

# To err can be divine

Dennis Sleigh

**A**s school leaders, we know that we make mistakes. We might be tempted to hide them, to minimise them, even to deny them, but our fallibility is clear to all – subordinates, peers and superiors. In the classroom, where every teacher is a leader, the same thing applies. Since we cannot ignore these failings, let us at least see if we can understand them.

When we make a mistake, it is often because we fail to think carefully about the situation. We might upset a parent, treat a student unfairly, fail to submit a report on time, or forget a significant event in the school day. Whatever the nature of the error, there are certain features that are common – and from which we can learn.

*This brief article is about facing up to our problems so that we can learn where we went wrong, and hopefully, avoid making the same mistake in the future.* The following four points may be a useful guide to avoid repeating mistakes. My assumption is that, having previously made errors, we are now seeking ways to avoid doing the same thing again.

## a) Beware the first solution

Errors often arise because we grasp the first possible solution. We are faced with a challenge – such as a naughty student, an irate parent, a distressed staff-member, or a deadline long gone – and we know that we want to find an effective solution, quickly.

Because we are under some pressure to act, we do not have the time to consult with peers, or even to reflect deeply on our own experiences. Therefore, when a solution presents itself, we tend to grab it and run with it. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with this – especially if we are experienced and we have reason to trust our instincts. However, the first solution is not always the best one.

In his last book, *The 3rd Alternative*, Steven Covey explores this notion with his characteristic thoroughness. He warns us that when two people are on a collision course, the outcome is often unsatisfactory for at least one party. Perhaps I will insist that I am right, in which case the other party will be unhappy; perhaps I will meekly accede to the demands of the other, leaving me rather dissatisfied; or at best, we will reach some sort of a compromise, leaving both parties still edgy about the result. Covey suggests a different model – he calls this his *3rd Alternative* and he explains in detail how to achieve this win-win position. Fundamentally, what he is saying is that we should take the time to explore options and challenge our protagonist to join us in finding the *best* solution, not merely the *first* one.

I realise that, under pressure, we often feel unable to find the time to give the matter much thought, but Covey suggests that the only successful way to face a problem is to make the time to consider it. If we can develop the habit of “think first, act later” our mistake rate in the future will be less serious.

Covey’s ideas remind me of the work of Roger Von Oech who wrote *A Whack on the Side of the Head* 20 years ago. (A revised version is now available.) He suggested that our infatuation with “the right answer” often limited our thinking; he advocated looking for a second (and even third or fourth) answer. If we can force ourselves into this mind set – and I have already noted that it means taking extra time to solve problems – we can gain a huge deal from the process. Let me share a very simple example.

I enjoy playing a timed computer game where, faced with a jumbled series of letters, I have to decipher them. I was racing the clock recently when confronted with DDNEMA. I typed in DEMAND and kept going – only to be beaten because the desired word was DAMNED. Clearly, the first solution was not the only one.



Applying this experience to the task of leading in a school, it is clear that the first solution that pops into our head is not always the one that will help us. We need to discern whether there is an even better solution – and still stay within the time pressures! It is no small challenge.

## b) Make up for errors

Granted that we are going to be wrong sometimes, what is the implication of our fallibility? The main point to remember is that most mistakes can be forgiven. At times it might seem that we are in the midst of an unforgivable situation, but on reflection, we come to realise that all is not lost. Of course, there are some steps that we will have to take, and they might not be easy. The first is to admit to ourselves that we have made a mistake and then we have to be willing to apologise to any victims of our errant ways. This can be a “hair shirt event” if the other party chooses to make us squirm, but in my experience most people seem happy to see that we are apologising and that they are in the right.

Of course, the apology must be whole-hearted and based on a willingness to make amends. Have you ever told a student to apologise to someone who has been hurt, only to see the perpetrator walk up, hands in pockets, and almost snarl at the victim “Sorry!” This is hardly what I call a heart-felt apology and everyone knows it. On the other hand, when we

have indeed put our foot in it, and then turn to the injured party to express our genuine sorrow, it is usually clear that we mean what we say.

Often, people are looking for nothing more than to have a fair and respectful hearing, be understood, be given an explanation for the error and then be offered a genuine apology. These are indeed small prices to pay when compared with the long-lasting costs of a destroyed relationship.

Having apologised, we must also take steps to avoid making the error again. If we really mean our apology, it is logical that we won't want to repeat our mistakes. We know, as fallible humans, that we probably will go astray again, but at least we might choose a different way to do it. To err is human but to err the same way repeatedly is downright careless.

### c) See errors in context

No-one really likes making mistakes (or at least being caught having done so) but once we get over our initial embarrassment, we should face the reality that very few of our blunders are so serious that human existence as we know it will be put at risk. I have filled in important forms incorrectly, forgotten significant appointments, acted hastily in a crisis with negative effects, and done most of the other things that school leaders hate to admit to. I have been embarrassed, occasionally upbraided, and even ridiculed because of my silly actions – but once the dust settled, the world still remained in its fixed orbit.

This doesn't mean we should be blasé about our slip-ups, but it does mean that we should see them in context. Sure, we'll make mistakes, even serious ones, but that is no reason to slit our wrists or type out our resignation. A good leader recognises imperfection as part of human nature and accepts it patiently, either in others or in themselves. Why we are so hard on ourselves is a mystery; endless breast-beating leads to concave chests.

### d) Build sound relationships

If we base our leadership on sound relationships, we will be forgiven for our errors. Because we know our own propensity for stuff-ups, most of us are intelligent enough to accept them in others. The situation where people are less likely to forgive mistakes is in those situations where the leader is such a pompous and over-bearing ass that no-one wants to be near them. If such a leader makes a mistake, instead of offering support, we tend to be more critical. If we see a friend slip on a banana peel, we are sympathetic; if we see an egotistical buffoon do the same, most of us find it hard to suppress a chuckle.

In a previous article about leadership, I said that relationships underpinned all of our successes as leaders. This is just one example of that truth. If we enjoy good relationships with others, they are more likely to tolerate our failings. Building positive links with others might be seen, then, as an insurance policy against the negative impact of our mistakes.

An essential feature in developing good relationships is honesty. We must admit our errors, making sure that our superiors are told about them by us, not by the victims. During my years as a principal, I always tried to back up my staff but I found it very difficult in those situations where the first I knew of an incident was when the victim (or the victim's parents) confronted me with their version of the facts, and I had nothing to compare them with. On the other hand, if the alleged perpetrator had already advised me of the problem and has presented their side of the case, I was in a better position to defend them. Naturally, it was not always possible to argue the case of the teacher – as teachers, we all know that we sometimes do the wrong thing – but at least I was able to present the staff member's case and perhaps apologise on their behalf. I usually found that this defused the situation – but it was only

possible if I was fore-armed.

A teacher might object that this was ridiculous advice – why should they admit to a serious mistake before complaints were lodged? Sometimes no complaints would be made and the boss would be no wiser; in such instances, if they had admitted the error, they would have already cooked their goose by confessing. My only reply to this would be that such a view betrays a somewhat fractured relationship between teacher and principal. As I noted earlier: "If we base our leadership on sound relationships, we will be forgiven for our errors. Because we know our own propensity for stuff-ups, most of us are intelligent enough to accept them in others."

There is no way that we can lead a life free of error. The size and nature of our mistakes might vary from person to person, but everyone makes slip-ups and most of us make serious ones at some time. To help us avoid future errors and to compensate for past ones, let us remember the four features that can make the difference:

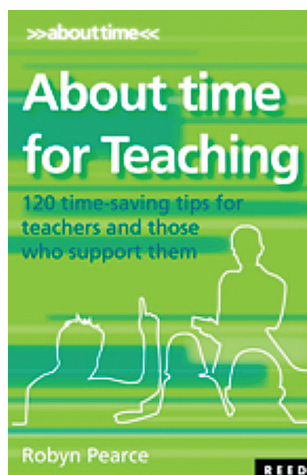
- Avoid glib decisions
- Compensate when we do wrong
- Assess errors sensibly
- Nurture good relationships.

While mastering these skills, we will still do the wrong thing from time to time but if we learn from our errors, we will end up being better people. **ET**



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