

Cherish mistakes (Aaron Swartz's Raw Thought)

by Aaron Swartz

7-9 minutes

This post is part six of the series [Raw Nerve](#).

This is a tale of two nonprofits.

At one, they hate making mistakes. How else could it be? “We’re not ever going to enjoy screwing up,” they told me. But this attitude has a lot of consequences. Everything they do has to go through several layers of approval to make sure it’s not a mistake. And when someone does screw up, they try to hide it.

It’s only natural — you know you’re going to get in trouble for screwing up, so you try to fix it before anyone notices. And if you can’t do, then your boss or your boss’s boss tries. And if no one in the organization can fix it, and it goes all the way to the executive director, then he tries to figure out a way to keep it from the press or spin it appropriately, so the world never finds out they made a mistake.

At the other nonprofit, they have a very different attitude. You notice it the first time you visit their website. Right in their navigation bar, at the top of every page, is a link labeled “Mistakes.” Click it and you’ll find a list of all the things they screwed up, starting with the most horribly embarrassing one (they once promoted their group under false names).

And it goes on to discuss mistakes big and small, core and peripheral. They previously used flaky phones that would cut out during a call, annoying people. They were insufficiently skeptical in some of the most important claims they made. At times, their admissions have the tone of a chastised teenager forced to write an apology, but together they provide a remarkable record of all the mistakes, both crucial and mundane, you might reasonably make when starting something new.

It’s not that this group likes making mistakes — you can feel the annoyance and embarrassment seeping through the page — but they don’t shirk from them either. They identify their mistake, admit them publicly, and devise steps to avoid them next time. They use it as an opportunity to get better.

I [wrote before](#) about Carol Dweck’s studies of successful and unsuccessful kids, but there’s one bit that really jumped out at me. Given a really tough puzzle to solve, one growth mindset kid just smiles and says “Mistakes are our friend.”¹

Mistakes are our friend. They can be an exasperating friend sometimes, the kind whose antics embarrass and annoy, but their heart is in the right place: they want to help. It’s a bad idea to ignore our friends.

That’s a hard attitude to take toward mistakes — they’re so embarrassing, our natural instinct is to want to hide them and cover them up. But that’s the wrong way to think about them. They’re actually giving us a gift, because they’re pointing the way toward getting better.

If we try to ignore them, they'll keep nagging at us. We'll run into them again and again in different guises. You'll say "Don't be silly, that wasn't a mistake — I meant to do that." And then you'll eagerly do the same thing next time ([cognitive dissonance again](#)). Or else you'll say "Yes, yes, of course that was a mistake — it won't happen again." But as you hurry to move on, you don't change anything, and so it does happen again.

The trick is to confront the mistake, fess up to what went wrong, and think about what you can change to keep it from happening again. Usually just promising not to do it again is not enough: you need to dig into the root causes and address those.

Sakichi Toyoda, the founder of the Toyota car company, developed a technique called "Five Why's" for handling this. For example, sometimes a car would come off the Toyota production line and not start. Why? Well, imagine it was because the alternator belt had come loose. Most car companies would stop here and just fix the alternator belt. But Toyoda understood that was dodging the mistake — it would just lead it to come back again and again. So he insisted they keep asking "Why?".

Why was the alternator belt loose? Because it hadn't been put on correctly. Why? Because the person putting it on didn't double-check to see if it had fit in correctly. Why? Because he was in too much of a hurry. Why? Because he had to walk all the way to the other side of the line to get the belts and by the time he got back he didn't have enough time to double-check.

Aha! There, on the fifth why, we find the real cause of the mistake. And the solution is easy: move the box of alternator belts closer. But if we'd stopped at any earlier point (say, by just yelling at the alternator belt guy to always remember to double-check), we wouldn't have actually fixed the problem. The same mistake would have happened again and again. Only by digging all the way to the root cause did we realize we needed to move the box of belts. The mistake pointed the way to the solution.

The last time I wrote about two nonprofits, someone commented to say they were "outright nauseated" by my post. "[T]he website is not the place to signal humility and argue against your own conclusions. All that would demonstrate is naivety and incompetence," they insisted. And maybe they're right: maybe having a mistakes page at the top of your website goes much too far.

I've [written before](#) why I disagree, but even if they're right that you shouldn't tell the world about your mistakes, you need to at least tell yourself. It's much too easy to conveniently forget about all the stuff you screwed up. And so even though it happens again and again, you never notice the pattern.

By forcing yourself to write it down, to keep a log of the problems you've run into, you begin to see patterns. You start seeing the things you get better at and the things you keep flubbing. And then you know what to work on for next time.

Next in this series: [Fix the machine, not the person](#)

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The thing that intrigued me, is the five Whys. When we are children, we all do this; child asks a question, adult answers. Child asks, "Why?" Adult answers, child keeps asking why.

posted by [Ravi](#) on September 17, 2012 <#>

I have an Aunt who once said to me that “if you have no secrets, you have nothing to worry about” and I am often accused of TMI but I talk about my mistakes and I find that people are comfortable talking to me about their mistakes. In that way I learn, and I know myself. I can never be accused of lying to myself. Great post!!

posted by [hetile](#) on September 17, 2012 <#>

It's hard to admit mistakes publicly because in many situations, it has been empirically verified that people are not forgiving of mistakes, and that lying or omission pays off. The psychologists and marketers have this all figured out. This is why presidents do not admit to making mistakes, corporations silently bury their errors rather than publicize them, doctors and hospitals remain silent about medical errors, etc. I think whether a mistake is tolerated and embraced depends greatly on the culture that already exists in a community.

That said, I'm going to keep on mistakes and talking about them, if I believe I and others can benefit from them.

posted by [Franklin Chen](#) on September 17, 2012 <#>

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