

Leadership: mistakes, apologies and permission



By [Catherine Milward-Bridges](#)

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While it's prudent to take direction from the experts, it's as important to heed feedback from those at the receiving end of leadership.

Like many, I've had the privilege of working with remarkable leaders, as well as the converse. Granted, there will always be a degree of subjectivity in arriving at either conclusion.

These common statements by many leaders have (sadly) compromised credibility, because they were just not applied: "Please feel free to come and talk to me at any time, I have an open-door policy," or "I'd rather you make a mistake first and apologise, than ask for permission."



Mistakes - scourge or boon?

Daniel Dennette, American cognitive scientist and philosopher once said, "The natural human reaction to making a mistake is embarrassment and anger - we are never angrier than when we are angry at ourselves. One has to work hard to overcome these emotional reactions."

Our intellectual superiority to other species compels us to view mistakes - our own and those of others - with intolerance. This is a surefire way to stifle confidence, creativity and innovation - the very components crucial to propelling any business toward increased market share.

The misconception that intolerance for mistakes will lead to peaked productivity, reduced waste and higher profits is laughable. All that this will produce is a highly-strung workforce who will do/say anything to exonerate themselves when a mistake (inevitably) is made.

Leaders should instil a culture of allowing mistakes, but with these non-negotiable measures in place (starting with their own example):

- be accountable - don't make excuses: own up and take it on the chin
- learn from your mistakes: this could turn it into a refreshing growth experience, if you let it
- remedy what's gone wrong or get appropriate help to do so: don't delay in fixing it
- take preventative action to avoid a repeat: have a fool-proof plan to avert a recurrence.

Apologies

Saying "I'm sorry" is never easy, but it demonstrates maturity, garners respect and admits to inherent imperfection (a 'flaw' we can ALL relate to).

Leaders who are known to acknowledge their wrongs tend to elicit more loyalty from their workforce, than those who pretend to have all their t's crossed and i's dotted. The latter endure far more pressure trying to uphold an image of perfection that we all know doesn't exist - a very lonely place to be.

Permission

Permission has its place and shouldn't be traded for trendy catchphrases that are impractical and confusing.

Asking for permission is a way of acknowledging authority, as well as the need for guidance. In the right context it can provide a healthy balance between leaders and their teams.

So, think carefully about your authenticity the next time you're tempted to say something like, "I'd rather you make a mistake first and apologise, than ask for permission."

ABOUT CATHERINE MILWARD-BRIDGES

Catherine Milward-Bridges is a passionate communication specialist and founder of simplyput.co.za. Catherine guides her clients in taking their engagement efforts from good to great; and helps them optimise social media with strategic know-how.

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