

## NLP &amp; Business

# “Mistakes aren’t tolerated here”

*by Surinder Deol*

If running a business successfully depends on the spirit of enterprise and creativity, the way to get there is through having a tolerance for mistakes and creating an environment in which people have the opportunity to reflect on their mistakes and to learn from them. When people are penalized for their mistakes (and not for their inability to learn from them) we create a situation that encourages only defensive behaviors.

I remember the story of a CEO who took charge of a large and very complex organization and had the following words for his top managers in his very first meeting with them: “I’m known to be a very tolerant and forgiving person. Yes, I do tolerate the first mistake people make, but never the next one.” Imagine the impact these words had on the people around the table! For the next three years while the same person was in charge, top managers spent all their time avoiding their “first mistake.” The result was complete risk avoidance and total lack of creative thinking. The only interesting idea that emerged during those three years

was something that the CEO cooked up with assistance from a junior staff member. The vice presidents were mostly engaged in defending their craggy little bunkers.

Mistakes are not cost free. They can impose a huge cost. They can in fact jeopardize the very existence of the enterprise. We do not yet know the full story of Enron’s collapse, but one could guess that the managers were making mistakes that entailed very high costs. Protecting self-interest, it seems, was more important than learning to survive in a volatile economic environment. But without the freedom to make a mistake and to learn from it no business can thrive in the long run.

How can NLP help attain the right balance between risk and security, action and reflection, the relative costs of action and non-action? The existing literature is not of much assistance. But if we look at the NLP Meta-Programs there are number of ideas that could form the basis for action learning. The objective is not to avoid mistakes, but to create

multi-level learning structures where everyone (managers, supervisors and workers) is engaged in continuous learning.

First and foremost there is the concept of chunking. Mistakes occur when the doer is paying too much attention to either the “big picture” (the perennial dreamer) or to minute details (the proverbial bean counter). Imagine the synergy these two characters can generate if they could come out of their little boxes. We don’t have to be deductive and inductive thinkers at the same time (mostly we are one or the other) but we need to learn the art of looking at every business issue with general and specific lenses.

Another useful thinking tool is value direction. Some business managers spend too much time processing past data. What happened? Who did what? Who should be blamed for foul-ups? Past is important but it is also a spent resource. Processing the past but quickly moving away from it to focus on the future challenges is a key skill for business success. Therefore, we need to

encourage “toward” value direction clearly centered on future possibilities.

We live in information age where we can have all sorts of information about business operations at the click of a button. But what do we actually do with the information is more important. Anyone experienced in MBTI knows about the silent war that perpetually wages between “sensors” and “intuitors.” Sensors rely on “real” data while intuitors are known to use their hunches and insights. Again we have a preference to be one or the other. There are people who are going to ask for solid numbers and there are those who are not going to be satisfied unless their deep-seated concerns are addressed. Sensing

and intuition are gifts that can’t be traded one for the other. The way to ensure that we have a diversified work team is to look for people with different orientations and preferences—every work team should endeavor to have more women, more minorities, more professional specialties in general. Greater diversity can help avoid fatal mistakes by moving the business away from “there is only one right answer” thinking.

Last but not the least important is the way business treats its employees. The most precious asset for a business is its people. We have heard this time and again. But in reality does the business treat its people that way? Does the organization encourage independent thinking or relationships of

dependence on the superiors? Is teamwork encouraged and rewarded? How much money is spent on learning? Do managers appear as good role models and exemplars? Do they embody best ethical values and behaviors? Are they willing to spend their time coaching and mentoring junior employees? Is there a drive for “perfectionism” that weeds out all opportunities for creative thinking?

Learning organization as a concept may have lost its initial appeal, but the idea is very simple. It is about asking the question: In what specific ways does the organization promote learning internally and is willing to bear reasonable costs associated with learning? The costs needed to be

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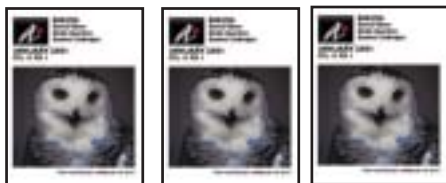
incurred may not be for fancy classrooms or expensive consultants, but the time and energy that goes into promoting the idea of learning and self-reflection through simple things like team-based learning, information sharing, small group interactions, and candid communications—up and down the organizational ladder.

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