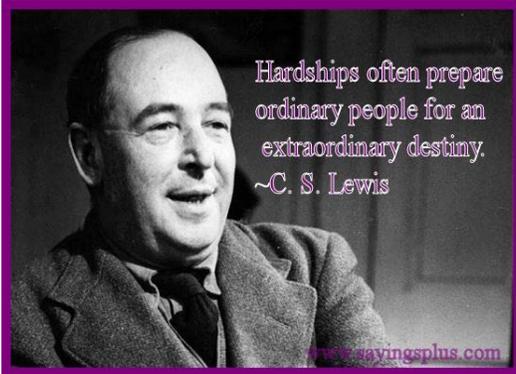


# Don't Waste a Good Mistake

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Ever made a mistake? A really big one? Maybe you did something careless, without proper planning or sufficient attention? Something that might have cost you dearly in some way like a job, sale, time, money, health, or a relationship? Unless you were just born, you surely have. So, the more important question is “are you better off as a result?” As painful as mistakes can be, they can provide great benefit.

There is no teacher better than adversity. People do their best learning through tough times, mistakes, and failures. Prosperity is great, but not a good teacher. Those who live a privileged, sheltered, and adversity-free life miss life’s education. In contrast, those who deal with tough bosses, demanding clients, relationship conflicts, and their own bad decisions,

learn many valuable lessons. Counterintuitively, the extent of adversity people have been through is a better determinate of their future success than how much prosperity they have enjoyed. But adversity is only beneficial if it is properly processed.

When people make a mistake, they have three fundamental choices on how to process it. Two of the choices lead to no benefit and the other to significant benefit. Choice #1 is to be frustrated by or dismissive of the mistake. Choice #2 is to blame others or circumstances. Choice #3 is to reflect on and find the learning in it. Intellectually, people see choice #3 as the correct choice, yet regularly practice choices #1 and #2. Rather than embrace the opportunity for change, they stay in their comfort zone. Rather than learn what they can and make adjustments, they get frustrated until they “get over it” or worse—blame others or circumstances. They may be quick to correct others, but unable to see the need for change in themselves.

Whether you lose a sale, cause one of your best employees to quit, produce a bad product, accept a dead-end job, mess up a relationship, or simply say something you wish you hadn’t, you have earned the opportunity to learn from and be better for it. Don’t waste a good mistake.

Studies find that successful and unsuccessful people both have generally the same experiences in life. The key difference is that successful people grow through their experiences, particularly their adversity. They accept responsibility when things don’t go well, reflect on what happened, and make adjustments in how they think and act. In contrast, unsuccessful people tend to dismiss their role in their misfortunes, blame others, blame circumstances, or simply ignore what happened.

Studies also find that professionals’ learning primarily comes from their on-the-job experience (52%) with mentoring, coaching, and reading being second (27%), and formal training (21%) third. Yet people’s on-the-job-experience only translates into learning if they take time to reflect on their work and learn from it rather than just perform the work. Learning to the fullest extent, whether from normal daily work or from adversity, is an intentional activity.

Whether in your professional or personal life, your future success largely depends on how well you learn from your experience, especially your mistakes. Here are seven principles to follow to get the most benefit from your mistakes:

1. **Acknowledge the mistake.** Don’t let the good qualities of being calm, resilient, and forgiving prevent you from seeing that a mistake was made. Confront reality. Forgive yourself and others, but don’t dismiss the mistake outright. Don’t be so positive and forgiving that you foolishly miss the opportunity to see that a mistake worth understanding was made.

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2. **Take responsibility.** Don't be quick to fault external influences. There are always contributing circumstances. There are always contributing people. Rarely is anything all your fault or responsibility. Yet accept that you had a role in the mistake. Whether your role was limited or significant, accept responsibility. Even acts of omission are mistakes.
3. **Reflect on the mistake.** Consider what happened and your role in it. Assess the root cause. Get to the real issue. Most mistakes are symptoms. Ask "why did this happen?" Consider the possibilities and narrow them down to the likely culprits. Then ask "why did this happen?" again. And again, as needed, until you've exhausted the likely root causes that deserve your attention.
4. **Involve others.** Seek input from others who can help you objectively think through your assessment. Share your reflections with someone you trust who can help you understand the nuances of your situation. Ask them to be your sounding board. Allow them to know the details that led up to whatever happened and to help you make sense of it.
5. **Record your lessons learned.** After assessing the root causes, consider what you can do going forward to mitigate or avoid the mistake in the future. Take note of the thoughts and behaviors you need to adopt. If you aspire to make a better presentation, for example, write down what you need to do to make a better presentation, e.g. prepare more, cover less content, include a call to action.
6. **Process your feelings.** It's alright to be frustrated and even angry just as much as it is to be excited and happy. Don't cheat yourself out of processing your feelings, but don't let your feelings overcome your logic. Don't label yourself. A mistake doesn't define you any more than an achievement does. Allow yourself to go through a healthy grief cycle.
7. **Look forward.** Forgive yourself and others. Realize that you are not perfect and it's okay. Recover and move on. Embed your lessons learned into your plans, processes, and daily habits. Don't ruminate any longer. Accept that you can't change the past. You are smarter and better now. You have more experience now. Be glad that you now have knowledge that will help you as well as others as you go forward.

Twentieth century American author Napoleon Hill, famous for his book *Think and Grow Rich*, said "Every adversity, every failure, every heartache carries with it the seed of an equal or greater benefit." British writer and broadcaster C.S. Lewis, from the same period, said "Hardships often prepare ordinary people for an extraordinary destiny." Don't waste a good mistake. Don't miss the opportunity from your hardships to gain the greater benefit and become extraordinary.

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Article written by Mike Hawkins, award-winning author of *Activating Your Ambition: A Guide to Coaching the Best Out of Yourself and Others* ([www.ActivatingYourAmbition.com](http://www.ActivatingYourAmbition.com)), author of the *SCOPE of Leadership* six-book series on coaching leaders to lead as coaches ([www.ScopeOfLeadership.com](http://www.ScopeOfLeadership.com)), and president of Alpine Link Corp ([www.AlpineLink.com](http://www.AlpineLink.com)), a boutique consulting firm specializing in leadership development and sales performance improvement.

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