



## Better by Mistake

### The Unexpected Benefits of Being Wrong

#### THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

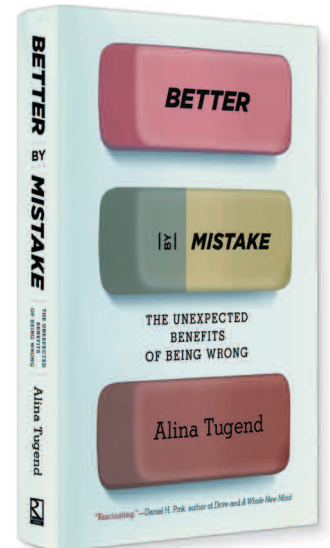
Journalist Alina Tugend examines the delicate tension between what we are told — we must make mistakes in order to learn — and the reality — we often get punished for them. In *Better by Mistake*, she shows us that mistakes are everywhere, and when we acknowledge and identify them correctly, we can improve not only ourselves but our families, our work and the world around us as well.

Through fascinating research, Tugend reveals how cultural attitudes about mistakes can affect us from the earliest stages in our lives and shape us into adults who steer clear of risks and challenges. She takes us behind the scenes into cutting-edge behavioral studies; invites us into the high-stakes world of health care and aviation, where mistakes can cost lives; and delves into the art and science behind learning how to craft a sincere apology and taking responsibility for mistakes.

Bold and dynamic, insightful and provocative, *Better by Mistake* turns our cultural wisdom on its head to illustrate the downside of striving for perfection and the rewards of acknowledging and accepting mistakes and embracing the imperfection in all of us.

#### IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- The many definitions of a mistake and why it is more important to understand the differences between types of errors.
- Why human beings are resistant to mistakes and tend to play it safe.
- The way to create a culture that is more aware of mistakes.
- Why a zero-tolerance policy for mistakes can actually lead to a greater number of errors.



by Alina Tugend

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# THE COMPLETE SUMMARY: BETTER BY MISTAKE

by Alina Tugend

**The author:** Alina Tugend has written about education, environmentalism and consumer culture for numerous publications, including *The Los Angeles Times* and *The Atlantic*. She also writes the award-winning “ShortCuts” column for *The New York Times*.

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## Introduction

The fear of making mistakes is a cudgel that hangs over so many of us, preventing us from not only taking risks in our personal and professional lives, but even more important, from really accepting — not just giving lip service to — the truth that we all are human and imperfect. Of course, there are big mistakes and small ones and varying levels of consequence. A pilot error that crashes a plane full of people is not in the same league as a minor mistake in a law brief or forgetting to pick up your child from dance lessons. But for most of us, a mistake does not cost a life. I think almost everyone can relate to an anecdote told in a 1999 research paper by a British academic, Patricia Bryans, on what men and women learn from making mistakes at work.

A student of hers, “David,” was a night-shift supervisor at a food-production factory. One night, when he was about to start production, he realized that he had mixed ten times too much of one ingredient. David was tempted to ignore and cover up his mistake and go ahead, knowing that the product would taste awful but look fine. Instead, he confessed, held up production, remixed the batch, and left work. The next day, his manager issued a formal written notice saying that if David made one more mistake, he could be fired. David naturally was very upset about this, and his attitude toward his job changed completely. “He now took every opportunity to sneer at what they ‘preached’ about quality. He started to look for another job. His eagerness to learn and improve was severely diminished. His major learning from that experience seemed to be that he should never have owned up to his mistake,” Bryans wrote.

All too often, we come away with David’s lesson about making a mistake: ignore it, blame someone else, rationalize it — do anything to avoid admitting it because you just might put yourself in a position of weakness.

Now if David constantly messed up the baking process, then his manager would be right in issuing a warning — and then firing him if need be. But if this was David’s first mistake — or even second within a certain period of time — his manager could have discussed how the mistake happened to see if there was a systemic problem, and he could have acknowledged that, indeed, we’re all human and mistakes *do* happen.

By delving deeply into why and how we react to errors, we can learn how to acknowledge mistakes without foisting the blame onto others or beating ourselves up. That allows us to be more open to the valuable lessons that mistakes can offer — and will ultimately improve our work and our relationships with our bosses, spouses, and children. ●

## (Mis)Understanding and (Re)Defining Mistakes

Defining a mistake, it seems, is almost as difficult as, well, defining happiness. When Bryans asked participants in a study to provide a definition of mistakes, they “largely agreed that the key issues were misjudgment and adverse consequences which were unplanned. For them, it was the scale of the consequences which differentiated mistakes from errors or slips.”

Even then, a real mistake can vary widely. It can be an accounting error that costs millions of dollars, a newspaper article that cites incorrect information, or a teacher



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scolding the wrong people for misbehaving. But it can also be leaving a sponge in a patient during surgery, causing a fatal infection, or wrongly diagnosing an illness.

The intensive study of errors in high-risk fields offers great insights into what causes people to make mistakes and what works best to prevent them. Although the expertise may be different, human reaction and behavior, for the most part, translate across professions.

James Reason, a professor of psychology at the University of Manchester in England, defines an error as the failure of a planned sequence of mental or physical activities to achieve its intended outcome when these failures cannot be attributed to chance. A slip or lapse is when action does not go according to plan — when we step on the gas instead of the brake. A mistake, however, is when the plan itself is inadequate to achieve its objectives.

We usually judge the severity of the mistake by the outcome or, as Bryans says, the scale of the consequences. A mistake can occur with the best information and the best intentions or through carelessness or lack of knowledge. In January, most banks will receive checks with the previous year written on them. We know every year those errors are going to happen. This type of error is called “strong habit intrusion” and is the most common of all error types.

### Active Errors versus Latent Errors

A concept that is key to how we think about errors is that of differentiating between active and latent errors. An active error, for example, is the pilot crashing the plane. The latent error is a design malfunction causing the plane to roll unexpectedly, which the pilot couldn't control.

“If you want to understand human error,” writes Sidney Dekker, author of *The Field Guide to Understanding Human Error*, “you have to assume that people were doing reasonable things given the complexities, dilemmas, trade-offs and uncertainty that surround them. Just finding and highlighting people's mistakes explain nothing. Saying what people did not do or what they should have done does not explain why they did what they did.”

Dekker talks about the tendency to examine the mistake from outside the tunnel, where we can clearly see every twist and turn, every possible problem, and observe where every road leads. How different that is from being in the tunnel, where we have to make split-second decisions, perhaps based on faulty data and unclear directions, often while we are stressed or scared.

Hindsight bias makes us assume that a bad outcome could only be preceded by a bad process. It causes us to oversimplify history relative to how people understood it at the time it was happening.

Most of us know the story of how Moses became angry at his followers for creating the golden calf to worship while he was busy getting the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai — and in his fury at his people's lack of faith, he smashed the tablets. The original tablets symbolized unattainable purity, Irving Greenberg, a Jewish scholar, says, and once Moses destroyed them, he and his followers had to work through heartbreak, reconciliation catharsis, and ultimately the creation of new tablets. This new set of tablets was “the product of hard-won repentances, built on realism, forgiveness and acceptance of others' limitations,” Greenberg writes. “Out of our brokenness we become stronger than when we claimed to be whole.”

We all — from Moses to us — must acknowledge that we can never be perfect, nor should we try to be. But defining mistakes and acknowledging them is only the beginning. It doesn't do us much good unless we also try to change our approach in ways that will benefit us and those around us. ●

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### It Starts Early

Carol Dweck is a professor of psychology at Stanford University whose highly influential research has closely examined children's reactions to mistakes. She found the children commended for being smart are often less willing to take chances than those praised for making a greater effort. When we applaud children for their intelligence, she said, “we tell them that this is the name of the game: Look smart; don't risk making mistakes.”

As a graduate student at Yale, Dweck started off studying animal motivation and learned helplessness: the animals sometimes didn't do what they were capable of doing because they had given up after numerous failures. Dweck wondered how this translated to humans — why do some children quit in the face of failure while others are motivated?

What Dweck's research showed is that whether or not we think we have the innate talent or skills to do something — as opposed to believing in general we can work and improve ourselves in most areas — has a significant effect on how we view mistakes. Those who see their abilities as fixed, as innate and inflexible, are “entity” believers in psychological parlance, or as Dweck terms it, they have “fixed mindsets.” They fear mistakes because they think they are simply not smart or talented

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enough to do the task required, and they learn to be defensive and foist blame on anything or anyone but themselves. Those who hold “incremental” beliefs, or in Dweck’s language, “growth mindsets,” see ability as a malleable quality and therefore believe that with enough effort they can overcome obstacles. They may not embrace mistakes, but they tend to see them as more of the process of learning than as a reflection of their intelligence or abilities.

Socioeconomic class, culture, and ethnicity all come into play when delving into how we respond to mistakes and our willingness to learn from them. It starts with not only the overt messages but also the covert messages our parents and other authority figures gave us. Do we tell our children that “it’s okay to make mistakes” and then yell at them for spilling milk?

The key question is how much we believe we can do with what we were born with. If we believe our skills are pretty much set in concrete, we are going to avoid and dread mistakes, because what do they show us except that we’ve screwed up? If we believe that with more effort we can keep getting better and better, then we can view mistakes less harshly and as part of an overall process of growing and learning. ●

### “Fail Often, Fast and Cheap”

Chris Argyris, a professor emeritus at Harvard Business School, has spent decades writing about how employees in organizations learn from errors and is considered one of the great theorists in organizational learning. Argyris argues that most responses to errors fall into the category of single-loop learning — when a mistake is detected and corrected without questioning the underlying values of the system. The phrase is borrowed from electrical engineering: a thermostat is defined as a single-loop learner. The thermostat is programmed to detect states of “too cold” or “too hot” and to correct the situation by turning the heat on or off. Double-loop learning, on the other hand, means to question the underlying factors themselves and subject them to critical scrutiny — it turns the question back on the questioner and asks not only about objective facts but also about the reasons and motives behind those facts.

Not all mistakes are alike, and not all require examining and challenging the surrounding criteria. Imagine an office where workers constantly debated every error — making the wrong change, mistyping a law brief — rather than simply correcting the problem.

Sometimes, however, it may seem like single-loop learning is all that is necessary, but that just short-circuits

the real learning process. Argyris gives the example of a CEO who found out that his company inhibited innovation in employees by subjecting every new idea to more than 275 checks and sign-offs. He promptly eliminated 200 of them, and the result was a higher innovation rate. It sounds like a successful case of identifying a problem and resolving it, but it is only a case of successful single-loop learning by ignoring a more fundamental problem of why the checks and sign-offs had been around for so long. A double-loop approach would require the CEO to ask employees who told him about the problem some tough questions, such as “What goes on in this company that prevents you from questioning these practices and getting them eliminated?”

### The Reasons We Play It Safe

In *Mistakes Were Made (But Not by Me)*, social scientists Carol Tavris and Elliot Aronson write that all of us share the impulse to excuse what we do, to convince ourselves that we didn’t act in a bad or irrational way, and to avoid taking responsibility for harming someone. Most companies — like most people — don’t see themselves as promoting a work environment where mistakes are feared and avoided. They say they encourage risk taking and innovation, but in reality, they don’t. All too often mistakes are treated as something shameful that should be flung aside as quickly as possible rather than as something to be examined and learned from. And because of this, companies — and employees — fail to uncover systemic problems that may be leading to the errors.

Paul J.H. Shoemaker and Robert E. Gunther broke down into four categories the reasons that they think most human beings are resistant to making mistakes and therefore play it safe:

- **We are overconfident.** We are often blind to the limits of our expertise.
- **We are risk-averse.** This is because “our personal and professional pride is tied up in being right.”
- **We tend to favor data that confirm our beliefs.** The result is that we don’t often see the alternatives.
- **We assume feedback is reliable.** In reality, it is often lacking or misleading.

In their book *Leaders: Strategies for Taking Charge*, Warren Bennis and Burton Nanus advise that institutions reward admissions of mistakes as part of the organizational culture. Bill Gates, founder of Microsoft, is often quoted as saying, “How a company deals with mistakes suggests how well it will bring out the best

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ideas and talents of its people.”

While most people will do anything to avoid making a mistake, research has shown that some people actually respond better to certain types of training when they are encouraged to make gaffes rather than to avoid them. As Rutgers professor Stanley Gully states, failing to fail can restrict individuals from exploring alternatives, inhibit risk taking, and perhaps lead to complacency.

Carol Dweck argues that adulation of talent proved fatal for Enron. “Basically, it forced them into the fixed mindset. We know from our studies that people with the fixed mindset do not admit and correct their deficiencies.”

The types of mistakes we make in the workplace may be of a different sort and have a different impact than those we make in other parts of our lives, but the tools we need to react to and learn from them in a positive manner are the same. Remember the words of Nike’s founder, Phil Knight, who changed the sports shoe industry: “The problem in America is not that we are making too many mistakes but that we are making too few.” ●

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### It’s Not Brain Surgery ... But What If It Is?

Published by the Institute of Medicine, the *To Err Is Human* study immediately attracted enormous attention among both health professionals and the public. The study cited a staggering statistic: at least 44,000 people and as many as 98,000 people die each year in hospitals in the United States as a result of preventable medical errors. One of the report’s authors compared that figure to three fully loaded jumbo jets crashing every other day.

The authors divided types of errors into four groups:

- **Diagnostic.** This includes error or delay in diagnosis.
- **Treatment.** This includes error in performing an operation, test, or procedure.
- **Preventative.** This includes failure to provide preventative treatment or inadequate monitoring.
- **Other.** This includes failure of communication, equipment failure, or other system failure.

The initial step, of course, was to examine why such errors occur. The report cited a number of reasons, including the decentralized and fragmented nature of the health care delivery system. Health care, the report stated, is a decade or more behind most other high-risk

industries, like aviation, in paying attention to basic safety, and this is due partially to the lack of one designated government agency devoted to improving and monitoring safety.

A key point made in the report is that “the majority of medical errors do not result from individual recklessness or the actions of a particular group.” More commonly errors are caused by faulty systems, processes, and conditions that lead people to make mistakes or fail to prevent them.

In trying to classify the severity of mistakes, we need to look not just at the mistake itself but also at the outcome and the reason it occurred. The concept of *Just Culture* represents an attempt to find the balance between only blaming the individual and never blaming the individual. An underlying idea in *Just Culture* is that we as a society are too focused on outcomes and not on choices and behavior.

### A Culture of Awareness

The way to create a culture more aware of errors, then, is not to institute an atmosphere where there is zero tolerance for mistakes. Rather, the idea should be to establish an environment where people feel safe to ask questions and experiment.

Although we strive to do the best we can, perfection is not an option. The cultural barriers to working through and learning from mistakes may be more ingrained in the medical field than in other professions, but the basics are true across the board. First of all, avoid scapegoating; the problem often isn’t one of an incompetent worker but of a systemic failure.

We want, within reason, to accept the mistakes of others and have others accept ours. What we learn from the body of research that has grown out of addressing medical mistakes is that even in this most complex arena, such change is possible. ●

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### Lessons from the Cockpit

The more I read about it, the more I realized how much has been discovered about why and how people make mistakes — and the best ways to try to prevent them — by studying aviation, and cockpit crews in particular. The research in this field provides the building blocks for understanding error prevention across all fields.

Robert Helmreich, professor emeritus of psychology at the University of Texas, is one of the pioneers in developing systems to make aviation safer. He became involved in pilot safety in 1979, after a “series of embar-

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rassing aviation mistakes,” Helmreich told me.

Helmreich approached flight safety in a novel way: rather than look solely at how people interacted with the technology, he and his people looked at the human factors that lead to error. These include poor communication, fatigue, stress, and overwork. The Human Factors Research Project worked on the assumption that preventing accidents is the goal, not discovering what went wrong after the fact.

As Malcolm Gladwell notes, “Plane crashes are much more likely to be the result of an accumulation of minor difficulties and seemingly trivial malfunctions.” Once again, we look back at the idea of many latent errors leading up to the obvious active errors — and it’s the latent ones we need to uncover and fix.

Many aviation experts, like Robert Sumwalt, who flew for US Airways for almost 25 years and is now a member of the National Transportation Safety Board, believes that virtually all accidents can be traced back to human error somewhere in the system. “In reality, we’ll never get rid of error,” he told me. What we have to do is figure out what mistakes people are likely to make and try to prevent them or build such a robust system that even if a mistake occurs, it won’t be calamitous.

### Lowering the Risk When Mistakes Are Made

What has proved successful in aviation is a combination of training programs, observation, attitudinal surveys, and data collection. Part of the goal of crew resource management (CRM) is to get pilots to understand how stress, work overload, and fatigue can cause them to make mistakes. One of the changes that grew out of CRM was the institution of the preflight briefing. Another key change was that junior crew members are not only allowed but expected to speak up to the captain if there’s a threat.

Research shows that highly effective cockpit crews use one-third of their communications to discuss threats and errors in their environment, regardless of their workload, while poorly performing teams spend about one-twentieth of their time doing the same. As data on accidents accumulated, it became increasingly obvious that most accidents were related to breakdowns in crew coordination, communications, and decision making. One important way to reduce those accidents was a shift toward a more open culture that allowed questioning and recognized human limitations.

In developing systems to avoid errors we can’t just go on assumptions but need to closely observe and collect all sorts of information to truly understand how people involved think and operate. The first step in identifying

why mistakes happen and attempting to prevent them is to pinpoint embedded beliefs — and the corresponding values, such as it’s not manly to admit exhaustion — and then use hard data to show why such beliefs and values can be harmful. The next step is to find ways to solve those problems with a flexible and ever-evolving approach. ●

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## Blaming You, Blaming Me

There is a general consensus that women agonize more and blame themselves more and that men get over their blunders faster and tend to point their fingers at others. But is there any research to back up the belief that men and women actually respond differently to their screwups?

Patricia Bryans, when working at Newcastle Business School at Northumbria University in England, researched management development, gender and emotion, and women in management and conducted one of the few studies directly looking at how men and women react to mistakes in the workplace. She found that “Women tend to internalize and personalize the experience of their mistakes, taking them ‘to heart’ and continuing to live with them long after the event. Rather than looking to find fault externally, women blamed themselves. For men, by contrast, feelings were more likely to be externalized, directed outwards through anger at others, blaming ‘pressures’ of the system or emphasizing the particularities of the context in which they were operating.” Men were also less likely to retain strong emotions after making a mistake.

### Is a Woman’s Expertise Blindly Disregarded?

What about how women are viewed by others? A 2004 study found that women are much less likely to be viewed as experts than men — even when they have the requisite knowledge. The researchers found that not only were women’s opinions more often disregarded than men’s, but women who had no particular know-how in the area were viewed more favorably than women with greater capability — because the women without expertise tended to go along with the status quo rather than challenge it.

Women tend to agonize more about their mistakes, at least in the workplace. Women, fearing their mistakes may be judged more harshly than men’s, are far more reluctant to risk them. In addition, women may steer clear of the possibility of making mistakes because they tend to be more affected, more cast down by them than men. If something causes you pain, you’ll do a lot to avoid it.

Simply understanding that someone of the opposite sex — be it a colleague or a spouse — has the tendency to react to mistakes differently can help us. Neither sex has a monopoly on the “right” way to cope with mistakes. We could each take something from the other’s playbook. Women tend to be more emotionally devastated by errors they make and dwell on them far longer than men. If a great deal of energy is spent on beating oneself up, then there is not much left over to actually learn from mistakes. Being able to depersonalize mistakes helps us view them more objectively and learn whatever lessons can be learned from them. Men, on the other hand, tend to find others at fault and then leave the error hastily behind — or at least appear to. They aren’t as shaken up by mistakes and thus can be more willing to take risks. But on the other hand, not much learning can take place if one doesn’t realistically look at how the problem occurred and what can be done to prevent it in the future. ●

### You Say Mistake, I Say Lesson

It is easy to assume that our approach to mistakes — whatever that may be — is universal. But that’s not true. Our response to errors grows out of deeply embedded cultural beliefs and values — beliefs and values we’re often not even consciously aware of.

Most of the comparative work available relating in any way to errors and mistakes compared North American and Asian — primarily Japanese — cultures.

One of the main differences, broadly speaking, is that Japan is oriented toward the community and the group, while the United States is a highly individualistic society. Hazel Markus, professor of psychology at Stanford University, explained it to me this way: “You don’t feel your performance is a function just of you and what’s inside you. [In a Japanese school] the reality is interdependence of people — my behavior is a function of yours and yours of mine.” Making a mistake, therefore, isn’t a reflection of your lack of ability or intelligence but simply that you haven’t learned something yet. “Often teachers asked for a show of hands from students who had obtained correct and incorrect answers to a problem, and the show of hands for incorrect answers was often substantial. Students who criticized their own thinking were warmly acknowledged, as were students who explained the thinking behind their mistakes, so that, as one teacher said, ‘Everyone in the class can learn from the students who tried to solve the problem this way.’ Mistakes became opportunities to help classmates rather than failures to be hidden.”

### The Bay of Pigs

When Carol Tavris and Elliot Aronson published *Mistakes Were Made (But Not by Me)* in 2007, they stated that the last American president to tell the country that he had made a terrible mistake — and to show that he had learned from it — was John F. Kennedy back in 1961. OK, granted, it was a doozy: he believed the claims and faulty intelligence of his top military advisers, who assured him that once America invaded Cuba at the Bay of Pigs, the people would rise up in relief and gratitude and overthrow Castro. The invasion was a disaster, but Kennedy actually took on board the harsh lesson by reorganizing his intelligence system and no longer uncritically accepting the claims of his military advisers, a change that may have made all the difference in averting tragedy in the subsequent Cuban missile crisis. Kennedy told newspaper publishers, “This administration intends to be candid about its errors. For as a wise man once said, ‘An error does not become a mistake until you refuse to correct it.’” The final responsibility, Kennedy said, for the Bay of Pigs invasion was “mine and mine alone.” Guess what? Kennedy’s popularity soared.

James Stigler, a UCLA psychology professor who has written extensively on Asian and American teaching practices, says that “For Americans, errors tend to be interpreted as an indication of failure in learning the lesson. For Chinese and Japanese, they are an index of what still needs to be learned.” There is a real fear in this country, he said, that if students are allowed to pursue the wrong path in figuring out a problem, they might, in fact, learn the subject matter incorrectly. So teachers tend not to leave a mistake uncorrected for even a short period of time. That is not true in Japan. Americans are motivated to achieve success, while Japanese are motivated to avoid failure. This is not to say that people from Japan don’t want to feel good about themselves, but rather that in their culture, individual self-esteem is not necessarily the road to satisfaction. It is more about maintaining face.

### Re-Examining a Culture’s Take On Mistakes

When we’re small children, we tend to think that how we live is how everyone lives. When we discover differences, we have to slightly rearrange our way of thinking — not everybody is like us. So it is when we investigate other cultures and their attitudes about mistakes; we re-examine our own way of measuring our successes and failures. The Japanese emphasis on effort, for example, can remind us that making mistakes while

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trying something new is to be commended, not disparaged, and that although it is difficult to always keep this in mind, we shouldn't revere results while diminishing the value of process. If we effortlessly accomplish our goals, we haven't really learned anything. Others outside our own literal and figurative boundaries can help us rethink our own assumptions and goals. ●

### I Want to Apologize

There's a *New Yorker* cartoon that shows a wife saying to her husband, "I don't want your apology — I want you to be sorry." That pretty much sums up a large part of the apology problem: saying you're sorry doesn't really mean you are.

For such a seemingly simple interaction, apologies are surprisingly complex. A proper apology has three elements: an acknowledgment of the fault or offense, regret for it, and responsibility for it — and, if possible, a way to fix the problem. Because we often don't separate these three aspects, we frequently get caught up in who is to blame and find it difficult to apologize when it shouldn't be.

When apologizing we should be thinking of communicating rather than expressing regret, because expression is one-sided — more like a monologue that aims to get something off your chest. Communicating should be a dialogue that works toward a resolution. And while a good apology is important, we all also get annoyed by over-apologizers — those who can't seem to stop saying they're sorry. On the other end of the spectrum are those who avoid apologizing at all costs, afraid it will imply weakness or won't resolve the problem anyhow, so what's the point?

### An Accountability Shortfall

The last part of the apology triumvirate, accountability, is the area where most people fall short. Accountability does not necessarily — although it often should — mean some kind of restitution or changed behavior. But we expect that when someone is genuinely sorry and expresses regret, that as much as possible he will look back at what went wrong and try to avoid doing it again.

Over the past few decades, research has shown that what we learned back in preschool also works in the corporate world: saying I'm sorry — and meaning it — makes the other person feel better. And therefore, she might be less likely to sue. Or take her business elsewhere. Real-life examples and academic research show that people are apt to overestimate the cost of apologies

and underestimate the benefits. In a British study of malpractice patients, 37 percent said that they would never have gone to court in the first place had they been offered an explanation and an apology.

If we can't apologize properly for our mistakes or accept others' genuine apologies, then we haven't learned all we can from our mistakes. If we can't express contrition in a clear manner — acknowledgment of transgression; regret and responsibility for it; and hopefully a way to fix it — then that may be because we have failed to come to terms with how we, or others, erred. An apology isn't separate from the mistake; rather, it's an integral part of the lesson to be learned. A genuine expression of remorse and an offer of accountability aims not only to repair what went wrong in the past but to help build greater understanding and trust in the future. ●

### Conclusion

There are no simple fixes, but there are ways all of us can shift our thinking about mistakes. Starting with our children, we can emphasize effort and deemphasize results. We can appreciate that we — and they — can't be perfect, nor is it a goal we should aim for. We should strive to do our best, but if the prize is ever-elusive perfection, then fear of failure will too often overshadow the willingness to experiment, take risks and challenge ourselves.

The truth also is, sometimes a faux pas is just a faux pas and there is no great lesson or wonderful epiphany at the end. It might just be a blunder that messes up your workday. We all make our share of those mistakes, and that's OK also. But if we can all forgive ours and others' errors more often, if we can acknowledge that perfection is a myth and that human beings screw up on a regular basis — and we can either simply feel bad about it and find someone to accuse or learn from it — then we are on the right track. Make no mistake about it. ●

#### RECOMMENDED READING LIST

If you liked *Better by Mistake*, you'll also like:

1. ***How Did That Happen?* by Roger Connors and Tom Smith.** This summary offers a proven way to eliminate the shocking effects of a lack of personal accountability in an organization.
2. ***Brain Rules* by John Medina.** This summary introduces 12 Brain Rules that cover what scientists know for sure about how our brains work and also offers ideas for how each rule might apply to our daily lives.
3. ***The Power of Habit* by Charles Duhigg.** Duhigg takes us to the thrilling edge of scientific discoveries that explain why habits exist and how they can be changed.