

# How our mistakes are judged can have lasting career impacts

*Mistakes can be opportunities for learning and personal and professional growth. But for that to happen, employees need psychologically safe work environments. **Jasmine Virhia** and **Grace Lordan** write that, by fostering acceptance, respect, and open communication, organisations can unlock the full potential of their teams, enabling them to learn from their mistakes and engage in behaviours that drive collaboration and continuous improvement.*

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Taking ownership of mistakes is daunting, particularly if your ego is easily bruised or your professional reputation is on the line. However, acknowledging your mistakes will lead to more [innovative problem-solving](#) and [demonstrate objectivity](#) towards your past actions. It will also cause your colleagues to [trust you more](#). Crucially, how we judge our own mistakes, or how our mistakes are judged by others, has the potential to have lasting impacts on our career trajectory.

## Psychological safety

There are benefits to making mistakes in the workplace that we may not typically consider. The framing of mistakes as opportunities for learning and personal growth is dependent on psychologically safe work environments, within which leaders can set a precedent. There are additional benefits to vulnerable leadership—whereby leaders openly share their imperfections, uncertainties, and emotions—that are likely to interact with sharing of mistakes and career trajectories. Not only does a [vulnerable leadership style](#) foster working environments predicated on trust and authenticity, but it increases the humility that leaders express. In turn, teams increase their [improvement-oriented behaviours](#), meaning overall performance also increases.

Leaders who model a healthy approach to mistakes also set a powerful example for employees. When leaders acknowledge their own errors, take responsibility, and demonstrate resilience in the face of setbacks, they [inspire employees](#) to do the same. This fosters an environment where everyone is committed to improvement and

collectively embraces challenges as chances to evolve.

Mistakes can become integral components of the learning process rather than sources of fear or blame and viewing mistakes as chances for growth encourages employees to [engage in self-reflection](#). Instead of fearing errors, employees are more likely to analyse what went wrong, identify areas for improvement, and develop strategies to avoid similar pitfalls in the future. This self-reflective process leads to [continuous development](#) and increased self-awareness. When employees are encouraged to learn from their mistakes, their skills and knowledge steadily improve. Over time, this ongoing development translates to enhanced productivity. As employees become more adept at recognising and rectifying errors, they contribute to smoother workflows and more efficient processes. In an environment where mistakes are embraced as part of the growth process, employees are more inclined to think innovatively. They are more likely to propose unconventional solutions, challenge existing norms, and contribute to the organisation's evolution. This mindset drives innovation and positions the organisation as adaptable and forward-thinking.

## **Mistakes are treated differently**

It is clear there are many benefits to paying attention to how mistakes are treated in our workplaces. Sadly, not all mistakes are judged equally. While we may only speculate that all under-represented talent experience differences in the way mistakes are treated leading to worse outcomes in terms of pay, progression and promotion, there is good evidence that is the case for women. Yes, it looks like there is much truth in the saying that men 'fail up' much more often than women.

Economic research points towards discrimination, pipeline problems, occupational choice and caring constraints as the major drivers of the [differences](#) in [labour market outcomes](#) between men and women. More recent work, however, has begun to consider how the treatment of mistakes differs between men and women. Lordan and Wills, (2024) draw on a unique survey of professional workers to demonstrate that gender differences exist in the treatment of mistakes. In this survey, participants were asked to rate how likely three statements were on using a 7-point Likert scale. These are "I would feel comfortable telling my company about a mistake I made" (Mistakes-Comfort), "I would be penalised for the mistake I made" (Mistakes-Penalise) and "Mistakes would be viewed as learning opportunities in my company" (Mistakes-Learning Opportunity).

Analysing this data, the authors found that women and men have different perceptions of the treatment of mistakes in the workplace, which interacts with the share of men in the environment. More specifically, women experience mistakes in a much more negative light when they are in roles that have large shares of men. In contrast, both men and women have the most positive perceptions of mistakes when they are working in environments with low shares of men.

## Conclusions

It is clear that embracing mistakes holds great importance in workplace. By establishing psychologically safe environments founded on acceptance, respect, and open communication, organisations can unlock the full potential of their teams, enabling them to engage in behaviours that drive collaboration, learning, and continuous improvement. The opportunity for employees to self-reflect improves productivity at work over time. Also, creating cultures where learning is encouraged and development towards it outweighs any negativity bias (where more focus is given to something bad), can engender greater trust between employees and leaders. It is, though, imperative that all colleagues experience their mistakes equally!

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