HOW TO MAKE MISTAKES

Promoting risk taking and eliminating fear of failure.

It would be a mistake to try to avoid all mistakes. Indeed, it would be a colossal blunder to attempt doing things right the first time, every time. In todays light speed economy, ("new" economy and "old" economy) if you don't fall on your face both regularly and painfully, you are likely to end up dead instead. The only people not making mistakes are ones playing their game without risk and without novelty - and I might add - without progress. If your company cannot accommodate, even reward, failure - in the long run, you cannot succeed.

Why? Doing things wrong, is the number one - perhaps the only - source of innovation. David Kelly, CEO of design firm IDEO, says, "...enlightened trial and error beats the planning of flawless intellects...The reason is simple: the best solutions to most problems are rarely the most obvious." James Joyce said it poetically, "Mistakes are the portals of discovery." Think about it. What did you ever learn by doing something right the first time?

IBM's rumored motto about mistakes is legendary: Fail Faster. Since the road to success is paved with failures, the faster you move through them, the faster you might find a way which works. Don't prolong the agony, get it over with quickly, learn the most you can, and move on. IDEO's Kelly says it succinctly, "we fail faster to succeed sooner."

World leaders and scientists have wonderful legacy of being wrong in a big way. Edison's tolerance for "mistakes" is renowned. The European "discovery" of America was a mistake. Even the invention of Teflon was a mistake.

Great companies also have a long and gallant history of failing. AMC's Gremlin was a big flop, but paved the way for ever-popular hatchbacks. What about New York City's World Trade Center, one of the first "cities in a building," remained half-empty for almost a whole decade. There are many famous failed computers, including Apple's Lisa and Newton or the Palm Pilot's predecessor, Zoomer - evidence that failures breed innovations rather than stifling them. Not all business failures are so glorious. 65 out 100 business startups vanish without a trace within five years and 90% are gone within ten years. But we need these failures - without them there would no companies to survive.

If you are in the surgery business or fly airplanes for a living, you may not want to make any mistakes. But for the rest of us - especially if you are in a technology business - doing things wrong is prerequisite to doing things right. As the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein said, "If people did not sometimes do silly things, nothing intelligent would ever get done."

Internet Time doesn't simply mean working 18-hour days. It means trying lots of ideas, making mistakes, and killing off bad results quickly. Many "old economy" managers still want to take their time and make sure everything is thought out - all the I's dotted, all the Ts crossed. Don't do it! You no longer have that luxury - if you ever did. Don't slow down your development cycle, speed it up.

In the spirit of failing quickly, here are a few ideas and tips for you to try out. Some will work for you. Others will not. Try and fail.

Don't penalize mistakes, encourage them. How about rewarding them? Create a bonus for the most brilliant (or most flagrant) mistake of the month. Put risk-taking mistake-makers' faces on your website or in your newsletter. Many companies say they encourage mistakes, but really intimidate and punish the mistake-makers. As soon as you begin to do that you foster a better-safe-than-sorry attitude. Instead, put your money where your mouth is.

What about having a regular meeting dissecting the mistakes-of-the-month, trying to learn their lessons. Train people to savor their mistakes, and understand the strange paths which led them astray.

Use rapid prototyping. This technical-sounding phrase simply means doing things quickly without trying to get them into final form, making mistakes and swiftly fixing them. Get something up and running - anything that resembles your desired solution. Then fix what isn't working. And fix, and fix, and fix. This may be the best way to do product development in Internet Time, also known as creative trial and error.

When things go wrong, do you sound a hunt for the guilty? Don't cast blame - commemorate mistake makers as heroes. One of the reasons mistakes go undetected - and progress slowed - is that people aren't willing to take "credit" for their errors. Rather than calling attention to things which are off course (and risking their careers), they prefer to bury them for as long as possible.

Use the concept of a "breakdown." When your car breaks down, do you blame the driver, or do you just fix the problem? When a project or a process is veering off course, treat it like a breakdown. Rather than spending time deciding who did what wrong, do this: restate where you are, where you want to go and figure out what will get you back on track. During the Iran Contra Scandal, President Reagan intoned, "Mistakes were made." There was no admission of guilt. No fixing of blame. Perhaps we can learn from this brilliant locution.

Create a company of learners with a formal debriefing policy. Without one, learning from mistakes is just one more accident. Debrief everything - good, bad or indifferent. Use the four-stage catechism of the learning organization: What worked? What didn't work? What was missing? What do we do next?

One way to really get things moving on a project is to declare a "state of emergency." Emergencies mobilize people. They bring out the whatever-it-takes attitude, especially when they know that "mistakes" will be tolerated, and that mistake-makers will be lionized.

Forget about total quality and zero defects. You can't afford it, especially in this day and age. Think of the 80/20 rule, or extend it to 90/10. There is a level of quality beyond which "mistakes" are a viable economic alternative. Unless the outcome of your product or service impacts life or death, the cost of perfection cannot be justified. Use the errors you generate as opportunities to improve your production process and practice great customer service.

Remember, the hallmark of progress is making mistakes.