GUY MINOR

Why Do Smart People Do Dumb Things?

The Art of Managing Mistakes

Have you ever noticed how we sometimes take a perverse pleasure in reading articles that detail aircraft accidents? That's not terribly surprising; after all, an accident account is a cautionary tale complete with good guys and bad guys, tragedy and mayhem. You just can't look away!

Another guilty pleasure of accident reports is the ability to heave a sigh of relief because it wasn't you, and perhaps you convince yourself that it could *never* be you. Our natural tendency to make judgments helps insulate us from the tragedy. The unfortunate pilot in the story somehow brought it on himself. He made a dumb move. He was somehow deficient in experience or intelligence. It feels so good to play the superior. It seems right to balance the scales of justice. There is a bad outcome; some-one should pay the price.

But is this attitude helpful in making sense of the situation? Before we start assigning blame, perhaps taking a closer look at the tangled relationship that exists between humans and errors can provide us better insight into the "hows" and "whys" of an acci-dent as well as help us understand the reasons behind our own aerial blunders. To be able to fully benefit from the lessons an error can teach, it is imperative to walk in the shoes of the person who made the mis-take. Then ask yourself: "Why would an otherwise well meaning, bright individual make this mistake?"

To Err is Human …

It might help to understand that error is part of the human condition. The design of the human brain hardwires us for practices that lead to success in addition to those that lead to errors. Success is the upside of having a brain, mistakes the downside. The problem is we often have no idea whether to call our actions suc-cess or failure until we observe their outcome, and sometimes it is just too late. In considering error, it is useful to note that our brains have two functional modes: conscious workspace and long-term memory.

> **The good news is that we can learn from errors and, if we recognize them, we can manage and mitigate them before they cause harm.**

Photo by Tom Hoffmann

If we encounter a problem we have never seen before, we use the conscious workspace to "noodle out" a solution. The conscious workspace operates in trial and error mode, and it is easy to understand how the trial and error mode might cause error. We try something. If it works, we call it success. If it does not work, we call it error.

If, on the other hand, we encounter a situation we have seen and solved in the past, we retrieve a program or skill from long-term memory to perform that task more quickly. These automatic routines guide much of our behavior because we are very comfortable working in mental autopilot mode. The error trap lurks, though, because if something changes about the context of the behavior during the running of a skill program, we need to alter the program to account for the change. These kinds of changes require us to exit autopilot mode, pay close attention, and then alter the plan to accommodate the change. If we stay on mental autopilot or if we don't focus properly on the change, we might simply miss the change and continue with the old behavior. The problem, of course, is that the old behavior may no longer be appropriate for a new situation. Result: error.

Let's look at a specific example. A man wakes up every morning, climbs into his car, and drives

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to work. Every morning he takes the same freeway entrance ramp. Now it's the weekend, and his daughter asks him to drive her to a store located just beyond the familiar entrance ramp. As he approaches the ramp, he is deep in conversation. What does he do? He takes the entrance ramp. It is his habit. He doesn't even notice until his daughter asks, "Where are you going?"

Have you ever made a similar mistake? Perhaps you set your coffee mug on the top of your car, and because it is not a common thing to do, it's still there when you drive away. These are skill-based errors. The way our brain processes routines pulled up from long term memory causes these errors.

Managing Mistakes

Human error and human success come from the same psychological processes, so error in itself is not bad. It is the context in which we make the error that makes it so dangerous. Errors made in an unforgiving context like aviation can easily lead to disaster. We cannot change the penchant of people to make mistakes. We can however ask why the mistake occurred, and determine how to address the cause in a systemic (not individual) way. We can structure and manage the system, so it is less likely to promote error, and so it will be more forgiving of error when it does occur.

And we can look within ourselves. It is always smart to learn from your mistakes, but smart pilots prefer to learn from others' mistakes. When reading those accident and incident accounts, though, avoid the smug and superior mindset we so often tend to assume. Consider that the people who made those mistakes are people just like you — people who did not intend to do things that would cause an accident or incident. It's tempting to characterize the person as silly, thoughtless, incompetent, or reckless, but anyone — in fact, everyone — can be adversely affected by a complex, confusing, and stressful context.

The remedy is to focus on the "why," not on the "who." The "why" question deals with influences, which gets to the systemic heart of the matter. And that's when you truly learn why smart people can do dumb things and how you can avoid a similar situation. ✈

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