

Elke M. Schüttelkopf, Error Management Expert

# ALL THE WISER: LEARNING FROM OUR **MISTAKES**

A Quality Management Guide | English Translation by Corinne von Nordmann



Illustrations by Olivia Gnahn | Bonus Article by Dejan Stojanovic

**Elke M. Schüttelkopf**

**ALL THE WISER:  
LEARNING FROM OUR MISTAKES**

**A Practical Quality Management Guide  
for Employees & Executives, Teachers & Professors, Coaches &  
Consultants  
as well as for People from all Walks of Life**

Copyright © 2018 Elke M. Schüttelkopf

Although the authors and translator have made every effort to ensure that the information in this book is correct, the author and translator do not assume and hereby disclaim any liability to any party for any loss, damage, or disruption caused by errors or omissions, whether such errors or omissions result from negligence, accident, or any other cause.

The tips and recommendations in this book are based on research studies as well as the practical experience of the authors. However, the authors do not guarantee success or assume responsibility for it. Please note that the names and characteristics of the people in the examples have been changed except for the historical ones. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

**English translation and editing: © Corinne von Nordmann**

**Cover design and illustrations: © Olivia Gnahn**

**Contributing guest author: © Dejan Stojanovic**

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be scanned, uploaded, reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means whatsoever without written permission from the author, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in academic papers, critical articles, and reviews.

Purchase only authorized electronic editions and do not participate in or encourage electronic piracy of copyrighted materials. Thank you for supporting the author's rights.

# Table of Contents

**Cover Page**

**Title Page**

**Copyright & Disclaimers**

**Elke M. Schüttelkopf, Translation by Corinne von Nordmann:**

**Foreword: Why mistakes and a Mistake Culture are a good thing**

**Introduction: How I learned to love mistakes**

## **1. What Mistakes Mean**

Section 1.1 When mistakes lead to disasters

Section 1.2 Mistakes: A question of definition

Section 1.3 Who is to blame

Section 1.4 What characterizes a positive Mistake Culture

Section 1.5 How to become all the wiser

## **2. When Mistakes Happen**

Section 2.1 Why we like to conceal mistakes

Section 2.2 What mistakes cost us

Section 2.3 Why the reporting of mistakes is vital

Section 2.4 How executives can manage their anger

Section 2.5 Positive handling of negative news

## **3. Addressing Mistakes**

Section 3.1 Small but powerful: Mistakes in the everyday workplace

Section 3.2 Why accusations fail

Section 3.3 How articulating needs can be helpful

Section 3.4 Why everything has consequences

Section 3.5 When the hierarchy plays a role

Section 3.6 How to alleviate the accusations of others

Section 3.7 When serious grievances occur

#### **4. Dealing with Mistakes**

Section 4.1 Fighting causes instead of symptoms

Section 4.2 How to handle mistakes systematically

Section 4.3 How to learn from mistakes as a team

Section 4.4 Establishing a culture of learning from our mistakes

#### **Dejan Stojanovic:**

#### **Failure: The Mother of Innovation**

Section 1. What is innovation?

Section 2. Corporate innovation

Section 3. Startup term "Pivot"

Section 4. Who runs the world? We all do!

**About the Author Elke M. Schüttelkopf**

**Other Works by the Author**

**About the Translator Corinne von Nordmann**

**About the Illustrator Olivia Gnahn**

**About the Guest Author Dejan Stojanovic**

Foreword:

## Why mistakes and a Mistake Culture are a good thing

Mistakes happen. They are part of the daily fabric of our lives, yet they continuously throw us for a loop as we find our own mistakes to be a source of great embarrassment. We nervously sweep little mistakes under the rug before they become evident. Major mishaps witnessed by others will often haunt us for many years to come.

We also tend to handle the mistakes of others with little to no understanding. Emotions boil over quickly while we eagerly seek out a few culprits on whom to squarely place the blame. There are many ways to react to mistakes. However, very few of these practices are capable of permanently remedying our mistakes while enabling us to avoid them altogether in the future.

Only in those situations where mistakes are dealt with in a calm and objective manner, can everyone involved truly learn from his or her mistakes. Solely in a positive Mistake Culture can all of the participants ultimately become all the wiser through the learning process.

This book was originally written for the German-speaking world, where there is a prevailing fear about mistakes in general. The silence about one's own mistakes, the accusations hurled at the mistakes made by others and the tendency to punish mistakes of all kinds also does not exactly bode well for both the work and social climates.

Instead, it leads to a strong propensity to avoid mistakes even in companies that promote quality. This unconstructive approach only impedes efficiency through perfectionism while inhibiting innovation through fear of failure. Not even creative or innovative mistakes are tolerated, much less accepted and appreciated.

In German-speaking countries, the expression *Fehlerkultur* can designate both a negative and unproductive as well as a positive and productive error culture. But, it is generally used synonymously with a positive culture of mistakes - describing an open, factual, and constructive manner of handling them. It also seeks out a

respectful and considerate way of dealing with the agents of the mistakes.

Unlike the English expression “Blame Culture” which denotes a culture wherein the game of finger-pointing reigns supreme, the German term *Fehlerkultur* does not imply a culture that is all about making mistakes. Rather, it describes a proactive society that focuses on dealing with mistakes in a positive and constructive manner while ultimately working on preventing them from occurring in the first place.

The German word *Fehler* can be translated either as “mistake” or “error.” We have opted for the word “mistake” in this context as it lacks the moral obliquity that the similar word “error” can sometimes have. The origin of these words is explained in more detail in the second section of the first chapter. The word *Kultur* means culture as it relates to our social environment as well as lifestyle. Even though both mistake and error are used nearly interchangeably throughout this book, we have chosen the expression “Mistake Culture” to represent the English equivalent of the German *Fehlerkultur* instead of “Error Culture.”

The term Mistake Culture refers to the way the people of an organization deal with mistakes. In effect, this book is about going from a negative Blame Culture to a positive Mistake Culture. Thus, effectively transforming us from being “none the wiser” as the saying states to becoming “all the wiser” in the process.

To boot, an ineffective Mistake Culture translates into a whopping 20% or more in losses for a company while an effective Mistake Culture yields an additional 20% in profits on top. It means that teams and companies that can revamp their Mistake Culture from a negative one to a positive one can expect an overall profit of up to 40%!

Through this book, you will learn how to create a solid foundation for successfully dealing with your own mistakes as well as those made by other people. It will show not only you and your loved ones but also your colleagues and bosses, how to better understand and handle errors plus how to work together to alleviate mistakes and misconduct both in the workplace as well as at home in the long run.

This book is filled with plenty of suggestions, practical tips and effective methods to help you deal constructively with mistakes while learning as much as possible from them. We are excited to be embarking on this journey of exploring the timely

topic of error management together with you and wish you every success in becoming all the wiser!

**Elke M. Schüttelkopf and Corinne von Nordmann, June 2018**



## Introduction:

### How I learned to love mistakes

Nobody likes mistakes. I don't enjoy making mistakes, either. I can still vividly recall plenty of situations at school where my classmates made fun of the incorrect answers given by the other kids. I will never forget their red faces or the general feeling of embarrassment. For a long time, it was most disconcerting for me to stand in front of the entire classroom completely exposed while the others were sitting together listening to my test answers. To avoid embarrassing mistakes, I simply didn't say anything when in doubt. It was much easier to keep my mouth shut.

But that was a long time ago. During my studies, I already internalized a new error strategy. Saying nothing or not ticking the box on a multiple-choice test was akin to giving the wrong answer. With every attempt I made, my chances of stumbling upon the right answer also increased. My most important learning experience was that mistakes happen. When you do something, it could also very well be wrong. No matter how much one studies and how big of an effort one makes. At any rate, it is a mistake in itself to want to avoid making mistakes and to say or do nothing instead.

As I then promptly got to witness in my role as a coach and consultant on a daily basis, the fear of mistakes prevents people from learning and advancing. Thus, I considered it my mission in life to help create a learning-friendly climate. Without being aware of the term Blame Culture at the time, I banished any feelings of shame and embarrassment as best I could from my seminars and committed myself to dealing openly with mistakes.

In the late 1990s, many companies invested in expanding the scope of their quality management, but these efforts mostly failed to meet their ambitious expectations. Despite TQM, error reporting systems and other official measures, the employees did not address the mistakes. So, my advice was sought out, and the same reason was repeatedly identified as the cause during my team workshops: Mistakes are preferably not mentioned for fear of their negative consequences. The employees would rather hide or cover up their mistakes than risk their jobs.

With these practical experiences in mind, I chose the topic of *Fehlerkultur* aka the way in which mistakes are handled as the focus of my first master's thesis as part of my extra-occupational executive MBA program. I thought that I would have recourse to a mountain of relevant literature. But, I was clearly mistaken. I then almost made the mistake of changing the subject matter. Baffled, I stood there staring at the works of famous management gurus like Fredmund Malik, who rallied against mistakes and propagated error prevention as well as at the likes of consultant stars such as Tom Peters, who glorifies mistakes and postulates error-friendliness...

After many months of hard work, I gained a better overview and managed to get to the heart of this subject matter. In doing so, I succeeded in resolving the existing contradictions and, for the first time, establishing a compelling and clear concept of the phenomenon Mistake Culture. However, that was not enough. I was all fired up with enthusiasm. I wanted to continue down this intriguing path. My next master's thesis could not be strictly theoretical but needed to put into practice the insights I had gleaned. As part of the action research in the master's program for supervision and coaching, I examined the Mistake Culture in a high-tech company. What an exciting opportunity it was to be part of the research and development department, where errors inevitably occur during the innovation process, but the end products must still meet the highest standards of quality, reliability, and functionality.

As a management consultant, I then specialized on the topic of the culture of mistakes – the way in which organizations handle human, technical and systematic errors. To date in this role, I not only support companies in ascertaining and analyzing their respective Mistake Cultures but also in implementing the appropriate improvement measures. Before I knew it, I had the reputation as the “leading authority” on the culture of mistakes throughout the German-speaking world.

Next up, my university published my research on *Fehlerkultur*. The book sold out soon, but it is still available as an eBook. I was then ever so honored when a noted publisher approached me to create a guide all about dealing successfully with mistakes. Enthusiastically, I agreed. I wanted to write a more practical guide after my first book, which is somewhat scientific in nature and therefore makes for a more challenging read. With my second book, my goal was to incorporate a

slew of experiences and examples from the everyday workplace together with plenty of practical tips. The German-language booklet *Lernen aus Fehlern: Wie man aus Schaden klug wird* is in its second edition and now also available in English: *All the Wiser: Learning from our Mistakes*.

*Corinne von Nordmann* has translated *Lernen aus Fehlern: Wie man aus Schaden klug wird* with great attention to detail into English. It has turned out to be a bigger undertaking than expected. Even though there are many borrowed German words in the English language such as *Zeitgeist*, *kindergarten* or *rucksack*, there is no approximate term for Mistake Culture. Corinne has mastered the translation challenge with flying colors, and I thank her not only for the excellent result but also for the inspiring collaboration.

She has taken great care to convert the specific nuances and idioms so that nothing ends up lost in translation. To boot, Corinne has accompanied the editing process with a most exacting eye, and I am so happy that I was able to partner up with her for this project. My book has taken a quantum leap thanks to her top-notch translation and editing work.

*Olivia Gnahn* has also given the English version a special boost. As a graphic designer and artist, she has brought the many practical stories to life with her colorful brushstrokes and humorous interpretations. It never ceases to amaze me how I can read the thoughts of the characters just through their facial expressions thanks to the skillset of this most talented artist. Kudos! Thank you, Olivia, for enriching my book through the lively imagery of your zesty cartoons.

Last but not least, it was a great pleasure to meet *Dejan Stojanovic* at one of the Fuckup Nights in Vienna. As a gifted infotainment moderator, Dejan leads three podium guests and a packed audience through an inspiring evening during which you learn a great deal about the mistakes and failures of the founders of many a company while also learning from their experiences. I am thrilled that Dejan has agreed to be the contributing guest author for my book.

In his section at the end of this book, the self-professed Failure Evangelist provides more detailed insights into the fascinating world of creative and innovative mistakes drawn from his experiences with his guests as the founder and host of the Fuckup Nights in Vienna. Dejan grew up speaking both German and Serbo-Croatian. Thanks to his extended stays in the States, he was able to write his contribution directly in English. Furthermore, he illustrates the differences

between the respective Mistakes Cultures in Silicon Valley and Europe most vividly by letting us partake in his study experiences and work impressions.

At this point, I would like to take the opportunity to thank my various friends, colleagues and business partners for their wonderful support and help throughout my journey from *Lernen aus Fehlern: Wie man aus Schaden klug wird* to *All the Wiser: Learning from our Mistakes*. Of particular note as my worthy accomplices but in no particular order: my professor *Peter Heimerl*, who encouraged and motivated me in my research; the head of development *Erich Freitag*, who immediately recognized the immense productivity gains possible by improving the existing Mistake Culture right off the bat; the quality manager *Ulrich Vogl*, with whom I was connected for many years by a very exhilarating and intense cooperation involving the optimization of the culture of mistakes as well as my close friend *Arnold Reikerstorfer*, an expert in quality management and seed financing, who is always there to support me with his professional advice and assistance on all technical and practical matters. Finally, a great big thank you and shout out to *Carole Bowden* in the UK!

My heartfelt thanks go to my dearest life partner *Christian Gnahn*, the initial reader of each new chapter and the best sounding board of all time. As it so happens, Christian also “donated” the story in which he, as a specialist for customized database solutions, had to solve a train ticket debacle only to end up deliberately violating the client’s travel policy.

Now that you have gotten a glimpse into the genesis of this book, I hope that your curiosity has been awakened and that you will be motivated to learn more about how to successfully deal with your own mistakes and those made by others plus how to go about improving the Mistake Culture at your workplace. By handling mistakes openly, you will be able to dismantle the inherent Blame Culture, foster the collaboration and mutual trust within your team thereby increasing employee satisfaction and ultimately winning the War for Talent.

I hope that you will want to learn how to avoid costly and serious mistakes, how to improve the quality and safety of your products and services as well as your internal processes, thus upping your productivity and competitiveness through error prevention. Lastly, I hope that you will want to find out how to make the right kind of mistakes, how to promote further development and a higher capacity for innovation through error-friendliness while strengthening your future viability. All of

this should enable you to be successful not only today but also tomorrow and the day after as well!

So, dive in and enjoy the read!

**Elke M. Schüttelkopf, Vienna 2018**

# 1. WHAT MISTAKES MEAN

*Mistakes are annoying. They create stress and hassles. Nobody needs them. But one thing is certain: they still occur. That is why it is worthwhile to rethink matters and make the most out of any given situation.*

***In this chapter you will learn:***

- *Why the incorrect handling of mistakes can have devastating results*
- *Why mistakes are a question of definition*
- *Who is at fault*
- *What characterizes a positive Mistake Culture*
- *How to become all the wiser*

## 1.1 When mistakes lead to disasters

Mistakes happen. We ended up with several cuts and bruises after stumbling while taking our first tentative steps. We shattered a few vases while playing ball. We messed up a number of homework assignments while attending school. But what does it matter in the grand scheme of things? To err is human, after all.

But not all mistakes are created equal. Letting mistakes be and chalking them up to being human, can be a dangerous undertaking. Therefore, it is a good idea to recognize the differences between minor and major mistakes, cheap and expensive mistakes, inconsequential and far-reaching mistakes.

**Example:**

The cruise ship *Costa Concordia* left the Italian port of Civitavecchia at 19:18 local time (18:00 UTC) on Friday, January 13, 2012. The route through the western Mediterranean led past the island of Giglio that evening, for which a show-stopping maneuver was in the works. The *Costa Concordia* decided to deviate from its given shipping route to “salute” the island while completely lit up and sounding its foghorns in the immediate coastal area for a spectacular extravaganza.

The further sequence of events is well known from the worldwide media coverage. Most of the 3,206 passengers were having dinner when the ship collided with a rocky outcrop at 21:45 local time (20:45 UTC). Only 95 meters (311 ft) from the shoreline, the luxury liner rammed into a reef at 8 meters (26 ft), resulting in a 53-meter (174 ft) gash through the ship’s port side hull. Within moments, most of the hull was flooded as power was lost, the engines failed, and the rudder was blocked. Unable to maneuver, the ship drifted out to sea and began to tilt starboard. It was

then pushed back towards the coastline by the wind and waves. After more than a mile of drifting aimlessly, the ship ran aground one last time. “Saluting” deeply, it came to its final resting place at an angle of more than 30-degrees on top of a rock near the coastal town of Porto Giglio.

Despite the icy water temperatures, about 200 passengers jumped overboard to swim ashore. Most of the 4,229 people (including 1,023 crew members) were rescued during the night via the lifeboats, ferries, other ships as well as helicopters rushing to the rescue. However, 32 people ended up losing their lives due to this reckless exercise.

## Common misconceptions about mistakes

### Fallacy No. 1: Tough luck!

**Example:**

When the top model Eva Herzigová smashed the champagne bottle against the luxury cruiser in the summer of 2006 during the christening ceremony of the *Costa Concordia*, nothing happened. The bottle remained intact, sending a shockwave through the sailors present. It could only mean one thing: a bad omen! On top of this, the *Costa Concordia* ran aground on a Friday the 13th. The shipping company immediately spoke of a “devastating tragedy.”

As is often the case, it was not fate that ran its course in the case of the cruise ship. Rather, the tragic events were the direct result of a series of mistakes that were caused by people. Mistakes are not controlled by fate. They are not the result of good luck or bad luck. The real tragedy is that on the one hand a serious mistake was made, which was avoidable. On the other hand, massive mistakes were made while dealing with the initial mistake, ultimately leading to the fatal outcome.

### Fallacy No. 2: Fate determines the trajectory of mistakes!

**Example:**

The impending disaster unfolded slowly. It was triggered by a wrong decision together with a series of both minor and major judgment errors, leading to the inevitable accident, which severely damaged the luxury cruiser when it crashed into a rock.

At that point, it was not just an expensive mistake; it was also a dangerous mistake. By that time, it was no longer merely a case of material damage, but it already endangered the safety of the 4,229 people on board. However, the fatal outcome could still have been averted.

The fatal accident did not occur suddenly but over the course of one night. The collision took place at 21:45. Within a few minutes, the facts became crystal clear: the hull and the engine rooms were flooded, the power failed, the ship was no longer maneuverable, and the ship’s stability was in acute danger. All this was critical, but it still did not translate into a disaster. But then things took a very wrong turn.

At around 21:54, the ship’s command center only informed the passengers about a “blackout” while claiming that everything was under control. Shortly after 22:00, the captain appeared the

Coast Guard while keeping them in the dark about the actual conditions on board. At 22:33, a good 45 minutes after the disastrous collision, the general emergency alarm was raised on the *Costa Concordia*. The official order to abandon ship was only given at 22:54 and the first lifeboats were finally lowered at 22:55. Clearly, much too late!

When the general emergency alarm signaled for the passengers to head to the evacuation decks and report to the muster stations to await further instructions at 22:33, the luxury cruiser was already severely tilted to one side. As a result of the angle, many passageways were flooded and became impassable due to the increasing inclination. The lifeboats were blocked and could not be launched. In the ensuing chaos, the captain and some other officers avoided their responsibilities and fled from the ship at 23:19. The remaining crew proved to be uncoordinated and insufficiently trained in rescue operations.

The damage suffered resulted in 32 fatalities. Many more survivors were seriously injured and traumatized, not to mention the loss of the 450-million-euro vessel itself. Recovery costs amounted to approximately 1.5 billion euros plus scrapping costs upwards of 100 million euros as well as several million euros in legal expenses and damages awarded.

Not to mention, the countless negative media reports incriminating the shipping company and damaging its image until the criminal proceedings had reached their conclusion.

This example illustrates how mistakes can have serious consequences. But, the tragic series of events was not due to a higher power; it was the direct result of gross negligence by the crew.

Accidents happen. However, after the sinking of the *Titanic*, a series of security measures were put in place to ensure that even the most serious of accidents did not result in a catastrophe. A cruise ship such as the *Costa Concordia* could be duly evacuated within 80 minutes. This means that by 22:33, the rescue measures could have already been underway for more than 45 minutes. At 22:33, half of the passengers could have been safely tucked away in the lifeboats and on their way back to shore.

However, that is not what happened! Instead, the accident itself was hushed up; the passengers and the Coast Guard were both lied to while the evacuation itself was delayed. Instead of wrapping up the salvage operations around 23:15, the rescue operations continued well into the weekend. A South Korean couple was saved more than 24 hours after the ship ran aground while an injured crewmember was only discovered and evacuated at noon that Sunday. For some of the passengers and crew, any form of help came too late. They had to pay with their lives for the mistakes, omissions, and failings of the responsible parties.

#### **Important**

- 1. Mistakes can be anticipated beforehand and mitigated or even prevented. Thus, mistakes can be avoided!**



2. Critical mistakes must be quickly recognized and averted after their occurrence. Constructive handling of mistakes reduces the damage!

---

### Fallacy No. 3: Guilty people must be singled out and punished

**Example:**

The anger and outrage regarding this disaster were great. A guilty party was quickly found, and the media was readily presented with the scapegoat of the maritime accident: Captain Francesco Schettino. Schettino's weaknesses came in very handy: his vanity, his mistress, and his inability to own up to his mistakes and to overcome them. The general public reacted with scorn and derision to Schettino's statement that he simply had "slipped and fallen into a lifeboat" soon after the evacuation began.

Shortly after the accident, the general public passed judgment and found Schettino to be guilty on all charges. The captain chose the wrong course! He avoided his responsibility! He abandoned his ship, leaving the passengers to their fate!

When guilty parties are arrested or placed under house arrest in the midst of a media frenzy, the general public breathes a sigh of relief: Justice is served, something is undertaken, guilt and atonement are assigned. However, that is a mistake of gigantic proportions. In practice, the situation is only served up by the media through personalizing and emotionalizing it without getting to the root of it. Guilty parties are found, but not the reasons for the mistake. Only the symptoms are fought, but not the actual causes.

The escalating emotions and the parading of the "guilty parties" only enriches the media conglomerates. On the other hand, handling mistakes in such a manner is counterproductive. When heads roll, it usually only serves as a distraction from the fact that everything else stays the same.

The allegations against Schettino were justified. It was justifiable that he was charged with multiple negligent homicide and assault, with causing a marine casualty, abandoning his ship prematurely, and leaving behind those in need. However, it did not end there. It does not suffice if the captain is sentenced to serve a lengthy prison term, a few more parties agree to a voluntary prison sentence of a few years, and the shipping company buys their way out of any further official investigations to the tune of a cool million euros.

Punishment for crimes is necessary. But, this does not bring about any improvements. If serious mistakes occur, it is essential to hone in on the mistake, to analyze the causes and to develop measures for improvement. Even if we tend to ascribe mistakes prematurely to the people involved, most of the mistakes are

due to the system. There are many reasons for the sinking of the *Costa Concordia*: language problems, unqualified staff, insufficient training, lack of crisis preparation and acceptance of negligence by the shipping company management, no sense of duty and a missing risk awareness by the ship's officers, the lower management tolerating the mistakes and breaches of duty in silence, rigid hierarchies as well as a significant power gap, etc.

If only guilty parties are sought out, and sentences served, the risk of recurring mistakes is great. Thus just one year later a similar chain of mistakes claimed the lives of passengers and crew when the South Korean ferry *Sewol* went down on April 16, 2014. As was the case with the *Costa Concordia*, the safety regulations were also ignored here, and the ferry capsized. Like Schettino, the captain of the *Sewol* sent the passengers back to their cabins instead of the evacuation deck, and like Schettino, the captain of the *Sewol* also abandoned his ship. Unfortunately, the ferry did not come to rest on a rock but sank into the depths of the ocean. Of the 476 passengers and crew, including 325 high school students, more than 300 people paid with their lives for this systematic failure.

## 1.2 Mistakes: A question of definition

In the case of the *Costa Concordia*, if we add up all the mistakes that ultimately led to the disaster, we can fill long lists: inadequate nautical charts on board, promotions at the expense of safety, deviations from the shipping route, excessive speed during critical maneuvers, unauthorized persons on the bridge, a captain who chooses his mistress over his official duties, personal vanities and so much more. But, can this multifaceted chaos indeed be attributed to individual mistakes? What makes a mistake a mistake?

### Mistakes: Coming up short of the goal

The German equivalent for mistake is the word "Fehler." It comes from the Old French expression "faillir," meaning "to miss" or "to err." The term was widely used by the military: Cannonballs were either categorized as hits or misses. They missed their intended target. This meaning has been retained over the centuries. To this day we regard mistakes as that which misses the goal, the polar opposite of what is worth striving for and correct. The expression "to miss" is an integral part of the word mistake and denotes how something has missed its mark as well as the intended goal.



The closest corresponding word we have in English for the German “Fehler” is the expression to fail from the Anglo-French “failer” and the Old French “faillir” meaning to “fail in expectation or performance” and to be “lacking, miss, err, and to make a mistake.” Hence, in this day and age, the word mistake best describes the situation overall by tying in the various meanings throughout the ages.

The word mistake does not imply moral obliquity unlike the similar word error sometimes can. Mistake refers to something being unintended, whether it is a choice or false judgment. It also does not contain the implicit negative association, which the expression to fail or the word failure has. To fail denotes an ending and implies finality. To make a mistake does not mean the end of the world. Instead, it can end up serving as a means to another end, a more successful one at that.

## **The standard definition**

In the course of a series of quality management initiatives in recent decades, mistakes have taken center stage. Companies have aimed to make fewer mistakes, produce fewer defective products and ensure higher product quality. Standards were developed, processes defined and quality standards established. The ISO 9001 states: Non-conformity is the non-fulfillment of a requirement. If the demand is not met, the goal is not achieved. It is therefore clearly a “mistake.”

## **Different types of mistakes**

Requirements suit different needs.

- **Regarding the result:** If the result fulfills all of the requirements, the quality is guaranteed. If it does not meet a specific requirement, the product is compromised. Such defective products do not just encompass industrial ones as well as the skilled crafts and trades; they can also occur in administrative areas or the service sector.
- **Concerning the procedure:** If the procedure meets the requirements, it is good and right. Otherwise, it constitutes a process error. Process errors are steps and methods that deviate from the correct execution when creating products and services.
- **In light of the behavior:** If the conduct meets our expectations, all is in order. If it deviates from it, it is regarded as a behavioral error. Behavioral errors are mistakes that occur in the demeanor of the person as well as in the communication and cooperation aspects.

**Important**

**Sharpen your perception of different types of mistakes. Focus not only on product defects but also on the process and behavioral errors. This increases your awareness of mistakes.**

---

Use the following table to check how well you manage product, process, and behavioral errors. Enter the abbreviation Pd for a product error, Pc for a process error and B for a behavioral error.

What happened?	Type of mistake
1 There is a scratch on the product housing.	
2 The trainee speaks very quietly and is unintelligible.	
3 The buyer overlooks the timely reordering.	
4 The salesperson does not pay attention to customer requests.	
5 The control lamp does not go on.	
6 The hands are not disinfected before the physical examination.	
7 The manager yells at the young employee.	
8 The presentation contains outdated information.	
9 The files are stored in the wrong folder.	
10 The company cafeteria serves dried-up sandwiches.	
11 The doctor's prescription does not contain any dosage instructions for the medication.	
12 The tax consultant's statement is not in accordance with the law.	
13 The laboratory results are mixed up.	
14 The new program will not be tested before the rollout.	

Solution:

1 Pd, 2 B 3 Pc, 4 Pc, 5 Pd, 6 Pc, 7 B, 8 Pd, 9 Pc, 10 Pd, 11 Pd, 12 Pd, 13 Pc, 14 Pc

## When right and wrong are unclear

Requirements are not always as clear as they should be. They are usually precisely defined for products and processes, yet barely touched upon in the administrative areas. When it comes to our conduct, it is generally a gray area. Many requirements often only exist as implicit expectations. But even if they remain unspoken, they set a standard and people are judged accordingly: If the

conduct matches our expectations, we label it as correct. Otherwise, we regard it as incorrect.

To provide clarity and orientation for everyone involved, requirements are often defined in norms and secured by standards as well as established in processes. Nevertheless, it is often unclear as to what constitutes right and wrong. Different people often interpret what determines a mistake differently.

**Example:**

The two software specialists Rashad and Chris are up working late at the computer and want to wrap things up by booking train tickets for an upcoming meeting at a far away branch of their main client. The situation ignites an argument.

Rashad wants to get coach tickets. Chris says, "Check it out. Here is a special offer for a first-class ticket at half price. Instead of paying 207 bucks for coach, this costs just 129 bucks!" Rashad: "But we can't do that. You know the guidelines of our client: Only coach tickets!" However, Chris insists on the special offer: "But look, it's so much cheaper!" Rashad shakes his head vigorously: "We can't do that, it's wrong. We have to stick to their travel guidelines." "No, you're wrong!" Chris says. "The first-class ticket is so much cheaper. It would be a mistake to get the more expensive ticket!"

Convinced that they are both right, they buy their respective tickets: Rashad gets his for coach while Chris opts for first class.

But which decision is the wrong one aka the mistake? Is it a mistake to blatantly disregard the travel guidelines? Or is it a mistake to buy the more expensive ticket according to the rules?

A closer look at the requirements is recommended in this case. The travel policy is an explicit requirement. It was created to provide clarity to everyone involved regarding any business trips. Therefore, the compliant behavior is undoubtedly correct, at least at first glance. But what is the meaning behind the directive? Why was it established? What is its real goal? Does not the person who ignores the travel guidelines by paying more attention to cost-saving alternatives instead, achieve the goal better and thus act more appropriately?

We all try to do our best. According to our reasoning, we act correctly. But that does not mean that others will also view it that way from their point of view. To avoid mistakes, it is often necessary to clarify requirements that are not clearly defined.

**Important**

**Clarify the requirements. Be aware of both the pronounced and the unspoken requirements. Only then will you have the opportunity to act accordingly, to do**

## 1.3 Who is to blame

The question of what constitutes a mistake has occupied humanity for thousands of years, as have the questions about what is good and evil, what is right and wrong.

Over 2,000 years ago, the Greek philosopher Aristotle consciously distinguished between voluntary and involuntary action. In his opinion, a mistake is an involuntary act whilst any form of wrongdoing constitutes a voluntary act as it is done with intent to cause harm. Aristotle places the spotlight on the intention. The mistake lacks the bad intention. We can derive the following conclusions from this distinction:

- **Mistakes happen.** A mistake is usually an incident that happens to someone unwittingly. Thus a mistake is often an oversight, a slip.
- **A mistake is made.** Sometimes a mistake is also an action that you consciously set out to do, but without intending for it to have any negative consequences and still believing that you are doing everything by the book. You are acting on the basis of a misconception, a misjudgment or an incorrect point of view, without realizing the error of your ways. However, you are doing it all based on good intentions.
- **A crime is committed.** On the other hand, cases of wrongdoing are based on bad intentions. One is aiming to cause the greatest damage, or one approves of the dire outcome and thus acts deliberately or with conditional intent, ergo culpably.

For constructive handling of mistakes, it is therefore imperative to clearly distinguish between mistakes that simply happen or are supposedly made with good intentions in mind versus ones undertaken with malicious intent.

**Example:**

Nicole works in the public sector. Her job is to review the files of her colleagues, to recognize processing and calculation errors and to initiate their immediate correction. In so doing, she encounters some serious resistance. Whenever she enters an office, the clerks turn to stone. Nevertheless, she sticks to her guns. Relentlessly, she wags her index finger and starts off with: "It's all your fault!" Within a few seconds, the mood explodes. The clerks fight back against the

claim while defending their actions. Long after Nicole is gone, all they still hear echoing in their heads is the charge of “guilty, guilty, and guilty!”

Anyone who discusses mistakes in the context of blame confuses two different categories: mistakes and wrongdoing. However, only where there is malicious intent can we speak of guilt. Thus, the phrase often quoted in companies that “the employee is to blame,” constitutes an error in reasoning.

Anyone who accuses others of having made a mistake takes on the role of prosecutor. One accuses them of malicious intent. One turns the others into the defendants, accusing them of some form of wrongdoing. Therefore, do not act surprised if the others deny or shirk the blame. In fact, one makes a mistake in dealing with mistakes: a behavioral error.

#### **Important**

**A mistake happens, it is made, it is caused, or it happens unwittingly. But it is not intentional. Only cases of wrongdoing are intentional as they are committed conditionally or even deliberately.**

---

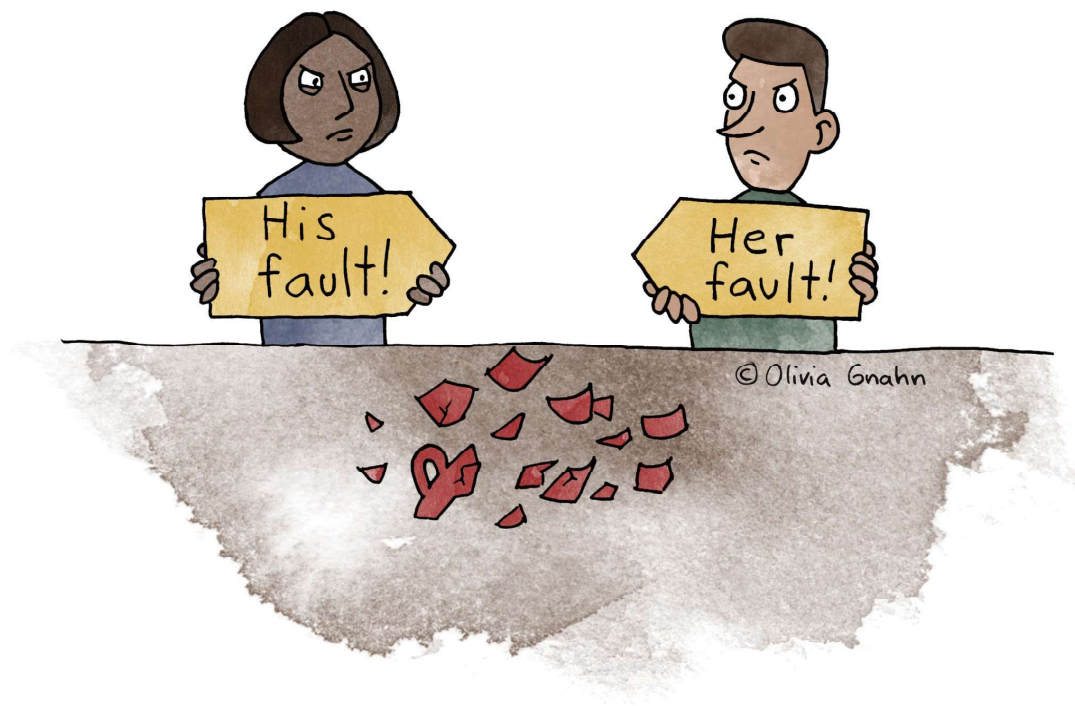
## **1.4 What characterizes a positive Mistake Culture**

The expression Blame Culture refers to a “culture” in which mistakes are experienced as a source of great embarrassment, in which those causing the mistakes are blamed and branded while the finger is pointed at them for all to see. Therefore, a Blame Culture is the epitome of mishandling mistakes and their agents, hence an ineffective or negative Mistake Culture. All of us have to contend with this destructive kind of behavior. That is why it is worth reviewing the problematic aspects of the Blame Culture and the underlying individual characteristics of how to deal with mistakes.

### **From a Blame Culture to a positive Mistake Culture**

You are not handed an effective and positive Mistake Culture. Rather, it results from a respectful and appreciative attitude towards one another as well as a constructive and cooperative approach. Four aspects are especially relevant.





## #1: Seek out causes instead of guilty parties

A positive Mistake Culture does not seek out culprits. Instead, it searches for the underlying causes. It requires shifting one's perspective. Instead of focusing in on people, you review the matter at hand.

Search for the culprit	Search for the cause
Who did that? Who caused this? Who screwed up?	How did this happen? What led to the mistake? What are the causes?

## #2: Aiming for improvement instead of punishment

A constructive Mistake Culture is not about punishment. One does not act as judge and jury, sentencing the guilty parties. One does not demand punishment, but requests improvement. The focus shifts from penance to solution.

Punishment	Improvement
You will regret that! That is going to have consequences! That is going to result in disciplinary action!	What can we do better? How can we stop the mistake? How can we prevent a repetitive mistake?