

# training

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## Reaching Consensus: Addressing Employee Mistakes

by Deborah Zarsky

***My direct report recently made a critical error. The last time I brought something like this to his attention, he was extremely defensive, and it took a while for him to “re-engage” with his work. How can I hold him accountable without damaging morale, especially if he’s unwilling to admit his mistakes?***

Nobody likes to make mistakes. And mistakes can be especially hard to admit when they’re brought to light by a supervisor. Nevertheless, one of your responsibilities as a manager is to ensure that things get done properly. So, however difficult it may be to discuss, you must address the situation, especially since this is not the first time a “critical” mistake happened.

First off, keep in mind that the timing of your response will influence the situation. If possible, schedule the conversation with your direct report to take place *after* the stress caused by the mistake has dissipated.

Realizing that *how* you say something is at least as important as *what* you say – that in any given conversation you have power to influence the dynamic and the level of constructiveness, depending on the tact you choose – is half the battle. The other half is knowing how to say it.

In your example, one thing that will help guide you is shifting your focus from “*Who is to blame?*” to “*How did this happen?*”, keeping in mind that your underlying objective is to prevent the recurrence of similar mistakes (and not to assign blame).

When it comes time for the conversation, rather than clinging to *your interpretation* of what went wrong, try to adopt a more neutral opinion of the situation. This will help you formulate neutral questions that will be received as being less accusatory, in turn obviating the tendency for your employee to feel defensive. You might try opening with something like, “I’d like to talk with you about the incorrect information that *got sent* to the client.” Your employee will experience this type of question more positively than, “I’d like to talk with you about the *mistake that you made* in sending the incorrect information.” Then, follow up that with something like, “What do you think went wrong?”

Not only will this “neutral” strategy help focus the conversation on the issue rather than on the person and avoid eliciting a defensive response, but it also will facilitate a more exploratory and comprehensive analysis of the situation. By inviting your employee to share his interpretation of what happened, additional, and perhaps very valuable, information can be introduced for your consideration. To prevent future mistakes, you should explore all of the factors that might have contributed to the error – in today’s team-oriented work environments, it is unlikely that a critical error could be attributed to a single individual.

For example, you might learn something new about how he interprets what you say – you might have to be more explicit when giving directions, going forward. Or, you might get valuable insight into the team dynamic – you might find that employees voluntarily “pitch in” on one another’s assignments. Each of these could provoke ideas for process improvements.

As you move through the conversation, and you want to discuss the impact of the mistake, do so without attributing blame or intent on the part of your employee. Using first-person statements like, “I felt embarrassed” will elicit more positive responses than second-person statements like, “You embarrassed me.”

Try to remain open to what your employee says. Statements that might sound defensive, like, “I have too much on my plate,” or “Nobody told me that,” might be genuine and important contributors to the problem. Ignoring those factors could undermine any other steps that you would consider taking to avoid recurrence.

Ultimately, you will be the decision-maker as to whether your employee is performing up to par and what can be done about it. However, this approach should help inform that decision.

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