

Let Them Screw Up!



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By CDR Gerald A. (Jerry) Nauert, USCG PSU 309

Reference: Perspective

“That which does not kill us makes us stronger” is a quote, sometimes attributed to Alexander the Great, that in my ignorance I assumed was probably uttered when he was training his troops for battle, and is often found adorning the walls of many a weight room and gymnasium, to motivate the warrior instinct in trainees. In fact I first saw it on the wall of the Kentucky State Police Academy when I arrived there as an instructor in 1987. I later learned that actually a 19th century German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche, was the author of this very notable statement; perhaps influenced by his somewhat trying upbringing.

I subscribed to the philosophy behind the words as I assisted in the training of those new troopers to be ‘strong’ enough to hit the streets. However I feel I did not catch on to its full meaning till I was aspiring to leadership positions in the department and later in the United States Coast Guard.

I soon learned that it also applies to the cerebral part of developing into mature stable minded adults and ultimately strong leaders as well. Noted author, Rita Mae Brown, once said “Good judgment comes from experience, and often experience comes from bad judgment.” My take away from both Nietzsche and Brown then is that we have to make mistakes in order to be all that we can be.

And yet again, when I began my supervisory career, as a young sergeant for the department and was attending the FBI National Academy in Quantico, Virginia, I participated in a graduate level corporate communications class in which the instructor related a story that told of a new executive in training at Xerox who had made a mistake on one of his first decisions. As a result Xerox was out a couple of thousand dollars. He promptly crafted a letter of resignation and presented it to his boss. The boss questioned his actions and the young man simply stated he thought he would save the time and trouble and get the inevitable over with. Then, as the story goes, the boss told his young charge that if he fired everyone who made a mistake here and there he would never have any employees yet alone any ‘seasoned’ employees. It was this very statement that got me thinking about our responsibilities as leaders and mentors of those coming behind us.

In today’s electronic age of ease and ‘in your face’ competitiveness, I feel we are not as tolerant of missteps as we should be and the extreme high value of the “learn from your mistakes” philosophy. I have been fortunate to have had the benefit of mentors who did however and shaped my development as a leader and manager, by allowing me to screw up. Thank heavens I did not make any of those mistakes when it was critical to be exactly correct in thought and action in the practice of law enforcement and military mission execution. But the others, the “foot in mouth” and the “recommended the wrong course of administrative action” decisions that I was called on the carpet for, made me a stronger leader. I left those carpet sessions with a sincere feeling of disappointment that I had let myself and my agency down. But at the same time, I left the boss’s office without having to turn in my badge or resign my commission. I realized she/he thought I was salvageable (although a couple of times I wondered) and was teaching me a lesson about decision making. So I took heed and went to the task of analyzing what I did wrong. And you know what? I learned not to do that again by golly! My mentors in fact made me stronger; a stronger person and ultimately a stronger leader.

I feel today we may have gotten away from that tolerance for allowing others under our charge to take a misstep and learn from the errors of their ways. I do not speak to blatant intentional violations of law or policy or in the life and death situations of our profession however. It goes without saying we cannot tolerate those. To that end, we must be sure we as leaders and managers are placing the right experienced people in the right positions to avoid those tragedies. [That however is discussion for another time.]

However to allow an individual to get stung from their hasty or not to well thought out decision needs to be in our repertoire for developing strong up and coming leaders to replace us. And that is what it is all about. If you really care about your agency, you will need to make sure we have well grounded and experienced leaders to take our place.

As an instructor at the police academy, I relished in the knowledge that my students went on to achieve bigger and better things than I did during their careers. Many went on to become command level officers on the Commissioner's staff. I was not jealous, I was proud and it was rewarding to know I had a part in their development. Of course, cops being the bunch they are, I always took the opportunity to remind them of that fact when I could.

As front line supervisors and leaders, I feel the art of teaching from bad experiences is the easiest. As we move up and become removed from the action, it becomes somewhat more difficult, primarily because we do not have the direct control of those front line workers. And now we also have a next level of mentees to oversee and mold as well. Then there is that "as a CO, we are ultimately responsible for the whole shootin' match no matter the outcome" thing to have to worry about. However, we need to be true to our mission in the development of our replacements and see that all levels get to learn from missteps. As you proceed up the ladder, you not only need to allow those lower level down individuals to learn from their mistakes in that position as well. And you must also empower them to teach the same lessons to their charges below them.

The worst thing you can do when someone is assigned to help you direct others in the accomplishment of the mission at hand, is to assume that they know what to do and as equally important is what your philosophy and tolerance is. Don't let them flounder. Be up front and make it clear as to what you expect of them. Not just to accomplish the mission but to develop "their" replacements into solid leaders as well; even if that means watching them screw up.

In other words, no matter the level, make them stronger by letting them exercise bad judgment occasionally. Ultimately we will be better off for it.

Leadership Competencies addressed: Mentoring, Decision Making and Problem Solving, Accountability and Responsibility

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