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Celebrate mistakes: Creating a culture of forgiveness

Joel Garfinkle · May 18, 2015 · Leadership · Leadership and Management

Your team is made up of some of the best -- you have seen them in action and you know they're great players. Every day, you see them minimize risk, manage issues and deliver quality work. They almost always execute flawlessly and you trust them to get the job done, praising and motivating them to perform well. Do you trust them enough to let them make mistakes?

There's value to being able to follow a known path and complete the work, but we all know that projects (and lives) rarely follow a script. There are always unknowns and unexpected issues, no matter how well you plan.

Think about these specific questions:

- Do your employees feel confident that they can tackle the day-to-day challenges with creativity and innovation?
- Are they free to try something new, welcome to suggest taking a chance that might deliver faster, cheaper or better results?
- Do they know you'll be there with them, not there against them, if it doesn't work out?

When you encourage healthy risk-taking, you encourage innovative behavior in your team. Employees who know that they'll have your help and support when problems arise feel empowered to integrate changes into new projects and daily operations. Those changes could save time, save money or bring in a big win for the organization -- just the sort of behavior you want to encourage. But does your team know you'll make it a learning opportunity and not a mark of shame if something doesn't work?

Of course we're talking about reasoned risk, with plenty of planning. There are always ways to learn from a thought-out endeavor that failed. Even poorly executed or sloppy work is a teaching opportunity, through one-on-one feedback and coaching. But here's why you might want to consider rewarding those who try and fail in the name of better results:

- Team members feel empowered to make decisions, be creative and move ahead with projects.
- New ideas are generated by those who take risks.
- Employee knowledge is company knowledge -- everyone will benefit from lessons learned.
- Even ideas that fail, if well planned, often have nuggets of value. When the team builds an approach that tweaks the new idea so it will work, everyone wins and everyone feels inspired.

When examining the remains of a failed attempt, don't blame or shame, but stay factual -- there's no use glossing over the fact that someone tried something that didn't work. Don't dwell on the failure itself, or the person -- a little humor here can diffuse the anxiety around a mistake -- instead focus on the positive and what can be learned. Zone in on these questions to ask the team:

- What were the positives to the failed approach?
- What could we do differently to make it work next time?
- Is the benefit of trying this new tactic worth the risks involved? How can we minimize those risks?

Creating a positive environment where people are encouraged to try new things will benefit the company, the team and every individual, even when new attempts are not always successful. By providing the kind of leadership that celebrates mistakes in addition to the successes, you can generate the energy that will foster new ideas and keep employees engaged in delivering great results.

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