

Owning Your Mistakes - A Hard Lesson Learned

It is never easy to own up to one's mistake, especially when one prides him or herself on a particular way he or she does things. However, no one is perfect and even the best of teams make mistakes. What you do after that is really the defining moment of what kind of person or team you are. To understand what we're talking about, we'd like to share a mistake we made and how it affected our team.

First, it is important to define what we mean by mistake. By definition, a mistake is "to understand (something or someone) incorrectly; to make a wrong judgment about (something); to identify (someone or something) incorrectly" (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/mistake>). It happens to everyone and no one should ever hang his or her head for making an error every now and again. No one is perfect. Some mistakes are small while others are huge and disastrous. However, it's the intent behind the mistake and the process of recovery from it that is truly important.

It is important to note, a mistake is **not** doing something to someone or something with intent. A mistake is not knowingly making false statements or judgments, or knowingly deceiving someone. A mistake is not intending for people to get hurt by your actions or words. There **IS** a difference. We're not talking about those actions...that's a whole different post.

We learned a hard lesson with a big mistake our team made earlier this summer. A member of our team made a mistake on an investigation. (*For privacy purposes to the individuals involved, we won't disclose the specific details.*) It was a pretty big mistake; one that completely violates our Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) and one that some believe could cause potential harm to others. The member who made the mistake had absolutely good intentions with his actions. For all intents and purposes, it came from a good place in his heart with what he was trying to do. Nonetheless, it was against our rules. The other members present were completely unaware at the time that it even happened, but we all found out very bright and early the next morning when the team member informed the other members. It was **not** a good way to start the day for MVP. But it happened.

The initial response from the team was shock. How could this happen? Every member on the team had been through multiple training events, panel discussions, team meetings, and were all well-versed in our team's rules. Every member signed the disclosures and team SOP. Every member got the lecture from the Command Team as to why the rules are the rules. We are normally an extremely disciplined team. We have worked with numerous teams and individuals on other events that always noted how organized, thorough, methodical and professional our team was. So how could this happen and what does it mean?

Once we got past the initial shock of what happened, we came to the immediate decision that the team member that violated the SOP had to be disciplined and was removed from that position immediately. It was a difficult decision but it wasn't a difficult decision at the same time. It was difficult because our team is very close. We're a family. It was difficult because we knew he did not mean any harm with what he did and had nothing but good intentions. However, it wasn't difficult because we stand by our SOP. It wasn't difficult because we have rules and procedures for a reason, and unless an extreme situation calls for it, we don't deviate from those rules and procedures. This was not the case and it was unacceptable.

What isn't surprising to us, but may be surprising to others, is that our team member owned up to his mistake right away. He did not try to hide it, which would have been easy for him to do. He did not make excuses. He did not lie. He did not blame others or point fingers. Instead, he **owned** it. He told us what happened, admitted it was wrong, apologized, and then said he would honor whatever disciplinary actions were to be taken. Because of how he handled it, we maintained the utmost respect for him. If anything, we respected him more for how he handled it.

It was a learning point and reminder to us as a team: No matter how good you may think you are, you are not perfect. You must consistently train. Mistakes happen. No one is immune to them. It was also a very real and humbling moment for us. We recognized some weaknesses in our training, as well as how we conducted ourselves when we think no one is watching. We saw how important it is to remove the emotion from investigations because it can cloud one's judgment at a time when objectivity is paramount. It grounded us and though it had some serious ripple effect repercussions, in the end it was a good wake up call that no training could have given us.

The moral of the story is not just that people make mistakes. It is how we handle those mistakes and how we grow from them. Far too often we are seeing, hearing, and reading about people who make mountains out of molehills because their own self-serving pride prevents them from owning up to errors they have made in their actions, words, or judgments. Rather than taking responsibility and accountability for them, they either lie or start pointing fingers outward. That's neither mature nor professional. Not only that, but it compromises the integrity of the individual and/or team involved.

How hard is it to say, "I messed up. I'm sorry. It won't happen again."? You will recover far quicker once you take responsibility for your actions. Unless you're completely hard-headed and too full of yourself to notice, you'll even learn from

the mistake. You'll grow and evolve as a researcher, investigator, and as a person. Without that accountability, however, you're setting yourself up for failure. How can you rectify something that you won't even acknowledge?

Remember, respect is earned and not given. If you are afraid to take responsibility and ownership for your mistakes because you're afraid of a bad review or making someone upset, then you're mistaking integrity for popularity. If you want people to respect you, your team, and how/what you do, then taking accountability for your mistakes and acknowledging your failures, is just as important as posting up all of your accolades.