

# Mistake recovery is the new leadership competency

All leaders fail — successful ones recover



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**A**re you a health care leader who makes mistakes? Are you one who knows how to recover from them? If so, you're in a select group. I've seen some of the best leaders fail — but the successful ones know how to recover. Do you?

I believe that mistake recovery is the new leadership competency. Successful leaders in all venues, including health care, use mistakes as key résumé builders. How? By strategically applying selected recovery approaches to any one of seven critical mistakes.

## Health care and “human-ness”

With health care focused on the personal needs of patients, families and other key stakeholders, are health care leaders better able to recover from mistakes because mistakes are about “human-ness,” and human-ness is about the power to forgive?

Leadership mistakes are more open to public scrutiny than ever before. The media devour missteps made by leaders from political, corporate, religious and health care environments. Yet regardless of the industry, leaders who reveal certain shortcomings — showing their human-ness — are more likely to succeed in the long run. This phenomenon has been called the “strategic pratfall effect.”

For example, the popularity of advice columnist Ann Landers rose when she announced that she was getting a divorce. Communication experts and public relations folks say she appeared “more human.” Psychologists have found that people dislike those who are perfect because these are the characteristics we most seek in ourselves.

Consider President John F. Kennedy, who was not regarded as most successful after his handling of the Cuban missile crisis. In fact, not even after his assassination. He was regarded as most effective after his mismanagement of the Bay of Pigs offensive — for which he took responsibility. Experts consider this one of the hallmarks of Kennedy's career.

More recently, lifestyle diva Martha Stewart made mistake-recovery news. She exemplified the strategic-pratfall effect, using a prison term as a stepping stone to re-establish her career.

## Seven mistakes and the apology

I maintain that there are seven mistakes that a leader can overcome with an apology:

- Failure to use staff talent;
- Failure to align goals with strategic initiatives;
- Failure to accurately assess political dynamics;
- Failure to assess personal readiness for a given assignment;
- Failure to effectively use information or the right process to make a sound decision;
- Failure to create a work environment where staff openly communicate; and
- Failure to bring the right talent into the organization.

The apology is the one recovery mechanism that can overcome several mistakes. Everyone seems to know about this approach, but few seem to do it successfully. When the consequences of poor decisions affect the staff you lead or the public you serve, an apology is in order.

Not just any apology will do, however. It needs to be heartfelt and sincere, and it needs to follow critical steps. Interestingly, research demonstrates that physicians who apologize for missteps are likely to have significantly fewer malpractice claims.

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## The apology

The wrong way to apologize is to offer a statement of regret and follow it with the word “but.”

In this approach, the apology usually begins with the words “I’m sorry about ...” or “I apologize for ...” After the apology, many people use the word “but.” This makes the confession appear insincere. What follows the word “but” is regarded as an excuse. Since it’s the next thing the listener hears, she or he tends to remember the excuse and forget the apology. Many people believe that putting a “but” after the apology absolves them of the transgression. But listeners then don’t believe the apology is genuine.

To be effective, an apology must:

- Acknowledge that a mistake was made;
- State how your action affected others;
- Offer a statement of regret; and
- Indicate how you will rectify the situation.

## Acknowledge the mistake

Clearly state the mistake made. I recently spoke with a group of health care leaders about a new strategic planning approach. They were going to involve key stakeholders from every level of the organization. Previous strategic planning efforts that stated this goal had earned the scorn of rank-and-file employees, who perceived these efforts as another way for management to get others to do more with less.

The leaders told me how they were going to tell staff that this was different. I suggested that they communicate to employees that they had made a critical mistake by not involving them in previous strategic planning efforts. The leaders tried this approach — and catalyzed many to join the new effort willingly.

## State how your action affected others

People want to know if you understand how your action affected them. I suggest starting the empathy statement with “I.”

## Say you are sorry, say how you will rectify the situation

Simply add the typical “I’m sorry” or “I apologize” to the previous statement.

Those apologizing often fail to describe how they will rectify the situation. In deciding how you can make amends, consider that your solution must satisfy the offended party. It can’t always be what’s easiest for you.

## Two errors you can’t recover from

A comeback is rare, if not impossible if a leader:

- Abuses followers’ trust and compromises his/her integrity as a leader; or
- Establishes a pattern of foolish mistakes, leaving others to regard him or her as incompetent.

In these circumstances, the leader’s best strategy is to leave the organization. Leaders need to make sure that they do everything feasible to decrease the probability of making one of these two fatal errors.

## Vulnerabilities should be shared

The hallmark of a successful leader is resiliency — aided by a precise series of strategic actions. It’s about vulnerability and acknowledgement of human imperfection. Unsuccessful leaders don’t give serious merit to their mistakes. Yes, many say they will reform or try harder next time. But this is not enough. Successful leaders know how to recover from their errors — and learn from them.

What actions will you take the next time you make a mistake? The choice is yours: Expose your vulnerabilities with success or keep them hidden with failure. And trust me, they are never truly hidden. 🌟