

INSPIRE

On Leadership

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Learning vs. Mistakes

Learning versus mistakes; I am reminded of the differences every day. The differences are something I just know and not yet wisdom, as it is still not second nature for me to see them right away. My executive staff often needs to remind me to stop using that word 'mistake' when I mean learning.

One sunny, summer day after I had recently taken over as General Manager of LMI Packaging at 33 years old, I received a call from one of our suppliers. He let me know that a material order he was holding for us was going up in price the next week and if I released it today I could save money. It was more than \$10,000.00 which seemed like a lot of money to me, and still does. So I said YES RELEASE IT! I was so grateful for the warning and so proud of myself. It was the first time I had made such a major decision in the business and I felt like I had really come of age.

Fast forward one week and I am driving to work. As I reached our building, I noticed five semi trucks backed up along the road and traffic backed up for a mile as a result. I wondered what that was about, happy that I was at work now and didn't need to have anything to worry about it. Boy was I mistaken.

When I walked into the building everyone was in an uproar. It seemed that all five trucks and the one in the dock were for us, delivering a hundred thousand pounds of aluminum coils. We had no room in the warehouse to put them. We didn't have the crew or the equipment to efficiently unload them.

And soon enough I would learn that we also didn't have the money to pay for them.

I had never considered all this. I had thought the \$10,000

savings was a no brainer. What did I learn that day and the next few weeks? I learned about inventory turns, cash flow, and taking responsibility with six fuming truck drivers, a line of screaming drivers, bankers, and employees. Unfortunately there was no one there to remind me I hadn't made a mistake but had made a learning.

As the business grew I found out that I would not be the only one in the company making mistakes-learnings. I remember the day they delivered the brand new lathe we bought. Everyone was excited; we had finally spent the money to buy a highly precise piece of equipment. The plant foreman had been after me for months to make the investment. He walked into my office later that day, his face was ashen white. As he was unloading the lathe, it fell off the truck onto the concrete floor. No one was hurt but its 'highly precise accuracy' was now questionable. What did I learn? I learned that people are typically harder on themselves than I could ever be on them and often when they make mis-learnings all they really need is understanding and support. I also learned what FOB Supplier's Dock meant: Once it leaves their dock it's ours.

I realized that my job was not to protect people from making mistakes but to make sure that any mistakes learnings they made would not cost so much that they put the company under.

There are mistakes, of course, when we do the same thing again that didn't work the first time and when that happens it makes me crazy. But typically we make lemonade out of lemons, never quit so we never fail and support each other through all the mistakes learnings.

Jean Moran is the recently retired CEO of LMI Packaging Solutions. She is also an invaluable advocate for the community, participating in many important initiatives including Building Our Future.

