

The Best Project Leaders Admit Their Mistakes

Ron Taylor

I am not young enough to know all the answers.

I have made plenty of mistakes and almost, but not quite, relished the opportunity to admit them. It has allowed me to let others know by example that I did not expect them to be perfect, but I did expect them to admit when they made a mistake, learn from it and move on.

The more aggressive members of your team or organization may consider someone's willingness to admit mistakes as weakness, or try to use admitted mistakes as weapons. If you allow them to win the day, you are in trouble.

People will not admit their mistakes if they have to defend themselves for doing so. Allowing people to revisit old mistakes and reopen old issues keeps you and your organization mired in the past while your competition is moving ahead.

One healthy way of looking at mistakes is to redefine them. Thomas Edison's philosophy provides a great example. Edison was an American inventor, scientist and businessman who, with his team, invented the phonograph, the motion picture camera and the light bulb, among many other things. Known as "The Wizard of Menlo Park," he turned invention into a business, and created the first industrial research laboratory.

He held over 1,000 U.S. patents during his lifetime, along with several patents in other countries. Along the way he made a lot of mistakes, but he defined them in positive terms. When asked about his many failures, he responded: "I have not failed. I have just found 10,000 ways that won't work." If Edison can redefine mistakes, we can too.

There are a lot of common-sense reasons to admit your mistakes beyond merely being an example to others. One of them is that no matter how hard you try to hide your own mistakes, you are almost doomed to fail. Other people are going to find out about your mistakes. They will spread the word, and pretty soon everyone will be hiding their mistakes as well. You will not only lose credibility when you try to hold people accountable, you will also lose access to information that can help you make decisions that can prevent minor issues from developing into major problems.

I have often included an apology when I admit a mistake. It does not have to be a big deal. It can be something as simple as: "Sorry, I screwed this up. Here is how I fixed it." You have to be judicious in your use of apologizing but it can make a big difference.

Among the most powerful consequences of apologizing are that it demonstrates respect for yourself and others, allows everyone to confront the issue, allows you to present it on your terms and shifts it into the past.

Just do not ruin an apology with an excuse.

About the Author



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Ron Taylor is an internationally-known leader, lecturer, author, and consultant, and the principal and founder of the Ron Taylor Group. Ron served as President and CEO of a 10,000-person organization (PMIWDC) and was named Leader of the Year by the 500,000-person Project Management Institute (PMI®).

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