

9 Ways To Use Mistakes As Stepping Stones to Success

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The more successful people are, the more mistakes they've made. Errors often yield more valuable results than expected – IF you can discover their lessons and then implement that information appropriately. Just ask the chemist who was trying to cook up a strong glue and thought he'd failed -- the resulting adhesive is used by millions daily on Post-it Notes!

Knowing what to do about, and with, our mistakes is one of the best success tools around. Here are some helpful tips.

1. *Accept the reality that mistakes are part of everyone's life -- even yours.*

You have made, are making, and will always make mistakes. To be perfect and human is a contradiction in terms (sort of like jumbo shrimp and military intelligence!). Make peace with this fact of life, and you're well on your way to great tasting lemonade from those proverbial lemons.

2. *Understand the distinction between everyday small stuff and warning signals.*

Some people lose sight of the fact that little errors (forgetting someone's name, breaking your partner's favorite coffee mug) are just part of life (see above). However, if the same things keep happening -- you always scramble at the last minute to complete a task, your co-workers and family continually complain that communicating with you is difficult -- pay attention. Someone once said that insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results!

3. *Own and accept responsibility for your mistakes.*

It's easy to blame other people, poor procedures, miscommunication, etc. for a failure or disappointing outcome. That only sets you up to repeat the same errors again and again. Go off alone, sit in silence for a while, and ask yourself, "What did I do to contribute to this situation? How can I make it better next time? How did my behavior affect other peoples' actions?" Share your insights with your boss, co-workers, friends,

and family as appropriate. Tell them how you'll change your behavior, or ask for input. ("My inability to get the statistics on time delayed the project for a week. From now on, I plan to allow six weeks instead of three for information gathering. Do you have any other suggestions?")

4. *Find people with whom you can process the situation.*

Seek out honest and trustworthy supporters who will not sugarcoat their feedback or divert you with too much sympathy (a little reassurance and empathy, are, however, always welcome!). Ask for time specifically to discuss your mistakes and how you can learn from them. The process of actually verbalizing our concerns and challenges can often help us solve them. A word of caution, however – be selective about your choice of confidante. Factor in possible political, professional and personal agendas. Two very safe ways of accomplishing this point are with a professional coach or your own personal Success Team.

5. *Expect that you'll make mistakes, no matter how much of an "expert" you are.*

With over twenty-five years of professional experience, I'm usually able to communicate or reach some kind of mutual understanding with almost everyone I encounter. There are, however, those memorable folks who have really tripped me up. From them, I've learned more about myself, in a shorter period of time, than in almost any other situation. Time and distance eventually ease the embarrassment and awkwardness, and the value of the learning far outweighs the temporary discomfort.

6. *Process your mistakes with constructive, self-enhancing self-talk.*

Start by tuning in to how you talk to yourself when things go wrong. Replace that internal self-flagellation ("Damn, what a klutz! It's amazing ALL my dishes aren't broken!") with well-grounded support and encouragement ("OK; I'm trying to do too much too quickly.

Let me just stop and breathe for a minute here and slow down.”) Be sure your language is self-enhancing (“I’m going to allow myself fifteen more minutes to get across town from now on.”) rather than self-defeating (“Late again! I just can’t seem to get anywhere on time!”).

7. *Be aware that mistakes often happen when things are going well.*

We tend to get over-confident or over-anxious when all our hard work starts paying off. The key here is to strive for balance.

Self-confidence is important, combined with a healthy dose of reality, proper perspective and enough concern to maintain motivation and forward momentum. Calling on your support network – your coach, Success Team, etc. – is extremely helpful in keeping things on track.

8. *The bigger the mistake, the more important and valuable are its lessons.* Use the preceding questions as a starting point. As painful as it is to examine a tough situation closely, the information that close scrutiny yields is priceless.

9. *Get into action! Integrate and USE the information you gain immediately in your daily life, activities, and behaviors.*

A colleague once told me: "Information without implementation is useless."

Thinking and/or talking points:

* Describe how a mistake you made during the past year lead you to deeper understanding or greater effectiveness in your work or your life.

* List the three most important lessons you’ve learned from your mistakes.

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