

GET OVER IT

Don't stay stuck in your past—or you may be hurting your future.

BY NEAL WHITTEN, PMP, CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

Just below the surface, many leaders are troubled. They carry an unnecessary and destructive burden with them—a burden that most of us have felt at some time. They cannot fully let go of mistakes they've made over their careers. Some were errors that harmed projects, products or relationships. Others were simply miscalculations that left the leaders looking plain dumb. And now they're haunted by the feeling that some of their co-workers won't forget those mistakes. It's as if a dark cloud is always looming over them.

As a result, some leaders can become less social, less participative in meetings, less sure of themselves, less worthy and less effective. They may think about employment at another company where no one knows of their past errors. Even though they may enjoy the tasks they perform—and have worked hard acquiring knowledge and skills over the years—they like their jobs less and may become wearier with each passing performance review.

Leaders who think this way are voluntarily stuck in the past. They are behaving as if they're the only people who make mistakes, but they're far too hard on themselves. With this behavior, they're not adding value to their teams and organizations. And if their career hasn't already stalled, it may be headed in that direction.

Let It Go

Everyone makes mistakes—especially those striving to move their teams, organizations and careers forward. But the most effective leaders learn to move on. Here are four primary actions necessary to deal with a mistake:

- 1. Acknowledge the error.** This can immediately begin a healing process and raise the level of respect people have for you.
- 2. Make restitution.** If appropriate, apologize and determine how to best deal with the effects of your error.
- 3. Learn from the mistake.** Look for changes that can be made to ensure it doesn't happen again.



4. Move on. Don't allow the misstep to interfere with your duties going forward.

That fourth step seems to be where leaders have the most difficulty. Often, we give more weight to what we believe other people think about us than what we think about ourselves. But we should never give others that power over us.

If we can move past our mistakes, we will focus on the present with our full potential. Our careers can be revitalized, our sense of self can be improved and we will find ourselves adding far more value to our teams and organizations.

The Upside

Mistakes aren't necessarily a bad thing. U.S. architect, designer and inventor Buckminster Fuller once said, "Whatever humans have learned had to be learned as a consequence only of trial-and-error experience. Humans have learned only through mistakes."

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or her errors, making an occasional misstep can be an asset to a résumé, not a liability. The more we achieve, the more mistakes we are likely to make.

Leaders recognize the value of making those missteps.

All of us have made errors that in hindsight we wish we could replay another way. And we will continue to do so. Although the pain we feel from mistakes is real, we must let it go. If we don't, we risk giving up the great potential inherent in each of us for good—to achieve, to lead and to make a positive impact on those around us.

We must deal constructively with our own mistakes so that we can help others learn from their errors.

You have the power to move on. Now you just have to do it. PM

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