



SMART ORGANIZATIONS LEARN FROM MISTAKES

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I continue to be amazed at how often business organizations — including law firms — make mistakes about how they approach their own mistakes. The most common mistakes include:

- **Developing a culture of zero tolerance for mistakes.** When an organization or person within makes no mistakes, it tells me that they have stifled innovation and growth. Not that we want mistakes to happen. Of course, we want to carefully plan and anticipate contingencies when we try something different. But inevitably, mistakes can and will happen. Assuming that the mistake is not one that produces an extreme negative outcome, mistakes should not be career-enders. They should provide opportunity to learn and grow. And try again.
- **Failing to monitor and recognize existing mistakes.** An organization should constantly be monitoring and testing systems and procedures to ensure that they continue to operate as efficiently and effectively as possible. Not just when things go right, but especially when things go horribly wrong. Many organizations will react to such a mistake by dismissing it. It will be considered an aberration unlikely to reoccur, rather than an opportunity to identify a crack in the floor that can be plugged.
- **Reacting to complaints about real or perceived mistakes in a defensive manner.** This is the most egregious of all. When a client, colleague or employee asserts that a process, procedure, or even an employee was detrimental to a successful interaction — whatever it might entail in the complainer's circumstance and opinion — the last thing an organization should do is react defensively. Many go so overboard in doing so, that they often shift blame to the complainer. When that person is a customer, prospect or colleague, the harmful results may be irreparable.

A recent experience I had with a trusted business vendor illustrates much of the preceding. You will no doubt call to mind similar frustrating experiences upon

reading the story. That's because reacting to mistakes in a detrimental manner is becoming more prevalent. Pay attention. You should not be repeating these mistakes at your own firms.

I own a multi-function copier/printer/fax/scanner purchased from a long-trusted and often-recommended equipment manufacturer. There is rarely a functional failing to this equipment. It's rock solid. But I have always had a full-service contract.

Recently I was working on assembling a large time-sensitive digital document. It required scanning a large number of individual documents and assembling them into a PDF. The first 26 scanned perfectly and transmitted to the desktop folder as always. On the 27th scan the machine froze. A minute later it presented an error message that it had no network connection. Nothing in the office had changed. Not even a light flickered, indicating an electrical disturbance. Hmm. I tried again. The scan failed again, but this time a different error message displayed: lost internet connection. I tested for internet availability at a few workstations to satisfy me that the second error message was incorrect. I tested the network connection to the equipment, and that was fine, too.

I did the next logical thing, powering off, rebooting the router, powering back on. Same result. It was time to call service.

I placed the service call. Much to my chagrin, the service agent told me I had no service contract. Not possible, I responded. Are you sure you're looking at the correct account? Would you like me to give you my contract number, account number, or anything else to move this along? The job is extremely time sensitive, I explained. I need a service technician to call me back pronto to troubleshoot in hopes of finishing this job and getting it out the door.

The technician was not moved by my predicament. She had to verify the contract first, or I would have to pay for the call no matter what the problem. Sigh! How long until I hear back? She tells me it will take between one and three days. DAYS?!? How can that be? Some more "excited" exchange back and forth elicited her accommodating response: she will expedite the contract validation and be back to me in an hour. That left me a scrap of hope of meeting my deadline.

There was no return call in an hour. Or a day. Or two days. Was I surprised? No!



On the third day I wrote to everyone at the company who appeared in my contacts. I have been referring people to them for equipment purchases for years and been a customer myself. To receive no response was totally unacceptable.

One concerned employee who has nothing to do with service but knows me well forwarded my distraught email to the current service manager. He was unaware of my predicament until he received the email. He sent me a polite courtesy email telling me that he had forwarded the email to one of his service technicians who would call, and to let him know if I needed his further assistance.

The service tech called. He looked up my business name in their database he found the valid contract. My first question: why would that not appear when the service center looked it up? Is it a different database which is inaccurate? My second question: why have 3 days passed without them calling back? My third question: how quickly can we get this problem fixed?

He dismissed question one and two as insignificant and irrelevant. He asked me to explain the problem in detail, which I did. Oh, we have a problem, he tells me. It sounds like it is probably a problem on the network side. Your contract doesn't cover that. I have to first send you an engagement agreement so you acknowledge that if it's a network issue you must pay for all work on an hourly basis. He can't even troubleshoot until I sign.

It then takes hours for the agreement to arrive. In the meantime, I called the service manager. Without even looking into anything, he went into defensive mode. Thus far everything they did was "normal." I asked — insisted — that he find out what went wrong for 3 days. That's when he told me that unless I wrote down the service call confirmation number, there would be no way for him to even check into it. The onus is on the customer to write it down. There is no way to search by my name, date/time, or any other variable to find out who handled the call, from what call center, and what transpired.

I'm so trained to research and correct these types of things from a quality control perspective that it was incomprehensible to me that he thought this was a perfectly acceptable way to operate. I found and provided him with the confirmation number and waited to hear back.

Meanwhile, I decided to call my network people first since they could take a look remotely, and it would not cost me anything to eliminate that possibility. They found no issues on the network side and asked me to try to scan again. Amazingly,



it worked perfectly. We were both amused. They told me next time just to call them first. And I will.

Ultimately the service manager got back to me. Apparently in my haste (and with bad vision) I provided the serial number of my former machine when I made the call. The operator did not attempt to validate by using the company ID or contract ID which I offered. She did “expedite” by sending the contract validation the exact same way they always do but wrote “customer says urgent” in the subject line. And according to the service manager, no further research was required. It was my error. Everything worked just fine on their end.

So, you tell me, did everything work fine on their end? Was that a satisfactory conclusion to the event? Would you be satisfied with the answers? All I know is that if I were the manager, I would have immediately acknowledged that my (e.g the customer’s) urgent need had not been met or even considered, and that perhaps their process and procedure could be improved. I might have offered my cell phone for future use. Since service is just as important as equipment quality, I now have to think twice about future referrals.

Now think about such learning opportunities at your firm. Do you tighten procedures, make adjustments, validate customer concerns? Or are you just another organization that communicates in dozens of ways that quality control is not a top priority?

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