

4 Mistakes That Sometimes Help Your Career by David Sturt

Plus, the one mistake successful people will always regret

Sheldon Harris, the former CEO of Cold Stone Creamery, once reprimanded an employee for repeatedly coming in late, only to discover he had been voluntarily cleaning up trash in the parking lot every morning before coming inside. A classic tale of “foot in mouth.”

On a much larger scale, imagine how NASA felt when their miscalculations on the Mars Climate Orbiter caused their spacecraft to disintegrate when it passed through the upper atmosphere. They’d used English units instead of metric; that was a \$125 million mistake.

Yes, these two mistakes were regrettable, but some mistakes serve as teaching experiences. In research for my book *Great Work*, we analyzed 1.7 million cases of award-winning work in The Great Work Study. We examined the great and award-winning outcomes, but also the unexpected benefit from mistakes, which may ultimately serve to advance an organization or a career.

Researchers asked, “What mistakes have you made in your career that benefited you in the long term?” and “What mistakes have you made that have hurt your career?”

Here are the results—four mistakes that may ultimately prove to be beneficial:

1. Saying Yes to Everything

This is a classic and common career mistake, but there is a great lesson to learn. As one study respondent put it, learning “how to draw a line in the sand and where to draw it” is a good measure against stretching an employee or leader too thin.

Murthy Renduchintala, co-president of QCT at Qualcomm in San Diego, shared the benefit he found from saying yes to everything: “This company started with seven people. The founders had a simple vision to improve communication, which meant saying yes to possibility. We became the company that no matter what the problem or the deadline, we would find a solution.” A pathway to yes became the hallmark of their excellence.

2. Working for a Jerk

A bad boss can be an eye-opener for showing you where you don’t want to work, or how you don’t want to treat other people. That’s because you’ve learned firsthand how it feels.

“It seemed like a mistake at the time to accept the position because I had heard the manager was horrible, but I really wanted to gain the experience,” one respondent said. “I ended up learning a lot more about myself than I ever expected.”

3. Getting Fired for What You Believe

Not everyone will go through the experience of being fired, and especially not in a heat-of-the-moment confrontation. But this advice came through loud and clear from an employee who had refused to read a script that he deemed was misleading and unethical to the company's vendors.

The employee was fired, but years later reports that he has no regrets. In fact, the willingness to take a strong ethical stand can serve as signal of character and strength to the right organization in time.

4. Assuming You're Right

It's human nature to want to appear knowledgeable in front of our co-workers and customers, and especially in front of the boss. But none of us is an expert in everything.

A few respondents shared the lessons they learned from situations where their egos were crushed: Acknowledging the mistake or the lack of knowledge was an opportunity for learning.

Ultimately they learned that it's OK to be wrong. Yet the ability to say "I was wrong" led to greater trust and stronger relationships with the other people involved.

The Mistake They'll Always Regret

Finally we asked, "What mistakes have you made that hurt you most in the long term?" We received varied answers to the question. One responded, "Allowing some of the best people to leave." "Not realizing that I was mistreating people," was another.

But by and large, the mistakes that leaders continue to regret boiled down to one predominant theme: not saying thank you.

They reflected and focused on failure to appreciate a relationship. And from this study of more than 1.7 million great work outcomes, I would maintain that it is the mistake no executive or company can afford to make.