



Outside the Box

► by **Tom Field**, University of Nebraska–Lincoln

Missing the mark

Minus 20! Scrawled in bold red pencil across the middle of the statistics exam, the bad news was difficult to comprehend. I had known how to solve that problem. In frustration, I reworked the solution. About halfway through the formulation, there it was — an inadvertent mistake — two digits of a number transposed. Beyond this small mistake, the remainder of my work had been flawless. With great confidence, I scheduled a meeting with the professor to plead my case and to negotiate the release of at least part of the lost points to the favorable side of the ledger.

Systems approach

At the appointed time, I laid out my argument. I had painstakingly illustrated the solution in my best handwriting, isolated the flaw, and deliberately written out a new solution proving had I not transposed the numbers the correct solution would have been achieved.

He listened intently; I was certain of success. I finished the pitch and delivered the closing ask with the intensity of a legal eagle.

“I should receive, at minimum, 18 of the 20 points,” I argued. I had even left wiggle room for negotiating another point. It had been brilliant.

He leaned forward, his hands folded on top of the weathered oak desk. I leaned forward eager to retrieve the reward. In a soft but firm tone he rendered his verdict, “Mr. Field, you should have landed in Cleveland. Instead, you touched down in Cincinnati.”

There was no response that would have swayed the outcome. Vanquished and with papers in hand, I quietly left the room, leaving the points I had hoped to regain in the captivity of his grade book, but with an invaluable life lesson in tow.

Useful lesson

That conversation some 30 years ago has stimulated my thinking on so many occasions and in a variety of realms — ranch systems management, business strategy, entrepreneurship, relationships and parenting. The funny thing is, I don’t remember a single thing from the remainder of that exam. Eighty percent of my responses had been correct and, since that day, have yielded not one iota of value. But the 20-point failure, it has proven invaluable.

At first glance, the take-home lesson has been to pay more attention to the details



when attempting to hit a mission-critical target. Yet there are three additional lessons from the “Case of the Transposed Number.”

1. An unforced error is not the end of the world, but it is ridiculous and immature to expect to be rewarded for it.
2. However, the mistake becomes gold when lessons can be gleaned as fertilizer for professional and personal growth.
3. The problem had never been about a transposed number, but rather a systems failure. A design flaw had not been sufficiently robust to be caught early in the process and long before a final product was delivered to a customer.

Analyze mistakes

None of us really revels in dissection of our mistakes, and excessive analysis is no better than ignoring the issue altogether. However, reflective and thoughtful evaluations are critical to delivering greater value.

Create your own case study by asking the following question. What mistakes were made last year that negatively affected the business?

Once the list is made, choose two or three and ask the follow-up question: Why was the mistake made?

One must be very careful at this juncture to not settle for some surface response that is a symptom instead of a root cause. For example, the response, “People don’t listen very well around this joint” is not sufficient.

Why don’t they listen?

“Well, they do listen, but they don’t follow through.”

Why not?

“Our communication is all verbal, and there’s either too much detail or not enough.”

The focus now changes from “those people aren’t listening to me” (a what’s-wrong-with-them approach) to drilling down on the way information and direction in the organization is shared (a what’s-wrong-with-the-system approach). The shift from trying to fix people to trying to fix the system will provide a much more fruitful path to a better organization.

Once each of the sample problems have been put through the aforementioned process, the management team can begin to look for common threads that played a role in all or most of the mistakes and errors. Common themes might be communication issues, poor training, a lack of process, too many rules, or a lack of accountability. The common themes have a high probability of being root-cause issues. If an error seems to be unique without ties to common themes, then it is important to assess the likelihood of the mistake being made in the future. If the probability is low, move on. However, if the odds for a recurring problem are moderate to high, then the issue must be addressed directly.

Organizations and people who learn from their misses and proactively address the root causes increase their performance more than those who either ignore bad news altogether, or who fall into the downward spiral created

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