BLACK BOX THINKING

Why Most People Never Learn From Their Mistakes -- But Some Do

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MAIN IDEA

Everyone likes the idea of learning from their failures and mistakes but in reality few people or organizations ever do. Instead, most cover up their missteps and thereby end up repeating the same mistakes over and over.

Analyze, learn and improve
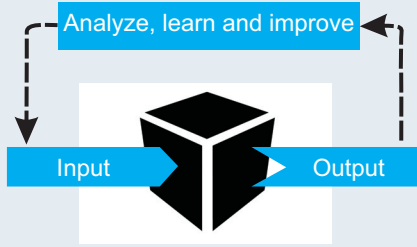
Input   Output

To avoid that, you need to follow the lead of the commercial aviation industry and install a "black box" which accurately records all inputs and outputs. Every commercial airliner has two flight recorders installed which record data about the airplane, the actions of the flight crew and more. Whenever a crash occurs, the data from the black boxes is widely disseminated so everyone can learn what they need to do differently in order to avoid repeating the mistake.

In a similar vein, in a highly complex organization, if you can install your own version of a black box rather than sweeping your mistakes under the rug, you will create a climate where not only is it safe to fail (because everyone does that) but it's vital to learn from what went wrong so it can be improved in the future. A black box approach to improvement will signal learning from failure is what counts, not pointing the finger of blame.

"Nobody wants to fail. We all want to succeed, whether we are entrepreneurs, sportsmen, politicians, scientists, or parents. But at a collective level, at the level of systemic complexity, success can only happen when we admit our mistakes, learn from them, and create a climate where it is, in a certain sense, "safe" to fail. if we wish to fulfill our potential as individuals and organizations, we must redefine failure."

– Matthew Syed

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1. The science of failure . . . . Pages 2 - 4

Whether we realize it or not, underneath any success always lies a mountain of failures which were used to figure out what doesn't work first. The real key to human progress in any field isn't to try and be infallible. It's far more important to learn from your mistakes. This is harder than it looks because the human mind is inherently hardwired to close our eyes to inconvenient truths, even when learning what to do better is clearly in our best interests. It's vital to replace closed-loop thinking with open loops of learning.

Closed   Open
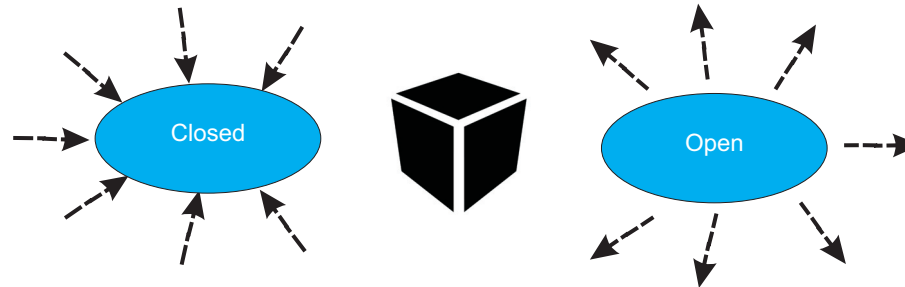
2. How to turn failure into success . . . . Pages 4 - 8

Black box thinking means that your organization has the tenacity and the willingness to learn from your mistakes rather than feeling threatened by them. In other words, you systematize and then enshrine a practical way to learn from your mistakes. The secret sauce which makes it all work is to change the way you think about failure and to let failure drive innovation, not impede it or stop it dead in its tracks.

Specifically, there are four rules which encapsulate black box thinking:

Analyze, learn and improve

1 Change a little, achieve a lot

2 Make all your loops open

3 No blame, no shame

4 Make it so you can try, try again

Input   Output

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