





When Being Wrong is Right

The school year had begun. Students and their teachers were still checking each other out in eighth-grade math.

“I give tough tests and I have no mercy,” our teacher, Mr. Barber, began. “Either you know the answers or you fail.”

I could feel the fear building inside me. I glanced around the room, seeing some of my friends rolling their eyes as if to say “not again.” I sat confused. As much as I enjoyed learning mathematics, I hated the pain and pressure from the way it was taught and the stress presented by the teacher. The course was tough enough without him acting so macho. Why didn’t he motivate us by making it fun instead of driving us by fear?

Despite these methods, we all passed and proceeded to high school. What we studied that year I don’t really remember, but by the time I finished high school I had been through calculus, plane trigonometry, and spherical trigonometry. How much of that math do I use today? None. Today, could I solve those same problems for which I had studied so hard and had gotten the correct answers? No, I have to admit that I couldn’t.

Today I don’t use much of what I learned after the fifth grade. But that’s not to say school didn’t leave its permanent mark on me. The fact is, I left school with several behavioral traits I hadn’t walked in with. Engraved in my mind was the belief that making a mistake, or

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“screwing up,” got me ridiculed by my peers and often my teacher. School brainwashed me into believing that if a person wanted to be successful in life, he or she had to always be right. In other words, never be wrong. School taught me to avoid being wrong (making mistakes) at all costs. And if you did happen to make a mistake, at least be smart enough to cover it up.

This is where all too many people are today—not allowing themselves to make mistakes and thus blocking their own progress. The symptoms of this “disease” are feelings of boredom, failure, and dissatisfaction, although most of us never come to understand why we feel this way. After having it drilled into us for so many years, it’s hard to imagine that being “right” could cause such unhappiness.

In 1981, I had the opportunity to study with Dr. R. Buckminster Fuller. Although I can’t quote him exactly, the first lesson I learned from him still sticks in my mind. He told us that humans were given a right foot and a left foot...not a right foot and a wrong foot. We make progress through our lives by advancing first with the right foot, then with the left. With each new step we both move forward and correct the prior step so that we come closer and closer to our destination. Most people, however, are still trying to walk the straight and narrow, avoiding mistakes and thus getting nowhere. What’s wrong with the straight and narrow path? Perhaps nothing except the fact that straight and narrow paths simply don’t exist in the real world. Not even physicists have ever found anything that is absolutely straight. Only curves have been found. Straight lines exist only in human minds.

In *The Abilene Paradox*, Jerry B. Harvey writes about the “paradox of paradoxes.” He explains the universal principle that “unity is plural.” Just as “up” cannot exist without “down,” or “man” without “woman,” a “right” cannot exist without a “wrong.” Similarly, people who can only be right eventually wind up being wrong. And people who are willing to risk making mistakes in order to discover what is “wrong” eventually end up knowing what is “right.”

In maturing as a businessperson, I have learned to be cautious of people who act as if they have all the right answers. At the same time, I have had to acknowledge my own over-zealous desire to be right. I had to learn that a person who stayed on his right foot too long would eventually end up on the wrong foot—or worse yet, with that foot in his mouth.

Allowing ourselves to be wrong, to make mistakes, isn’t easy. Think about how you feel when you hear the words “you’re wrong.” If you’re anything like me, you become defensive and try to think of ways to prove you are right. In my own struggles, as well as in

working with thousands of other people on this issue, I continue to be amazed at how terrified we humans can become at the thought of being punished for being wrong. Our efforts to prove ourselves right are often carried to the extreme, destroying marriages, businesses, and friendships.

To finally discover that knowing the wrong answer can be the most powerful beacon we could ever hope to have, shining a brilliant light for us on the right answer, is greatly liberating. But to be able to enjoy the vast benefits of this insight we need to re-think how we handle mistakes; rather than punishing us for them, education should teach us the art of learning.

Our fear of making mistakes is so ingrained in us that we habitually react to our errors in ways that blind us to the real learning in them. Here are four of the most common and destructive “skills” that we have learned for handling those times when we make mistakes. These are the key reactions that stop the learning process:

1. **Pretending we did not make a mistake.**

The last U.S. President I recall accepting full responsibility for his actions was President John F. Kennedy for his part in the Bay of Pigs incident. Since then there have been such classic statements as “I am not a crook” (Nixon during Watergate) and “I don’t remember” (Reagan during the Iran-Contra hearings). These men’s avoidance of any responsibility has kept the issues alive and smoldering – as jokes, if nothing else.

It has been shown through other examples that the public demonstrates understanding and compassion for people who commit errors and then acknowledge responsibility for their actions. This seems odd in a world where we are taught to avoid making mistakes. Yet, it seems that each of us continues to be responsive to the wisdom that still lies buried deep within us that, as the poet says, “To err is human; to forgive is divine.” Perhaps there is something in the act of forgiveness that makes us remember how we are meant to learn.

Comedian-actor Richard Pryor, after making the “mistake” of free-basing and badly burning his face and upper body, went on national television to come clean about drug use. TV evangelist Jimmy Swaggart admitted to visiting “women of the red-light districts.” As a result, both their careers continued and their “wrongs” were put behind them. I cannot say whether they truly learned from their mistakes, but at least they didn’t pretend they were not responsible.

2. **Blaming something or someone else for the “mistake.”**

Immediately after the failure of my business in 1979, I blamed my two partners for the money loss. I was very stubborn, refusing to

look at the role I had played in my downfall. I continued to dig in my heels and deny my own part in it for two years. I was angry, hurt and broke. It was not until I calmed down that I realized the experience was probably one of the best things that ever happened to me. I am not saying I would want to lose everything again, but I am grateful for the valuable lesson. Had I not lost my money in 1979, I am certain I would have lost it later because of my ignorance. There is the saying that “A fool and his money are soon parted.” My mistake allowed me to better understand how I had been a fool, and how to avoid making similar mistakes again.

I know many people who are not successful because they are still consciously or subconsciously blaming other people for things that happened to them. I hear many horror stories about money or romance and how someone “did them wrong.” The problem with that point of view is that the source of the mistake continues to lie dormant, just waiting to come to the surface again. One example of this is found with people who divorce and then marry a “different-same” person again and again, because they didn’t learn the lesson from the previous marriage. They continue to blame the previous spouse for the failure of their relationship. Had I continued to blame my partners for what I did not know, I am certain I would have made the same mistake again and again, with different partners, until I either got the lesson, gave up, or died broke, frustrated, and bitter.

American society has become “blame-happy,” and the term “victim” has become a part of everyday conversation. Courts are jammed up with lawsuits brought on by “victims” wanting compensation for being “wronged.” No one can deny that there are legitimate claims, but we also know that the practice of suing has gone to extremes. Doctors have become fearful of delegating any of their duties to other clinicians with whom they work for fear of malpractice suits. This single factor has caused an increase in medical costs and a decrease in insurance benefits.

Similarly, the highest single cost of producing a car in North America is not steel, but insurance. Insurance of all kinds is a hidden cost of every car produced—for a commodity that benefits the consumer in no way.

We could do with fewer victims and with more people willing to learn instead of wanting to blame.

3. Rationalizing the “mistake” instead of learning from it. (Also known as the “Sour Grapes Syndrome.”) “Oh, well, I really didn’t want that anyway.”

The world is filled with people who are always ready with perfect rationalizations about why they are unsuccessful. For a short time after I lost my business, I used the rationalization that I failed

because I didn't have an MBA. By clinging to this rationalization I only prolonged my mental poverty and slowed down my comeback.

One of the most prevalent justifications today is, "Oh, the money doesn't matter to me." I often hear it from people who are not winning at the game of financial well-being. Does money really not matter? Let's ask the question another way: is it a mistake to put yourself and your family in the position of not having enough money? At the very least, not having enough money should be interpreted as a "tap on the shoulder," a signal to change something in our lives.

4. Punishing oneself.

Possibly the most destructive behavior of all is the emotional torment people inflict on themselves as retribution for making a mistake.

When asked who is hardest on them, most people will point to themselves. They often do this with an apparent sense of pride and humility. And yet, punishment is one of the most destructive aspects of human behavior there is, whether it is self-inflicted or inflicted by a third party. One reason people are not successful is that they are consciously or subconsciously punishing themselves for something they did in the past. They cannot allow themselves to be successful because deep down inside they do not feel they deserve it. They are punishing themselves by withholding the opportunity to enjoy a successful life.

Truly successful people learn to take full responsibility for their actions; they apologize and do whatever is appropriate to correct their errors. They acknowledge the mistake, seek the lesson, make whatever corrections are required and then move on to become more successful.

Unsuccessful people harbor the emotional pain of self-blame and fail to get the valuable lessons made available to them through their mistakes. Not acknowledging mistakes makes for narrow-minded, self-righteous people who ultimately hinder their own ability to be happy and find financial success.

Always Having to be Right

Along with denying that we've made a mistake, there are several problems associated with having to be right:

1. Inability to see the future.

The person who has to be right often clings to old information, information which might have been right in the past but is no longer appropriate or true in the present. Most people confuse facts with

truths. Prior to Orville and Wilbur Wright's successful flight in a heavier-than-air machine, the "fact" was that humans could not fly and never would fly. While it was a fact at that moment, it was not a "truth." Similarly, prior to the day Roger Bannister broke the four-minute mile barrier, sports physiologists presented dozens of very convincing articles "proving" that such a feat was "humanly impossible."

Most of what we call human knowledge is only information we that we have jointly agreed is "true." Another word for it is "consensual reality," meaning simply that it is knowledge that most people recognize as "true." History is filled with stories of great new ideas or inventions that were ridiculed because society adamantly refused to look beyond consensual reality. Businesses have been destroyed by failing to recognize a new reality that was staring them in the face. Today, changes are coming at a pace never experienced before, making it more hazardous than ever to cling to the notion that "what worked today will work tomorrow."

To learn from mistakes, we need to learn never to say, "That's a crazy idea. It will never work," no matter how crazy it may seem. We need to learn how to at least suspend our belief in consensual reality long enough to listen openly to new ideas and new possibilities. Rigid thinkers cannot hear new ideas as long as they cling to what they believe is "right."

2. No increase in wealth (knowledge).

People who have to be right rarely learn anything new because they are too busy having to be right. It is only when they are willing to be wrong that learning comes alive. Wealth only increases when people learn how to learn from their mistakes. After all, there is very little knowledge in the world that won't be obsolete tomorrow, or next year, or in the next decade. Facts change—and so must our minds.

3. More conflicts.

I remember, as a child, going to our family's Methodist Church. I remember asking my Sunday school teacher what the difference was between our church and the Catholic Church. She told me, "The Methodists are following the right teachings of Jesus and the Catholics are wrong." I was only ten, yet something about that statement struck me as ridiculous. But how ridiculous is it? People cause pain, grief, and bloodshed in the name of needing to prove that they are "right."

Remember the slogan that was so prevalent in the years of the Cold War between the United States and Russia? The saying was "Better dead than Red," and indeed there were many times when our

two nations stood on the brink of an atomic holocaust in the name of defending their beliefs.

Again, what most people and most nations insist is “right” or “wrong” is often only their point of view or opinion. Each of us has our own hidden agenda, an opinion that we are right and that anything to the contrary is wrong. We need to learn to think more broadly and to accept that there are probably infinite numbers of answers for every question.

Change in these matters can begin with our educational system, letting go of the belief that students should strive for the ideal of always being “right.” It is the need to be “right” and the subsequent neglect of any real understanding that causes conflict between individuals as well as nations. As our planet shrinks, becoming increasingly crowded, “right-wrong” thinking will need to be reevaluated or the world is going to become uncrowded very quickly through global war.

As an ex-Marine and a person who grew up fighting, I’ve noticed much more peace in my life since I have allowed that other people also have “right” answers. I have greatly lessened my use of the words “right” and “wrong,” as well as “good” and “bad.” Instead, I try to comprehend different points of view and acknowledge that people differ. I have learned the hard way that opposing points of view don’t mean that someone is right and someone else is wrong.

In our schools, however, I am afraid that we are still teaching our children to be narrow-thinkers. We are planting the seeds of war, not peace.

4. **Stagnating income.**

In most businesses, people are paid for what they know. People who have to be right all the time, as we’ve already seen, tend to stagnate, sticking tenaciously to the “nests” of what they know instead of taking the risks that would provide them with new knowledge. Since their knowledge never changes, neither does their income. In the worst-case scenario, they are discharged from the company because it has gone on to new technologies or is making a new line of products for which this person’s knowledge is no longer useful. We see this every year in the hundreds of thousands of people who are let go or offered early retirement because the knowledge they have no longer serves the company.

5. **Dimming futures.**

A person who holds onto old ideas finds that his path becomes increasingly narrow. Often frustration and justification increase and opportunities decrease. The world is changing, but the person clings to the ways of the past or waits for the “good old days” to return.

6. **Progressive inner blindness.**

Growing up in Hawaii, I learned to love diving in the ocean for fish and lobsters. I used to see other divers coming home with octopi caught in the same area. I had never seen one.

One day, I asked a seasoned diver to take me out and show me where the octopus lives. He soon had me looking into a pile of dead coral. He pointed into a hole. I looked and stared as long as I could hold my breath but saw nothing. Then I pushed my spear into the hole. Immediately, an enraged octopus leaped out, scurried along the bottom and disappeared right in front of me. I realized the octopi had always been there, right in front of me, except I could not see them.

It is the same with business and investing. I find it amusing when a person tells me there are no more opportunities out there or that all the good investments are taken. Opportunities are always out there. Over the years, I have noticed that the more calculated risks, mistakes, and corrections I made, the better my “eyesight” became. However, I would have to say too that people who are afraid of making mistakes frequently never see the opportunities, even the ones staring them in the face. The people who can’t see call the people who can “sharks” because they are able to take advantage of opportunities that nobody else could see. The real problem is that the person who always needs to be right stops looking in new places.

7. **Inability to reap the benefits of “doing poorly.”**

All too many people become so fixated on doing things right that they spend their entire lives doing nothing at all. This is the typical pattern of “perfectionists;” their own fears of making mistakes literally paralyze them. Progress is made by following the path with “both feet,” as Bucky Fuller pointed out. We discover new paths and move forward by taking a new step, looking around to see where it has taken us, then taking another step with which we can both correct our course. Could we ever have built a 747 jet had the Wright Brothers not risked their financial resources and reputations, to say nothing of life and limb, to build and fly their crude heavier-than-air machine? What the history books often fail to tell us is the number of times they failed to get their machine off the ground and the number of times they crashed. Through this seemingly endless series of “mistakes” they made they became the brunt of journalists’ jokes. Only their willingness to take these risks carried them forward to success and eventually won them a permanent place in the history books.

8. **Personal potential turning to frustration.**

I frequently meet people who have great potential but no cash or professional success. The same people seethe with envy and

frustration. Much of their frustration stems from being too hard on themselves. They know they have what it takes to get ahead but they won't let themselves make the necessary mistakes and go through the learning curve which leads to personal satisfaction.

"Your son has so much potential," was the statement on the report card I took home. I remember going to school conferences with my parents and every time the teacher said the same old thing: "Robert has lots of potential, but he doesn't apply himself."

Now I understand my teachers' frustrations and my own. How could they expect me to manifest my full potential when I was always being punished for making mistakes? I went through those years knowing there were things I wanted to do and could do; however, I was living my life in the straightjacket of feeling that it was bad to make mistakes, that above all I had to be right. I didn't begin to grow and learn until I threw off that straightjacket and dared to make mistakes.

9. Being increasingly out of pace with the moment.

People who fear making mistakes are slow because they are too cautious; as the world speeds up, such people tend to slow down. This doesn't mean we should be reckless. But once free of the fear of making mistakes, we are much more likely to stay in the race. Asking a person who is afraid of making mistakes to keep up in the modern world is a little like putting a Volvo driver in a high performance Indianapolis 500 race car. The car has all the speed and power necessary to win the race but the driver is conditioned to a slower, more sedate pace. He can't get past his own habits and his cautious outlook on life long enough even to test the car's full potential. Thus, it's the driver and not the car that loses the race.

Successful race car drivers are conditioned to respond with swift but very small incremental corrections, which is the only thing that works at high speed. They know what happens when they don't recognize and acknowledge their mistakes and correct their course accordingly; they end up in the pits—or worse, on the wall.

As much as we may dislike it, our fast pace is a fact of modern life. Whether he's aware of it or not, the person who fears mistakes is constantly resisting this pace. And this resistance only compounds his stress and actually increases his chances of making mistakes. Unable to acknowledge or perhaps even recognize that he is straying off course, he cannot correct his actions and so ends up crashing.

A Major Turnaround Needed

The long-term effect of our grossly inadequate educational system is all too often the erosion of our ability to function well in the real world. All too many of us come away from the system with a lack of self-confidence, drummed into our hearts and minds by what we've failed to learn about the positive side of making mistakes.

We can no longer afford to tolerate an educational program that punishes honest mistakes and fails to design programs that make full use of our natural learning abilities. We must change the course of this antiquated behemoth that is degrading our society, eroding our children's desire for knowledge while causing pain and frustration. True learning can be frustrating enough without a system that makes it worse.

We must find a way to teach through love and kindness so that the "right/wrong" systems of education can be exposed for what they really are: filter systems for rejecting those who won't buckle under and conform to the system. We must have the courage to create new learning environments, where mistakes are applauded and seen as the invaluable source of wisdom that they are. We would prosper both in terms of tapping the full potential of our human resources and in terms of bringing greater happiness into all our lives. We must take this next step in our evolution so that we can finally see that we all benefit exponentially when we reach for the very best in ourselves and support others to do the same.

PART FIVE



From the Bottom Up