The Power of Deliberate Mistakes

by Andrew Cooke, Growth & Profit Solutions

How to benefit from making mistakes and challenging your assumptions.

A common view is that failure is a bad thing. It implies a lack of success, personal weakness and it makes you vulnerable. None of these things are comfortable, enjoyable or desired and, as such, failure is to be avoided.

The problem with this is that the only way you can learn and grow is to fail. It is a natural part of our way of life. How many parents proudly remember their baby standing up for the first time, and walking without falling down? Exactly, it doesn’t happen. Yet we insist that as we get older so we must always know better, and so we must not fail or be seen to fail.

So let’s plan to fail. Plan to fail by making deliberate mistakes.

If we are looking to make deliberate mistakes we are better prepared for the eventuality than if we make a mistake unexpectedly. By looking to make a deliberate mistake you are immediately putting yourself in a mindset of testing, learning and developing. If you make an unexpected mistake you are more focused on avoiding making the same mistake than learning from it. One way helps you grow, develop and to focus on the upside; the other can make you more insular, reactive and focused on the downside.

“Consider the Opposite”

Psychologists use this technique, “consider the opposite”, to stop ourselves from drawing premature conclusions and, instead, ponder whether we might be misinterpreting the evidence. For example, “I think my partner is selfish— but, wait, maybe I’m just ignoring all the times he’s looking out for me.” Or, at work: “I think my colleague is being rude and abrupt— but what if he’s not being abrupt and is just trying to respect my time?

If there is such a potential upside to making decisions, then why not take control of the process and try to deliberately make mistakes which can learn or benefit from? In their recent book, Decisive, Chip and Dan Heath tell the story of a company called DSI–Decision Strategies International, a management consulting firm.

The CEO at DSI, Paul Schoemaker wanted his colleagues to help him plan and execute a deliberate mistake, as a way of testing their assumptions about DSI’s business.

They approached this in 3 steps:

1. Challenge the Conventional Wisdom - they listed the 10 key assumptions underlying their business. Conventional wisdom is rarely articulated and even more rarely questioned.
2. Identify Low Confidence & High Payoff Alternatives - they identified and focused on the three assumptions that they were least confident about and that, if proven wrong

3. Select the option with the having the highest potential of benefiting from a strategy of deliberate mistakes.

4. Plan to make the mistake

5. Review results and identify results asking:
   - What was the difference between what we expected and what we got?
   - What changed or happened for this result to occur?
   - How can we replicate this or avoid this outcome?
   - What are the key leanings from this?
   - How should our underlying assumption be changed, modified or removed?

The three assumptions that DSI came up with were:

1. Young MBAs don’t work well for us. We need experienced consultants on the team.
2. The firm can be successfully run by a president who is not a major billing senior consultant.
3. It is not worthwhile to respond to RFPs. Clients who use RFPs are usually price shopping or are going through the motions to justify a choice they have already made. (RFPs are requests for proposals. Customers send out RFPs to attract vendors to bid on their business.)

A further round of assessment led them to select number 3 as the one in which they had the least confidence, and which could have the greatest payoff. Now they were ready to make their mistake.

The firm’s policy had been never to respond to an RFP, but they resolved to respond to the next one that came over the transom, which, as it happened, came from a regional electric utility. The DSI team submitted a proposal with a budget of about $200,000, a price that reflected their normal fees but that they suspected would be well out of the client’s league. Schoemaker said, “To our surprise, the electric utility invited our firm to visit with the CEO and the senior management team to explore not only the project in question but others as well.”

Eventually DIS earned over $1 million in fees from the client. Not bad for making a mistake.

But let’s be clear here, most of your “deliberate mistakes” will fail, and in fact that failure should be encouraging, because it means you've been making the right assumptions all along. Beyond the mistake itself, the willingness to test your assumptions has its own value. It signals to your colleagues that your work will be conducted based on evidence, not folklore or politics.

So where are you looking to make a mistake?
Excerpted from *Decisive: How to Make Better Choices in Life and Work* by Chip Heath and Dan Heath. Copyright 2013 by Chip Heath and Dan Heath. Published by arrangement with Crown Business, a division of Randomhouse, Inc.

About Andrew Cooke & Growth & Profit Solutions

**Andrew Cooke**

An experienced executive coach, business facilitator, and management consultant Andrew has more than 25 years’ national and international experience, working across a range of industries and businesses. He is passionate in helping people, teams and companies to unlock their individual and collective potential, enabling them to achieve their personal and business goals and, in turn, to help them unlock the potential of others.

Andrew has extensive experience in dealing with both blue-chip and start-up companies, and has had extensive international experience in the UK, the Middle East and Ireland across a range of industries.

He has post-graduate business qualifications with a Masters in Business Administration (MBA) from the London Business School.

**Growth & Profit Solutions (“GPS”)**

Andrew runs Growth & Profit Solutions, working with individuals, teams, groups and corporate so they can unlock their potential, that of others, and create a life and a job they love and choose to lead.

Through customized development programmes using experiential learning, backed by group workshops, individual one-to-one coaching and on-going support the individual and group development needs are addressed, the skills and capabilities are unlocked and the people can grow and achieve both personal and business outcomes on a sustainable basis. His blog, Growth and Profit, can be found at [http://growthandprofit.wordpress.com](http://growthandprofit.wordpress.com).

To find out more about this visit the GPS [website](http://growthandprofit.wordpress.com) or contact Andrew at andrew.cooke@business-gps.com.au or on +61 (0)401 842 673.