LEADERSHIP: THE FREEDOM TO MAKE MISTAKES

“FREEDOM IS NOT WORTH HAVING IF IT DOES NOT INCLUDE THE FREEDOM TO MAKE MISTAKES”
—MAHATMA GHANDI
By Abdelrahman Wahba

Freedom is not worth having if it does not include the freedom to make mistakes.” – Mahatma Ghandi. As cliché as it may sound, starting an article with a quote from Ghandi pretty much puts things into perspective. Yet, the quote is not about fighting oppression or foreign occupation, it’s about business leaders giving their subordinates room to make mistakes; a degree of freedom usually chained proportionally with the size of the organization, despite some anomalies. But what is the freedom to make mistakes?

The first time I have ever heard such a term was around eight years ago when I was watching an Egyptian TV program called Allah Aalam (Allah Knows Better), where Egyptian journalist and talk show host, Ibrahim Issa hosted a scholar talking about freedom in Islam. The episode discussed the wider aspects of freedom granted to people during the Islamic era. The principle idea is that human beings learn from their mistakes. They have the right to learn. Hence, they have the right to make mistakes as part of the learning process.

In fact, it is “only human” to make mistakes — another cliché.

Obviously, this is not carte blanche for people to run around in a destruction-frenzy crying “Oops!” at the end of their rampage. This comes with a set of rules:

1. The “mistaken” has to apply the best of his/her knowledge and resources to achieve the objectives required and actually do all that is necessary to avoid mistakes. So that mistakes, when they occur, are genuinely “honest.”

2. The “mistaken” has to be honest in admitting the mistake, owning it and figuring out how to fix it. Most importantly, work to fix it. This seals the deal on the learning part of the experience.

3. Management should not scold the “mistaken” too much, especially when they find him/her already on course-correction and has already self-lashed himself/herself enough.

In cases where mistakes are relatively expected, management should already have some backup plans in place to cover up for the mess and help the “mistaken” get out of the hole. It is a bit idealistic, I know. But this is the way it has to be, at least part of the time.

It is also the management’s responsibility to objectively review the situation with the “mistaken” and jointly work together to avoid falling in the same trap.

It is of paramount importance to look for improvement and not just single out the mistake on the “mistaken” appraisal. It is only fair to consider how the mistake has been handled by the “mistaken,” appreciate owning up to it and fixing it and overcome the temptation to use it as a form of Trojan horse to devaluate his/her overall performance.

Having worked in multinational and local companies, as well as my own company for the past seven years, I can easily say that the above mentioned points, though simple and straightforward, are seldom applied. Projecting on cultural dimensions we find the following:

Power distance, being one of the cultural variables of higher scores in Egypt and the region, contributes generously to this phenomenon by creating barriers to open communication between management and their subordinates. The higher the hierarchical distance in the organization, the bigger the barriers; the bigger the barriers, the murkier the

UNCERTAINTY AVOIDANCE, ALSO BEING A GENERAL PILLAR OF THE EGYPTIAN BUSINESS CULTURE, ADDS TO THE HESITATION TO ASSUME RESPONSIBILITY FOR FEAR OF MAKING MISTAKES AND THE CONSEQUENCES.
communication; the murkier the communication, the tougher it is to admit mistakes and own up to them. The tougher this becomes, the more intense the communication becomes and we find ourselves in the vicious circle of passing blame around like a hot coal — and “Welcome to where time stands still, no one leaves and no one will.”

Uncertainty avoidance, also being a general pillar of the Egyptian business culture adds to the hesitation to assume responsibility for fear of making mistakes and the unknown consequences that would occur. Like passing blame, people tend to pass around responsibility. Obviously, laziness partially drives such behavior. But so does the tendency to avoid falling into the unknown where the mistakes are.

This becomes very prevalent when you survey companies for the number of employees who “ask for forgiveness, rather than permission,” and tend to find such numbers miniscule. Conscientiousness, in other words responsibility and reliability, are rare goods in our market and in our country generally. Regardless of the reasons for such scarcity, it does have a significant impact in diminishing the freedom to make mistakes.

The obvious consequence of this phenomenon is that managers in our region are generally hesitant to delegate correctly, give subordinates space to grow and do it in a healthy way. This is fostered by the best of intentions – to guarantee the quality of delivery because of its critical nature or strategic importance.

ON THE OTHER HAND:
Scientifically as well as by common sense, mistakes are a substantial way to grow, as people learn from their mistakes more than they learn from their successes.

And the science of that is manifested in the situational leadership model developed by Paul Hersey and Ken Blanchard, which I would highly recommend to be read.

In a nutshell, the situational leadership model is about changing your leadership and communication model based on your subordinates’ abilities, levels of confidence and willingness to perform certain tasks. As a leader, you provide directives and instructions to your lower-competence/confidence subordinates. You “tell” them what to do.

When their levels of confidence rise, you start explaining the backgrounds of the tasks and their influence and meaning. In other words, you “sell” them the task they are asked to do.

Things can be fine and dandy until your employees start showing higher levels of competence and confidence. Now you are relatively in trouble. If you continue using the same leadership style despite the change in the situation, your employees can start to get bored or start having time-wasting discussions, since they want to flex their newly built muscles.

Or, you keep them under-utilized while work keeps piling up on your shoulders until you have a breakdown or a heart attack, or simply start slipping on delivery.

Here you need to change your strategy with them to – “cheer.”

It basically means that you put them to the test on a task or project that defies their abilities, and for which they might be lacking in confidence. It does not necessarily mean that you should drop them in goals and support them.

THINGS CAN BE FINE AND DANDY UNTIL YOUR EMPLOYEES START SHOWING HIGHER LEVELS OF COMPETENCE AND CONFIDENCE. GOALS AND SUPPORT THEM.
the middle of the ocean and ask them to swim back home. The idea here is to give them a challenge that is both bigger than their confidence and abilities. Assure them that they will take the credit for success, while you – being their manager and all – will take the blame for their mistakes. And as a seasoned manager, you should have some tricks up your sleeve to cover up their likely mess.

This point in any manager-employee relationship is very crucial and usually inflectional. It either becomes a founding point in creating a second line of competent executives and forging a new line of trust between both, or it starts building up resentment and ill-feeling.

I can claim that this is one of the most overlooked or sometimes misused moments of business history. Managers either ignore this opportunity in danger-disguise – obeying only the dangerous appearance and doing the stuff themselves – or they push their employees towards it with a hidden agenda to scapegoat them; and I’m not excluding myself.

This situation is the first step to oppress the freedom to make mistakes, which is the gate to innovation and potential tapping. As an exercise — please do not try this if you are unable to be honest with yourself — try to go back in time with your memory and remember the reasons and situations that made you the competent manager you are now. Eight out of 10 cases will be huge messes that you created and managed to fix, only because someone believed in you, your right to the freedom to make your own mistakes and your right to learn from them.

**THE MILLION DOLLAR QUESTION**

“How can people be liberated to make mistakes in a world dominated by corporate politics, lazy employees and vultures anxious to take advantage of you?”

I would like to remind you that if this is an absolute new practice for you, then you will be in for a ride. This is a complete change in mindset, and such shifts usually take time to sink in and face a lot of push back from yourself, the people around you and also the environment.

There is no such thing as a complete and easy fix to such complex situation. So please set your expectations accordingly.

Having said that, here is what I think should be accounted for throughout this journey:

You have to decide to commit to it; a deep mental and emotional decision to persevere.

This is a mid-to-long-term orientation, so expect some backlash and backfire in the short term. But it will build a positive reputation for you as a manager and business leader, attracting high caliber courageous people to work with you, who are willing to take risks and innovate.

Mistakes will happen anyway so make use of them even while fighting them.

Try to shield off your employees from the pressure of corporate politics and create a place for them to grow. This space will become a place of innovation that will hopefully spread out through the organization – if you managed to tweak the recipe in lieu of the company culture.

The first step in enabling this freedom is to own up to your mistakes and those of your management techniques, and fix them. Do the same, especially with your employees. First-hand experience says that this will make them do the same with you.

Reward the brave for their efforts as much as you can. Do not setup a guillotine for them.

On the other hand, abusers should be banned from this privilege, if they exceed a predefined number of chances to show improvement and genuine interest to progress via their mistakes in an attempt to avoid them in the future. This is where you setup the guillotine.

Your worry about things getting messy is in fact highly overrated, since any organizational work is by no means a walk in the park. So, if you are going through hell anyway, why not go through the path that leads to growth?

One final cliché before this article comes to an end: the freedom to make mistakes is in fact one of the key factors to any organizational growth both individually and collectively.

Indeed, but are you willing to pay the short term price for it?

Are you really willing to make this kind of investment? ABR