Workplace matters

To err is human; but not at work?
Sandi Mann

Sana, a 38-year-old accountant, was referred to me by her employer for what was described as 'anxiety'. On taking her history, it quickly became apparent that Sana was actually suffering from quite severe OCD that saw her checking and re-checking her work to such an extent that she was simply unable to let anything go. She had stopped trusting her own judgment and was taking hours completing simple tasks. Most times, she could only stop by double-checking with a colleague that she had done the task correctly. Moreover, she was coming home and ruminating about mistakes she may have made and had become unable to function effectively at work; the OCD was taking over her working life.

Such fears and anxieties are becoming more common as our workplace cultures become increasingly intolerant of mistakes that might cost them money or reputation in an ever more competitive world. This organisation-led intolerance of mistakes means embarrassment, frustration, stress and fear as the 'perpetrator' frets over the consequences of their actions. This fear is ever more pronounced in today's culture of insecurity, where a missed deadline or wrong number might result in our competence being questioned at the next appraisal.

The problems with such cultures of fear is not only that employees become risk averse (which may be good in safety-critical industries, of course), but that they can become so fearful that they are paralysed from doing their job properly. Of course, not all will become as dysfunctional as Sana, but fear creates its own inertia that rarely benefits anyone. Even doctors, where mistakes can mean life or death (it was famously estimated that 44,000 to 98,000 deaths per year – the equivalent of a jumbo jet a day – result from medical errors[1]), have to take some risks sometimes; to err on the side of caution can sometimes lead to worse outcomes.

Management guru Peter Drucker put this starkly when he suggested that rather than companies firing people who make mistakes, they should fire those who never make mistakes, because if someone never makes a mistake, he or she never does anything interesting.[2] Moreover, mistakes aid learning, so a company whose employees are afraid of getting it wrong may lack growth; as an article in the *Harvard Business Review* explained in 2002, 'business can't develop a breakthrough product or process if it's not willing to encourage risk taking and learn from subsequent mistakes.'[3]

A recent report suggests that nurses in Irish hospitals are claiming that they are losing sleep over fear of making mistakes and they feel that the increased likelihood of making mistakes is linked directly to too few resources and too much work. One nurse said, 'Every nurse goes into work with serious concerns that we'll make a mistake, that we'll forget to do something or we'll omit something important because we are juggling so many jobs at once.'[4]

The more juggling stressed employees need to do and the less time there is for reflecting, thinking and consolidating, the more chance there is of forgetting to do something, of doing something wrong or of missing something important. As the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (RoSPA) states, 'Workers experiencing high levels of stress may be more liable to commit errors in their work (whether slips, mistakes or violations).'[5]

Given the high stress levels of so many employees, you'd be forgiven for thinking that mistakes would be an acceptable part of work life – collateral damage as a result of the increased workloads and fewer resources of today's climate of austerity. But when companies are constantly looking to reduce costs and minimise 'deadweight', there is sometimes the expectation that those who make mistakes are dispensable. This leads to increased fear of erring, reduced entrepreneurism, reduced likelihood of owning and reporting mistakes and reduced learning from errors.

Sana's OCD did not respond well to CBT, partly because, even though she could learn to accept that to err is human, she still lived in very real fear of making a catastrophic mistake at work. EMDR was more successful, but the reality is that if her organisation did not treat mistakes as crimes, but as learning tools, Sana would never have needed expensive and extensive therapy in the first place (which, ironically, her company was paying for).

Where there are humans, there will always be errors. Companies should take every step to minimise and catch mistakes, but they also need to be more forgiving, both for the mental health of their employees and their organisation.

References
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