

Make No Mistake? By Leonard Lang, Ph.D.

Ever say the wrong thing to someone? Take the wrong turn going somewhere? Choose the wrong job? Mistakes. We all make them. But who needs them?

Actually, we all do.

We can benefit from making mistakes, and some of us might benefit from making **more** of them **more** often and learning from them.

Of course, **limiting unnecessary and repeated mistakes**, whether through good judgment or good systems, **can be helpful**. **It can even be critical** to our lives as with avoiding mistakes through safety procedures for emergency medical techs or firefighters or pilots and flight attendants.

But make no mistake. That's **not the whole story**.

Take 3M. Known for its innovation, the company fell into financially sluggish times around 2000. To move them ahead aggressively in the marketplace they hired James McNerney. McNerney **tried to squeeze all the excess and errors out of 3M**. He eliminated 8,000 employees and instituted very rigorous efficiency and quality assurance programs, such as Sigma Six. Sigma Six tries to systematize successful processes and programs and eliminate mistakes.

Share prices rose. Spending sank...along with morale and innovation. So when McNerney went on to Boeing, 3M went back to a more typical 3M leader, George Buckley, who rolled back some of the intense focus on efficiency in favor of the old culture that **allowed more freedom and mistakes for the sake of innovation**.

According to Brian Hendo, author of a June, 2007 *Business Week* article on these changes at 3M, Buckley had a different sense of how to balance efficiency and creativity. He quotes Buckley as saying, "Perhaps one of the mistakes that we made as a company--it's one of the dangers of Six Sigma--is that when you **value sameness more than you value creativity**, I think you potentially **undermine the heart and soul of a company** like 3M."

Sounds like Buckley learned from McNerney's mistakes.

I'd argue that the same can be true for the heart and soul of each of us at work. Emphasizing time savings, efficiency, and the ability to reduce mistakes to an absolute minimum are all useful at times but can **easily conflict with our ability to create** as well as learn and often to **enjoy life**.

Think about any time you've really learned something important or made a major change. Has it been through eliminating small mistakes and becoming ever more efficient step by step? Or has it been from taking some bigger risks, including some that left you flat on your face at times? Just like children learning to walk, we need to fall sometimes to succeed. Ideally, the falls are small and frequent so we learn a lot quickly with minimum risk.

Look at **inventors and geniuses**. They don't succeed by making fewer **mistakes** than the rest of us. They make **more**. That's how they learn faster and keep finding new ways to do things.

Instead of only asking how you can save time or avoid mistakes, **try any of these questions** that might lead to more mistakes but can put your mind into a more creative mode and make your job more exciting and meaningful.

- How can I learn more today at even my routine tasks?
- How can I be more inventive?
- How can I contribute more?
- How can I create my ideal job?
- What would make me really happy today in my job?
- What can I do to motivate and energize others at work today?
- How can I do this more playfully?
- How can I challenge myself today?

As Thomas Watson, founder of IBM said, "Would you like me to give you a **formula for success**? It's quite simple, really. Double your rate of failure."

© 2007 Beard Avenue—Training. Executive and Career Coaching. Facilitation.

This article may be redistributed as long as there is no fee associated with its distribution and this entire paragraph and the accompanying copyright notice is included with the article. Readers interested in more information about training or products to help you with creative problem solving, career development, or facilitation are invited to go to www.beardavenue.com or write to llang@beardavenue.com