. Here, sexual harassment cannot be considered a mistake but it shall be considered misconduct, because the intention in such cases is an unsafe one.

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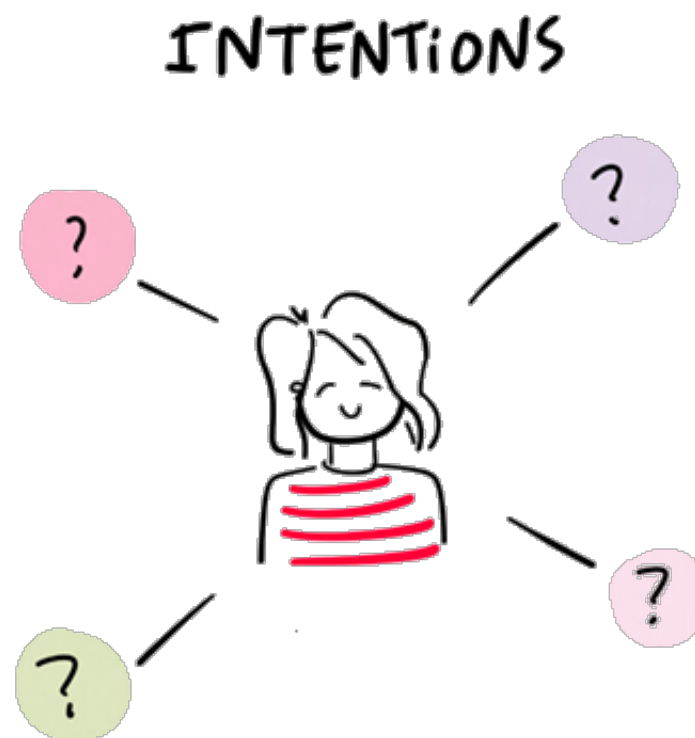
Key Take-Away:

Mistakes and misconduct are two different things. The distinguishing factor between both these things is the intention behind the action. In case of mistakes, the place of intention is genuine whereas in case of misconduct, the intention is unsafe and can affect wellbeing of other members.

While it is important to confront privately, when mistakes happen. It is important to be vocal about misconducts, even in the presence of all the team members. Being vocal about misconducts makes it clear to all the members as to what is acceptable and what is not.

While confronting privately about genuine mistakes, managers should be mindful about not making the confrontation entirely negative and not questioning the employee's morals and values. That way the confrontation can be made productive instead of making it demoralizing.

MOVE ON!

After conducting various in-depth interviews on this topic, one thing that can be learned is that successful leaders don't dwell on mistakes and blunders of their employees but they learn from it and move on!

Only when you build a culture where you make mistakes, learn from it and move on, will your employees feel like they belong to a safe space where they can learn and grow all while experimenting new things and exploring new ideas.

Talking about mistakes at work, she stated, "It is important to move on quickly after acknowledging that an error has occurred rather than dwelling on it. I make mistakes and so can the team." She stated, "The organizational culture I am aspiring to build is one of learning and accountability. I want my team members to understand that we are all learning together and in this process, we are all bound to commit mistakes. The key is to have an attitude of ownership and quickly move to damage control. It is good to normalize this process. I don't want my team to feel embarrassed about a misstep but want them to be comfortable with making mistakes and feel excited about taking on new projects and assignments."

She also added "There was this instance I remember, wherein I was giving critical feedback to one of my team members on a crucial ongoing project and in the heat of the moment I made a personal remark. I knew instantly that I hurt my team member's feelings and apologized immediately. When I am reviewing projects or tasks, I am cautious about my inputs and try to take the focus away from the person to their actions and consequences, a valuable lesson I learned while managing the cross-country team. This helps in reducing embarrassment especially when the other person is already feeling guilty.

This is something I have noticed that happens in the team of 'My Emotions Matter' as well. We are all humans and whenever any of the team members make mistakes, our supervisors call out on the mistakes that have been made. However, while doing so, our supervisors ensure that no remarks are taken in a way as to increase feelings of humiliation and self-doubt. For instance, in one of the weekly meetings that we had recently, one of our team members was being given critical feedback for some pitfalls that had occurred in one of her sessions. However, to ensure that such feedback doesn't demoralize the team member completely, our supervisor at the end of the meeting ensured to share his kind words with us whereby he let all the team members know that "None of the critical feedback that we received should lead us in a chain of self-doubt as our team leaders know that we are better than we give ourselves credit for."
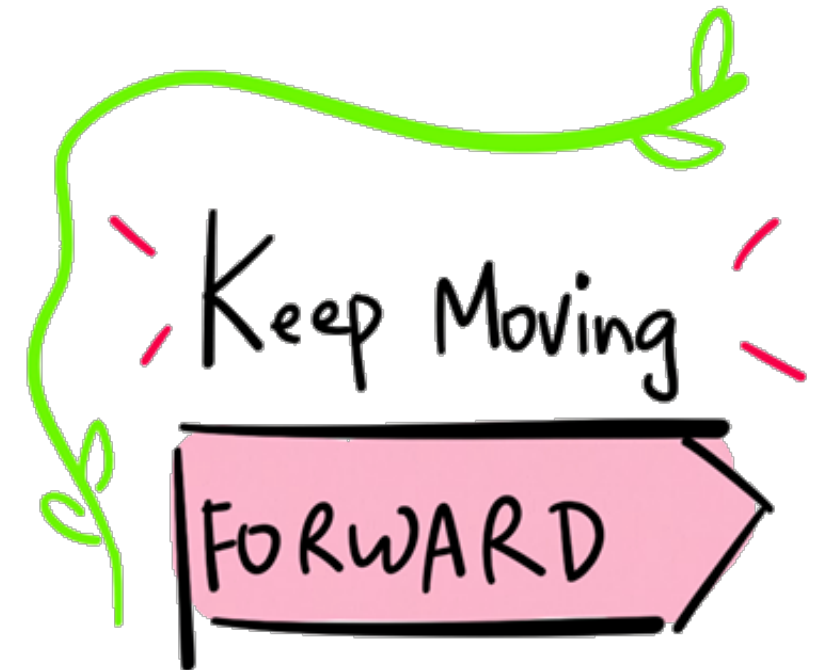
'FORGIVE AND REMEMBER' OR 'FORGIVE AND FORGET':

There are two approaches that you could follow when it comes to moving on after a mistake has been made. One approach could be to forgive the employee or the sub-ordinate who made the mistake and try to forget the whole incident and the other approach could be to forgive the person who made the mistake but to remember the mistake.

We talked to Mr. Sudeep Bhatta from Jivanas, about his preferred approach to follow when his employees make mistakes. As stated by Mr. Sudeep Bhatta, "I believe in forgiving and forgetting because I believe that if I do not forget the incident, I am allowing the incident to play in my subconscious. And if any inconvenience occurs with this same employee again, it is more than likely that I will refer to this past mistake. When I don't allow myself to forgive the overall incident, I am just going to bottle it up within me and once other things start to add on it, all the bottled up emotions are going to be released at one shot and that can be hazardous to my emotional health as well as it will have the possibility of spoiling my relationships with the employees in future too."

So, Mr. Sudeep believes that forgiving and forgetting the incident is healthier because when you forgive and remember things, it shows that you have not completely accepted what happened and this can negatively affect both one's own emotional state and the interpersonal relationship one shares with others.

On the contrary, Ms. Thryza Dow, from Blincventures.com, believes that it is difficult to forget a mistake once it occurred. She holds the opinion that once the organization has faced the consequences of a goof-up then the incident is going to remain with the founder as a valuable lesson. Remembering such incidents actually works in one's favor as you can prevent them from happening again, saving your company's resources and in some cases, reputation too.

She states that "If you remember such instances, you are likely to take active precautionary measures for it to not happen again. So, forgiving and remembering is actually crucial for the health of the organization."

Key Take Away:

It is upon oneself and one's choice on whether one wants to remember or forget after a mistake has been made. The important thing is that once you let go of a mistake, you have to release any negative energy associated with the mistake. This reminds me of one of the quotes shared by Yung Pueblo, the author of the book 'Inward'- "Letting go doesn't mean forgetting, it just means that we stop carrying the energy of the past into the present".

Both Sudeep and Thyrza were of the belief that once you move on, you don't stick with the grudges or mistakes of the past. You let the past mistakes go. That is the crucial component when it comes to forgiving a subordinate or a colleague as well. Carrying around the baggage of past mistakes will lead to the creation of a corporate culture where trust goes missing and thriving in such a culture can be extremely difficult!

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A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

A final note: as I (Mahima Poddar) close out this article, I want to reflect upon a few experiences with making mistakes and being forgiven or forgiving others for the same.

I have come across two kinds of teachers in my life – one that chose to punish me when I made a mistake in the process of learning and one that encouraged me to take risks even though it would mean that I would make mistakes. In the case of teachers that punished me every time I made a mistake, I ended up hating the subject they taught because I always used to fear the punishment that they would give me. Even when I had to drag myself to attend the classes on such subjects, I used to just keep a constant eye on what my fellow classmates were doing and I used to copy every single thing that my classmates did blindly! The only thing I wanted to do was to avoid mistakes and in the process of avoiding mistakes, I often forgot the lessons I was learning.

On the contrary, when it came to teachers that encouraged me to take risks, I think that I always felt freedom in studying the subjects these teachers taught. I was free to experiment with new ideas, share new opinions, and in the process of experimenting, I learned some lessons that will stay with me throughout my life!

And if I ever become a teacher or embark upon the journey of being a leader in my life, I think I would like to be the latter one – I would like to be the leader who encourages team members to take risks even if that would mean making mistakes.

And one astonishing thing I noticed is that I have scored higher grades in subjects where I was allowed to take risks than in subjects where I wasn't allowed to make mistakes. The reason being, preparing for the subject where risk-taking was encouraged was so much fun and less pressurizing than having to study the subject where all I was focused on was minimizing any sorts of errors.

Having said all of this, I do understand that there are higher stakes involved in a corporate organization when making mistakes. In some situations, the stakes might go as high as loss of brand reputation due to blunders.

Hence, I think it is crucial for organizations to draw a thin line between mistakes and blunders. Organizations should be able to communicate with their leaders and subordinates regarding what kind of mistakes are acceptable and what kind of mistakes fall under blunders committed out of sheer negligence. Once this thin line is drawn, organizations can be well-prepared to prevent blunders while encouraging an environment of exploration for their employees.

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My Emotions Matter is a values based education initiative in Kathmandu, Nepal that creates self-reflective learning experiences to help individuals, schools, and organizations identity, understand, and resolve interpersonal relationship problems via Emotional Intelligence.

We believe in a world where people are aware of their thoughts and feelings, make intentional choices, and live a purposeful life that benefits both themselves and others.

Our services include training, consulting, research, as well as coaching services to tackle people-problems via Emotional Intelligence.