10 Mistakes in Dealing with Errors

How the damaging effect of failures comes about

Keywords: error, prevention, criticism, failure, mistake

Subject

It is amazing how often errors are not considered further in operational practice and are consequently repeated. Over time, they may become an integral part of the workflow.

Dealing with errors is sometimes so negligent that the damage caused by the mistakes continues to increase in the process.

Errors happen. This circumstance, but not the errors themselves, must be accepted in order to draw *at least some* benefit from them. Not making the best of errors (i. e. getting the most benefit despite the damage) is often the biggest mistake.

Some errors aren't errors for real

In the »trial-and-error« process, errors are consciously allowed. For example, even if 90 out of 100 akquisition calls do not lead to an order, that is a good success. Also the tyrannosaurus may have had a maximum of 10% hunting yield.

So these are not errors, but "affordable losses" in achieving an overall benefit.

An error here is something that causes th success rate to be lower than it should be.

Mistakes in dealing with errors

The incorrect handling of errors has certain characteristics. The following ten mistakes are the most common.

1) Errors are not prevented

Errors were tolerated because they were not prevented. The same errors occur repeatedly. The reason is often misplaced optimism ("This will definitely not happen again.") or even avoidance of thinking about the case, rather than fear or laziness. Prevention requires understanding the error (i. e. how it came about) (see No. 2 and No. 8).

2) Misunderstanding novelty as an error

Unexpected results of an action often lead us to think that it is flawed. The initially unknown is perceived as a threat. In fact, it can be a discovery that opens up new avenues and opportunities.

3) Under- or overestimate errors

One tends to underestimate one's own errors ("It won't be that bad.") and overestimate those of others (»How could that have happened to you!«). It's helpful to imagine the opposite case: if my mistake had happened to someone else. Or if I had made his mistake.

4) Communicate errors incorrectly

Someone who makes an error sometimes has to tell others about his mishap. But it is important not to exaggerate the mistake, which may cause the other person unnecessary anxiety.

This includes developing and planning the correction of the error before it is reported, at least rudimentary.

Small errors are often communicated widely. That turns a mosquito into an elephant. Confusion arises, which is far more expensive to eliminate than correcting the error and avoiding its repetition.

5) Interpret errors as failures

Anyone who interprets his own errors as his personal failure usually overestimates them (cf. No. 3).

Errors are sometimes projected onto the people who appear to be responsible for them: "You made a mistake. You are a typical underperformer." But there are many causes for mistakes; personal disposition is usually not one of them.

6) Neglect to correct errors

Even known errors are often corrected too late or not at all. This often increases their damaging effect in the course of the process. Wrong behavior (i.e. leading to errors) is practiced because the analysis of the errors has been put aside.

7) Tolerate or hide errors

Mistakes are repressed or even tolerated (both by the causer and by others). Suppression can even mean that an error is not perceived or recognized as such: »That's not an error, just a small inaccuracy.«

Such whitewashing or sweeping under the rug is detrimental as it greatly facilitates the repetition of the errors, and the quality of the work product continues to deteriorate as more and more »inaccuracies« (i.e. mistakes) are tolerated.

8) Don't use errors to improve

To learn from mistakes made. they must first be noticed (see No. 7) and usually also corrected (see No. 6). But often they are not analyzed and understood in the way they came about.

This is often not even enough to prevent errors (see No. 1). The improvement of the processes (dealing with errors, communicating them) is consequently neglected.

9) Repeatedly blame others for making errors

Blaming other people for the errors they made without offering help does not lead to prevention (see No. 1) or improvement (see No. 8).

Sometimes you even accuse the other person of the same mistakes they made over and over again. This often has the purpose of belittling others (cf. No. 5), but it also often happens carelessly or because of one's own uncertainty as to whether preventive measures have already been taken.

10) Allow others to make errors

It happens that someone consciously allows others (also repeatedly) to make mistakes. In particular, this allows him to blame those mis-takes later.

This often is done in order to gain personal advantages, but sometimes also in order to be able to reject applications more easily (e. g.

during salary negotiations in an appraisal interview). Less often it occurs because of the learning effect ("learning from mistakes").

Some relations

The errors shown are interrelated in many ways. One often leads to the other, as the following examples show:

(1) Someone makes a mistake that he should report to his superior. However, since he fears that the latter will look at him as a write-off (see No. 5), or he still accuses him of past mistakes (see No. 9), he does not correct the mistake (see No. 6) and disguises himself him as well as possible (see No. 7).

(2) One's own mistakes are undervalued (see No. 3), i. e. tolerated, and they are neither corrected (see No. 6) nor prevented (see No. 1). There is no improvement (see No. 8).

Summary

Errors will always happen. It is important to limit their damaging effects and, above all, not to increase these effects.

First of all, this means not ignoring mistakes, but correcting them and preventing them (see Nos. 7, 6, 1).

This presupposes that they are understood and properly appreciated (Nos. 2, 3, 5). It is important to ensure correct communication of the errors (Nos. 4, 9).

In addition, the handling of errors themselves must be improved (understanding, process, No. 8) and any kind of misuse must be avoided (No. 10).

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