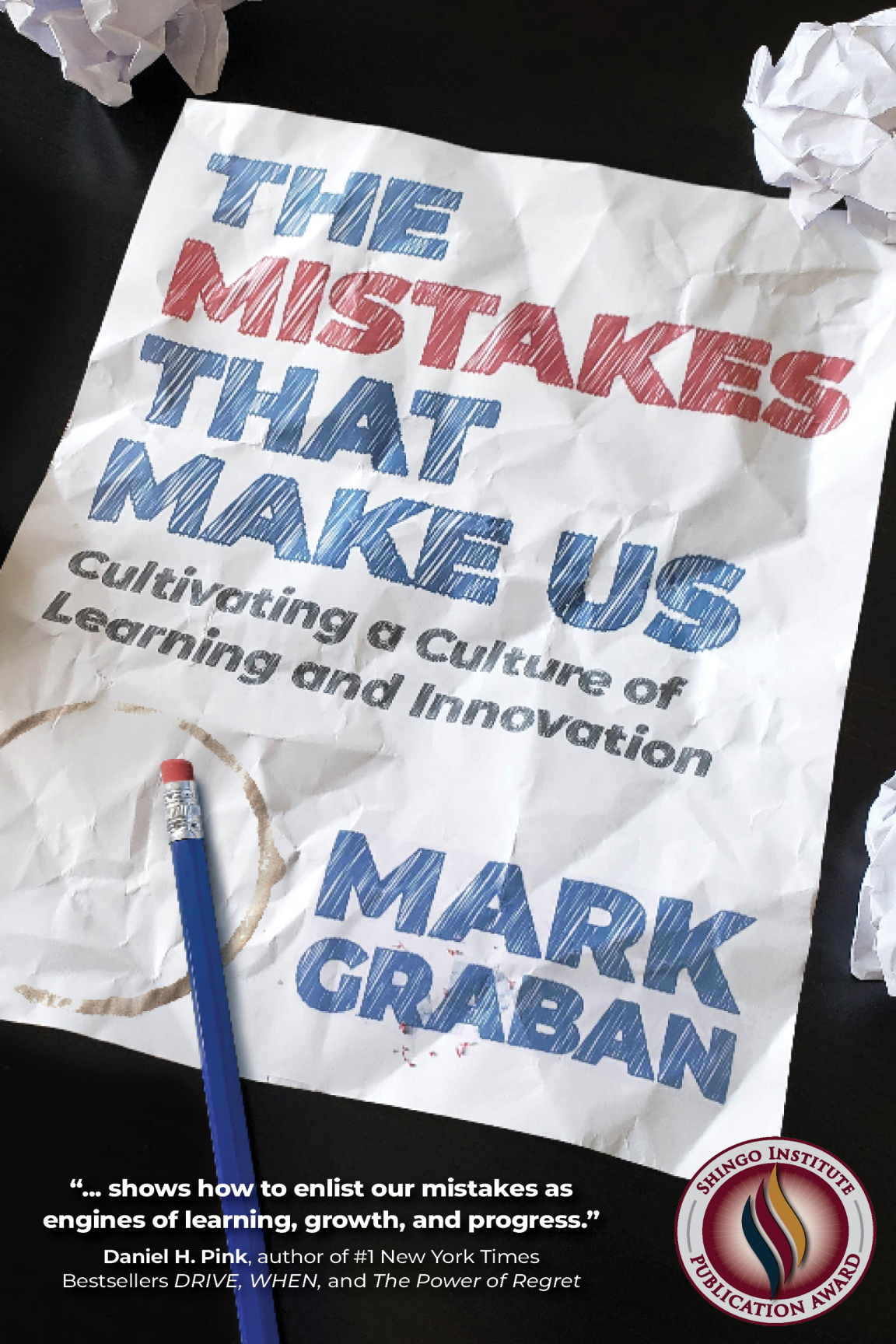

"... shows how to enlist our mistakes as engines of learning, growth, and progress."

Daniel H. Pink, author of #1 New York Times Bestsellers *DRIVE*, *WHEN*, and *The Power of Regret*

SHINGO INSTITUTE PUBLICATION AWARD

The Mistakes That Make Us

Cultivating a Culture of Learning and Innovation

Mark Graban

This book is available at http://leanpub.com/mistakesbook

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Dedication

This content is not available in the sample book. The book can be purchased on Leanpub at http://leanpub.com/mistakesbook.

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About the Author

Mark Graban has helped organizations improve for more than twenty-five years, in settings including manufacturing, healthcare, and software companies.

He previously wrote or co-authored *Lean Hospitals*, *Healthcare Kaizen*, *Practicing Lean*, and, most recently, *Measures of Success: React Less, Lead Better, Improve More*.

Working independently as a professional speaker and consultant, Mark is also a senior advisor to the technology company KaiNexus.

He hosts multiple podcasts, including "Lean Blog Interviews" (started in 2006) and "My Favorite Mistake" (2020). Mark earned a BS in Industrial Engineering from Northwestern University and both an MS in Mechanical Engineering and an MBA from the MIT Sloan Leaders for Global Operations program. He and his wife Amy, live wherever her career takes her.

Learn more and contact Mark through his website, www.MarkGraban.com, or email, Mark@MarkGraban.com

Also by Mark Graban

- *Lean Hospitals: Improving Quality, Patient Safety, and Employee Engagement (3rd Ed.)*
- *Healthcare Kaizen: Engaging Front-Line Staff in Sustainable Continuous Improvements*
- *The Executive Guide to Healthcare Kaizen: Leadership for a Continuously Learning and Improving Organization*
- *Practicing Lean: Learning How to Learn How to Get Better...Better*
- *Measures of Success: React Less, Lead Better, Improve More*

Podcasts by Mark Graban

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Praise for The Mistakes That Make Us

A full list of endorsements can be found at www.mistakesbook.com.

"Making mistakes is not a choice. Learning from them is. Whether we admit it or not, mistakes are the raw material of potential learning and the means by which we progress and move forward. Mark Graban's *The Mistakes That Make Us* is a brilliant treatment of this topic that helps us frame mistakes properly, detach them from fear, and see them as expectations, not exceptions. This book's ultimate contribution is helping us realize that creating a culture of productive mistake-making accelerates learning, confidence, and success."

- Timothy R. Clark, PhD, Author of The 4 Stages of Psychological Safety, CEO of LeaderFactor

"At last! A book about errors, flubs, and screwups that pushes beyond platitudes and actually shows how to enlist our mistakes as engines of learning, growth, and progress. Dive into *The Mistakes That Make Us* and discover the secrets to nurturing a psychologically safe environment that encourages the small experiments that lead to big breakthroughs."

- Daniel H. Pink, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of DRIVE, WHEN, and THE POWER OF REGRET

"Mark's exhibition of errors not only acknowledges a core human experience that is frequently concealed but also fosters a feeling of togetherness among his audience, inspiring us to persevere in their pursuit of education and personal development."

- Jim McCann, founder & chairman, 1-800-FLOWERS.COM, INC.

"In business, as in life, everyone makes mistakes. How we view and move on from mistakes can transform them from problems into opportunities for learning and growth. Mark's book delves into the ways we can use errors to help build and foster a culture of understanding and continuous improvement that embraces humanity as an integral part of work."

- Eric Ries, author of *The Lean Startup* and *The Startup Way*

"Another useful book from Mark Graban! Creating the conditions to surface and learn from mistakes not only drives continuous improvement and innovation, but also good jobs. *The Mistakes That Make Us* shows us how to get there. I found his lessons useful for business and life."

- Zeynep Ton, Professor of the Practice at MIT Sloan, President of Good Jobs Institute, and author of *The Case for Good Jobs*, *How Great Companies Bring Dignity, Pay & Meaning to Everyone's Work*

"At Menlo Innovations, one of our favorite phrases is 'Make Mistakes Faster!' It's not that we like making mistakes, we just prefer making small mistakes quickly rather than BIG mistakes slowly. The difference comes from creating a culture where we are safe to share our mistakes. Mark Graban teaches all of us how to do this and shares story after real story of the benefits. It would be a BIG mistake to ignore this wisdom!"

- Richard Sheridan, CEO & Chief Storyteller, Menlo Innovations, Author, *Joy, Inc. - How We Built a Workplace People Love* and *Chief Joy Officer - How Great Leaders Elevate Human Energy and Eliminate Fear*

"Mark Graban's exploration of mistakes provides a new body of knowledge––both practical and psychological––for individuals and businesses alike to capitalize on. This book's greatest power is how Mark weaves in the tenets for success with real-world examples and lessons that readers can apply immediately. It would be a mistake not to read this book!"

- Karen Martin, President & Founder TKMG, Inc. and TKMG Academy, Inc. and award-winning author of *Clarity First* and *The Outstanding Organization.*

"Finally, a book that goes beyond noting the importance of growth and improvement and shows how embracing mistakes can lead us there. This book provides practical insights and real-world examples on how to foster a psychologically safe environment that encourages experimentation and innovation. The path to continuous improvement is there; learn how to embrace the bumpy road."

- Ethan Burris, Ph.D., Niessa Professor of Management and Senior Associate Dean for Academic Affairs, McCombs School of Business at the University of Texas at Austin

"The path to success is paved with mistakes. And–as the Japanese proverb 'Fall down seven times, get up eight' represents–what matters is how we get up from the setbacks that knock us off course. We can all relate to –- and learn from–- the stories and insights in Mark's book, your guide for how to turn your mistakes a pathway to success."

- Katie Anderson, leadership consultant and author of *Learning to Lead, Leading to Learn*

"Dr. Deming told us to drive out fear. Toyota's model is respect for people and continuous improvement. They go hand in hand. Hiding mistakes is the death of continuous improvement. Mark uses stories to delve deeply into the disease and gives us powerful suggestions for creating an environment that breeds trust and high performance."

- Jeffrey Liker, author of *The Toyota Way*

Introduction

"What's your favorite mistake?"

When I asked 200 successful people that question, I learned that my podcast guests possess an admirable combination of confidence and humility. They have shared stories, reflections, and lessons, including:

- The member of Congress who lost his first primary before learning from his mistake and winning in his second try
- The CEO whose savvy acquisition literally made a name for his company but saddled it with a surprising debt load that might have been a blessing in disguise
- The retired Japanese Toyota executive who wasn't fired for a mistake that messed up the paint on 100 cars, and the American leader who had the same experience decades later in Kentucky
- The aide whose loose lips led to a spicy quote in USA *Today* but who, thankfully, worked for a U.S. Representative who focused on learning over punishment
- The distiller who over-aged 100 barrels of expensive whiskey but worked for a founder who realized mistakes happen when you're innovating
- The shark whose mistake almost put his company underwater for good...

Wait, a shark? That's not a typo. I'll explain it soon.

Why would people admit mistakes like these in a public forum? They understand how reacting kindly to mistakes can lead to growth and progress. They celebrate the progress and growth that results from mistakes when we react to them in constructive ways. My podcast and book are neither a pity party nor a shaming session. They are places to remember that we all make mistakes and to celebrate the learning and vulnerability that sets a powerful example for others.

When people start a story with "I'm going to be vulnerable here," we often brace ourselves to hear something personal, if not embarrassing. Admitting

a workplace mistake feels vulnerable because it exposes us to the risk of professional harm or loss—-which could include being marginalized, demoted, or fired.

Guests on *My Favorite Mistake* admit and own their mistakes instead of blaming others for any misfortune. And they felt safe enough to do so. Sadly, many people feel pressured to protect themselves by keeping quiet about mistakes.

Speaking up isn't a matter of character or courage—-it's driven by culture. People feel safe to share when their leaders and colleagues treat them with respect. Instead of asking people to be brave, leaders must create conditions where people can feel safe.

The most powerful question one can ask after a mistake is, "What did we learn?" People who know that their workplace reacts constructively to mistakes can reflect, learn, and improve—-preventing mistakes from being repeated, learning how to prevent mistakes that haven't happened yet, and proactively improving every aspect of our work to drive better results.

Positively Learning from Mistakes

Many say we learn the most from our mistakes and failures, including a certain beloved green character from a famous series of sci-fi galactic-adventure films, who said, "The greatest teacher, failure is." A fellow author warned me against possibly running afoul of a litigious entertainment company by mentioning the series' name. It does rhyme with, um, *Car Chores*.

Discussing mistakes might seem negative, but doing so helps us grow, leading to greater success. I'm positive about that. Mistakes can be turned into something positive—-if we react to them the right way (being kind) and make the right adjustments (being constructive).

Often, It's the Mistakes That Make Us Who We Are

The Mistakes That Make Us—-that's a good title for a book. But I could be wrong. Have I made a mistake? Only time will tell.

The mistakes that make us learn are ones to cherish.

The mistakes that make us upset are opportunities to reflect on being more kind.

The mistakes that make us examine our actions then help us improve.

The mistakes that make us frustrated, because we've made them before, can inspire us to finally take action and improve.

The mistakes that make us notice a small problem early on help us avoid big mistakes and possibly catastrophic failures.

The mistakes that make us embarrassed are, hopefully, made in a workplace that chooses kindness and learning instead of blame and punishment.

The mistakes that make us laugh brighten our day.

We can be thankful for mistakes.

How It Started

How did this book come to be? In May 2020, a public relations person sent an email that said, "I'm writing to introduce one of the original 'sharks' on the hit TV show Shark Tank, the creator of the infomercial and pioneer of the "As Seen on TV" industry, Kevin Harrington, and his mentee, serial entrepreneur Mark Timm."

The email concluded, "I hope you'll consider an interview with Kevin and Mark on your show." Wow! Yes! I wanted to. But Kevin and Mark, and their book about mentoring, didn't tightly fit the theme of the podcast I have hosted since 2006 called "Lean Blog Interviews."

I've been a student of "Lean Management," based on the famed Toyota Production System, applying those methods and mindsets in settings including manufacturing, healthcare, and software organizations. Toyota has long cultivated a culture of preventing mistakes and learning from them. You'll read stories in the book from Toyota people who have kept that culture alive and growing. Toyota's not perfect, but they offer us much to love and learn.

In one of my earlier books, *Practicing Lean*, fifteen authors and I shared mistakes we made early in our careers. I also wanted to change my habit of writing occasional snarky blog posts that criticized mistake makers, implying they should have known better. As book contributors, we aimed to reassure others (and remind ourselves) that we all make mistakes when learning and doing new things. I like to think I've mended my ways. I could be wrong.

Finding a Way to Say "Yes"

[Thankfully, a voice in my head said, "Find a way to say *Yes*." So, I asked the PR professionals what they thought about possible themes and titles for a new business podcast. These included *"*My Favorite Mistake," where I proposed that guests tell a story about a mistake that turned out to be a great learning opportunity, one they wouldn't have expected at the time.

Proposing this wasn't risky. If I didn't try, I would likely regret that more. I managed to turn a potentially lost opportunity into a big one––and was delighted when Kevin and Mark said they were happy to talk about mistakes! The podcast was born!

But one episode does not a podcast make. I assumed I could find other successful people willing to open up publicly to some random guy and his podcast listeners. I assumed guests would have compelling stories to tell. If guests wanted to share only humble-brag mistakes like "I've worked too hard and been too successful," I would have chosen to scrub the podcast's launch.

Thankfully, my assumptions turned out to be true. I found guests willing not only to share vulnerable stories but also to reveal what they learned and how they adjusted––and how the pain caused by their mistake subsided with reflection over time. That allowed us to talk about making something positive out of our mistakes––and how others have done the same.

I've released more than 200 episodes to date, with more to come. I haven't tired of asking about favorite mistakes or hearing how people answer.

What Makes a Mistake a Favorite?

What's a mistake? We'll discuss that in Chapter One. What makes somebody decide that a mistake is a favorite? My question to guests is intentionally open-ended, and the answer is completely subjective. A favorite mistake is not necessarily the same as one's "biggest." Asking about people's *worst* mistakes might trigger regret and sadness.

Through these conversations, I better understood what "favorite mistake" means to a wide range of people. A favorite might be one or more of the following:

- A mistake that's important enough to stick with you
- A mistake that created a fortuitous opportunity or new direction

- A mistake we hope others can avoid
- A mistake that led to learning, including the actions required to prevent repeating the mistake

Who Planted the Seed for This Book?

After we finished recording their episode, one of my first guests asked me, "Did you start this podcast because you're writing a book about mistakes?" My answer was a sincere "no." I was motivated at that point by curiosity, learning, and the opportunity to meet some fantastic people.

After about a hundred episodes, as patterns emerged, I realized these interviews served as "field research." These seeds started germinating as I considered writing a book about mistakes, but I don't remember which guest did the planting! Back then, it didn't seem important to remember exactly who asked. Please let me know if you're reading this and remember asking me the question. I'm very grateful, whoever you are.

Cultivating the Culture—-What's Ahead

In this book, you'll read about companies cultivating a culture of learning from mistakes, including global manufacturers like Toyota, software companies like KaiNexus](http://kainexus.com/), and, perhaps surprisingly, two small whiskey distillers. The ability to learn from mistakes isn't a technology only the largest companies can afford. It's something anybody can cultivate.

After a lot of consideration and debate, I chose the word "cultivating" to start the book's subtitle. That word was a gift from my old friend Don Coon, a professional artist who created the book's cover. I use the word throughout the book instead of alternatives like "building" or "creating." To me, "building a culture" sounds too mechanical. "Creating" one sounds like a one-time event.

I don't consider myself as having a green thumb, but we can draw parallels between a garden and our culture. The word "culture" has roots in Latin, *cultus* ("to care") and French, *colere* ("to till the ground").

First, leaders need to declare the intent to start cultivating the culture. As we launch a startup, we can decide what to plant and where. Or sometimes, we discover that a healthy culture has sprouted up as a result of the way

people act, so we then declare our intent to consciously keep the culture growing and thriving.

The second step is analyzing and preparing the soil that provides the foundation for our culture. What figurative rocks and weeds do we need to clear? Are any leaders making the soil too acidic for anything to grow? Are they willing and able to change, or do we need to change out certain leaders to ensure that our garden will survive?

Thirdly, leaders plant the seeds for a culture of learning from mistakes by modeling behaviors like admitting mistakes to themselves and then to others. As employees start feeling safe enough to follow their lead, others will plant more seeds by admitting their mistakes.

Finally, a garden requires continued food, water, fertilizer, and sunlight. Our culture is nurtured by what we do and how we act. Food and water are represented by leaders reacting kindly and constructively to mistakes. Effective problem-solving and process improvement are the fertilizer that accelerates growth. The sunlight of transparency means sharing of mistakes, lessons learned, and improvements—because it feels safe to do so.

The first part of the book focuses on actions that start on an individual level: thinking positively about mistakes (Chapter One), admitting mistakes (Chapter Two), and being kind to yourself and others (Chapter Three). Next, we look at methods for proactively preventing mistakes (Chapter Four) while cultivating higher psychological safety levels required for employees to feel safe in speaking up (Chapter Five). The final part of the book discusses the need for leaders to react constructively to mistakes, shifting from punishment to improvement (Chapter Six), the opportunity to iterate our way to success (Chapter Seven), and some concluding examples and thoughts about starting or continuing our cultivation efforts (Chapter Eight).

Thanks for reading. I hope you don't decide that's a mistake.

Disclosures:

I have formal business relationships with some organizations that I write about in this book:

- **KaiNexus**: Since 2011, I have been a contractor, part-time employee, and investor, owning a small equity stake in the company today.
- **Value Capture**: I previously worked for them as a part-time subcontractor (as a client advisor and in a marketing role) from 2017 through 2023.

- **LeaderFactor**: They trained and certified me in their psychological safety education, assessment, and improvement methodologies that I license for use with organizations.

Chapter One: Think Positively

"Experience is simply the name we give our mistakes."

– Oscar Wilde, Irish poet and playwright (1854-1900)

We all make mistakes –- even sharks.

It can be hard to admit our mistakes. Sharks don't feel that burden.

But what if the shark is Kevin Harrington, who appeared on the first season of the hit TV show *Shark Tank*? He was my first guest on the *My Favorite Mistake* podcast.[1] Just as great white sharks need continual movement to breathe and live, entrepreneurs like Kevin need a continuous flow of cash to stay alive.

A serial entrepreneur, Kevin is the inventor of the modern television "As Seen on TV" infomercial, selling famous products like the George Foreman Grill and Jack LaLanne juicers. He admits: "30 years ago, I made a big mistake. [I've] made plenty since then."

Kevin's company almost went under because of *his* mistake, one he was willing to admit and discuss. Some might think the Kevin Harringtons of the business world are successful because they *avoid* making mistakes. They'd be wrong. Successful people (and organizations) are better at *learning* from mistakes, and they avoid repeating them.

Thirty years ago, Kevin's business brought in $100 million a year in revenue from a dozen products. About $2 million in sales were deposited in the bank account each Monday, driven mainly by the weekend's sales.

One week started with a shock as he arrived to find his extremely distraught chief financial officer in Kevin's office. The CFO informed Kevin that the bank had held back that week's revenue. "That $2 million represented my life," said Kevin. This situation jeopardized his ability to meet payroll and buy airtime for his infomercials. He feared this would quickly make them "As Formerly Seen on TV."

Why did the bank withhold the funds? One of Kevin's twelve infomercial products had an extremely high defect rate of 30%, which led to a flood of

[1] *My Favorite Mistake*, "Episode 1: Kevin Harrington & Mark Timm," https://markgraban.com/mistake1.

customer complaints and refunds. The bank held the $2 million to protect itself from the risk of potentially paying additional refunds.

At the time, Kevin's company ran the credit-card payments for all its products through a single credit-card processing account. He didn't realize this was risky until it became a huge concern. The problematic product represented just 3% of his sales, yet it put the whole company at risk.

He worked with the bank to release 80% of those funds, relieving the cash-flow pressure in the short term. Once the crisis passed, Kevin wondered if this would happen again. Would the bank be as cooperative the next time? "It's something we never wanted to go through again," he recalled.

They could stop selling the product until they could eliminate quality problems at the factory or find a new supplier. But what would they do if they had a quality problem with another product in the future? Kevin took actions to address the systemic cash-flow risk, explaining, "We set up separate accounts for every product. Separate businesses, separate profit-and-loss statements. And we ran our business completely in these little silos," which isolated the risk created by a single defective product. If complaints spiked for one product, the remaining cash flow would continue through separate accounts.

Kevin calls this his "favorite mistake" because he learned, adjusted, and prevented that mistake from happening again, describing this experience as "an amazing learning curve." He survived and grew the business to more than $500 million in annual revenue before selling the company and moving on to the new world of online advertising and sales.

Kevin also emphasizes the need to iterate when they tried launching new products, realizing "not everything was going to be a hit." The company usually tried up to three times before declaring a product dead, aiming to "fail cheap" by putting as little money as possible into the failures. Small tests of change and the benefits of iterating your way to success are discussed in Chapter Seven.

When people like Kevin publicly admit mistakes, their story could help somebody else avoid his mistake, but few of us will ever face that exact situation. However, his attitude about admitting and learning from mistakes can help us all. Creating a public persona of perfection might be tempting, but what can other people learn from that? To be perfect? To try harder to be perfect? Nah, that's not going to happen. It's not that simple.

We're more likely to learn, improve, and grow when we admit our mis-

takes, even if just to ourselves. Some people might succeed despite never admitting a mistake, but it's unlikely they've avoided making them. I'm positive I make mistakes every day. But I work to turn those mistakes into something positive, helping me grow, learn, and improve.

What Are Mistakes?

Mistakes are actions or judgments that turn out to be misguided or wrong. We believe we are making the right decision at the time, but eventually discover it was wrong, whether seconds or years later. The word "mistake" is a noun. Mistakes exist, whether we recognize and admit them or not. After discovering a mistake, our choices determine if we turn it into something positive (learning and improving) or make things worse (dooming ourselves to repeating them).

Mistakes arise from decisions and actions that produce outcomes that don't match our intended results. Or we decided to maintain the status quo when we should have made a change––perhaps any change. We call this an "inaction mistake."

We use the term "planning mistakes" for decisions and actions that were intentional and end up being wrong. An example was when I emailed a new colleague and typed "Kayleigh" as part of the email address, an intentional spelling choice. I quickly discovered my mistake when the email bounced back because the address did not exist. I didn't know how to spell her name correctly and made a bad assumption.

The term "execution mistakes" applies when our intended actions *would* have been correct, but we failed to follow our plan for some reason. In reply to a later email from this new employee, my fingers still managed to type "Hi, Kayleigh," even though I had already learned that her name was spelled "Kaleigh." I slipped up. We sometimes call this human error. I quickly learned and created the habit of using her spelling, although I might make that mistake again. Sorry, Kaleigh.

We can also define a mistake as "an error in action, calculation, opinion, or judgment caused by poor reasoning, carelessness, insufficient knowledge, assumptions, etc." That definition also includes common causes of mistakes.

When we lack knowledge, we tend to fill that gap with assumptions that could be incorrect––leading to mistakes. Ideally, we could delay our decision until we get better information. If the information doesn't exist,

we might need to move forward without realizing that we should test and evaluate our assumptions, ready to be proven wrong. Stubbornly clinging to assumptions can cause many mistakes. When an assumption turns out to be untrue, we must detect it early to adjust accordingly—-celebrating what we learned instead of beating ourselves up (and hopefully, others will react kindly). Mistakes caused by what seems like "carelessness" are usually more complicated than that. It's not that people don't *care*—-even the *most* careful of us get tripped up by a badly designed process. Many types of human error can be prevented by various mistake-proofing techniques, as we'll learn about in Chapter Four.

Replace Punishment with Improvement

Leaders and organizations have a choice: cultivate a culture of fear and punishment or a culture of learning and innovation. That choice significantly affects happiness and performance at all levels within the organization. We're better off choosing to be positive about mistakes. We don't have to love that mistakes happen. But they're a fact. Taking the positive post-mistake path leads to better outcomes over time, even if it seems like the road less traveled. More than 200 podcast guests have made that clear.

A culture of fear and punishment drives mistakes underground. An organization with a culture of fear cannot learn from mistakes, because people don't feel safe admitting them. People who *do* admit mistakes to their manager aren't more virtuous or courageous; they likely are in circumstances where they are able to feel safe doing so. Instead of telling people to be brave, leaders must help people feel safer.

Those who fail to learn from mistakes are doomed to repeat them.

A culture of learning from mistakes is kind and constructive. It's more effective. It allows people to take an active role in preventing mistakes from being repeated. In doing so, they learn how to reduce the number made over time. They feel safer and more capable of driving improvement and innovation.

Most organizations today are closer to a culture of fear and punishment than a culture of learning—-it's been the corporate-culture default for a long time. Choosing to be positive and constructive about mistakes can be a differentiating competitive advantage. It will help you attract and retain top talent, and more effectively serve customers. More learning leads to more innovation, growth, and better long-term business performance.

Punishment is a hard habit to break. But we must. Lucian Leape, MD, one of the leaders of the modern patient-safety movement, reinforced this notion in testimony to Congress, making a statement that applies to most workplaces: "The single greatest impediment to error prevention in the medical industry is that we punish people for making mistakes."

Donald Berwick, MD, MPP, is president emeritus and senior fellow at the Institute for Healthcare Improvement and a former Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services administrator. Berwick has long championed a positive view of problems. In a 1989 *New England Journal of Medicine* editorial, he cited an epigram: "Every defect is a treasure," adding, "In the discovery of imperfection lies the chance for processes to improve."[2]

Berwick said organizations could not eliminate quality problems by blaming people and removing so-called "bad apples," a lesson he learned from the best manufacturers, including Toyota. Most problems and mistakes have systemic causes, and we can discover that by asking "How could that occur?" instead of "Whose fault is that?" The existence of a mistake does not mean that somebody messed up. Blame the process, not the people.

Many healthcare organizations use surveys, including one from Press Ganey, to ask staff members how much they agree with the following statement: "I can report patient-safety mistakes without fear of punishment."[3] In any workplace, everybody should have the ability to report mistakes of any kind without fear of punishment[.

The next statement in the Press Ganey survey emphasizes the need to combine a nonpunitive approach with effective problem-solving: "In my work unit/department, we discuss ways to prevent errors from happening again." Talking must lead to action as we test and evaluate the effectiveness of our prevention efforts.

Companies in a wide range of industries choose to think positively about mistakes. It might seem easier when the consequences aren't a matter of life or death. For example, Kevin Goldsmith, chief technology officer at DistroKid, the world's largest digital music distributor, says: "Figuring out how to fail effectively is a superpower at organizations, versus others that... are still punishing failure. It really destroys all innovation."^4]

[2]Berwick, Donald, MD, "Continuous Improvement as an Ideal in Health Care," *New England Journal of Medicine*, Jan. 1989.

[3]Press Ganey, "Safety Solutions Starter®," https://oneumms.org/wp-content/uploads/Solutions-Starter-Safety.pdf

A culture of learning from mistakes brings many benefits, including higher employee engagement, lower turnover, more improvement, and greater innovation. It's about better results —-as individuals, teams, and organizations.

Fail Often—-or Learn to Succeed?

In recent years, entrepreneurs have been increasingly keen to talk about failures. People in Silicon Valley and other innovation centers organize "failure nights," sometimes called "F-Up Nights" (more often by the vulgar version of that phrase). Others share "failure resumes" online.

The word "failure" is sometimes used interchangeably with the word "mistake." The words are related but different. Mistakes *might lead* to failures, but failures aren't always caused by a mistake.

Mistakes are inevitable, but failure is not.

A mistake is a bad decision or an unintended slip. Failure is an outcome. When defined as "a lack of success," "failure" sounds absolute, as it implies "complete failure." If a decision leads to results falling just a little short of expectations, the word "failure" seems too harsh.

Innovators love phrases like "Fail early, fail often." I'd rather say (and experience) things like:

- Fail early, not repeatedly
- Fail fast, learn often
- Fail early, succeed later
- Fail small, not big

Let's shift the thinking from "Fail early, fail often" to "Make small mistakes early, learn, adjust, and succeed." Or, more succinctly, *small mistakes lead to success*.

Even if you're not a startup CEO, you can embrace mistakes, regardless of your profession, industry, or company size. You can foster this mindset as an individual, even if your team or other leaders in your organization do not. But it's better when your leaders share this view. If you're a leader, thinking positively plants the seeds for others to do the same.

Discover Gaps between Expectations and Results

I've met many former Toyota employees who define a problem as "the gap between expected and actual outcomes." It can be the gap between our goal and actual levels of performance. The role of a leader is to help everyone work together to close those gaps.

Since a mistake is one type of problem, it leads me to use similar language: A mistake results in a gap between expected and actual outcomes.

Many podcast guests shared personal stories about the gap between what they expected from a new job (something positive) and the actual outcome (a bad situation). Some gaps were huge, meaning they needed to leave that job. Other gaps were relatively small, and they could be solved by staying and making the best of the mistake.

Scott Hirsch, the chief technology officer of a Canadian company, Talent Marketplace, launched the beta version of a job search platform with a price he thought would be attractive: free. He quickly discovered the gap between his expected outcome (that many people would sign up because it was free) and the actual outcome (people were skeptical and didn't sign up). A free site seemed too good to be true. Scott learned from the early mistake, started charging customers, and began to grow.[4]

Sometimes, we can quantify the gaps. In 2015, when Kevin Goldsmith was a technology leader at Spotify, the company planned to launch a new set of features called "Spotify Now." There was a sense of urgency, as they wanted to preempt Apple's expected announcement of their music-streaming service. Spotify didn't specifically predict how much Spotify Now would boost user retention, but a modest increase of 1% would have been a "huge deal at Spotify's scale," Kevin says.

Rolling out Spotify Now to all users would risk a public failure, so they tested it by giving the features to a small group of users in New Zealand. Customers were not being charged for the Spotify Now features whether they used the free version of the Spotify service (with ads) or the paid, ad-free version. The results of the test showed a 6% increase in retention. Kevin thought those results were "amazing" but "completely unrealistic."

Based on the test results, and even with Kevin's concern about them, Spotify moved forward. They ran a slightly larger test by giving the Spotify

[4] *My Favorite Mistake*, "Episode 154, Scott Hirsch," https://markgraban.com/mistake154.

Now features to 1% of their customers in Spotify's four largest markets. So how did it work out in the larger test? They were surprised to see a 1% *decline* in user retention. What happened?

After some investigation and further testing, Spotify learned they had inadvertently removed ads for users in this test group who used the free version. They were essentially getting the paid service for free, and that's why the test group was so happy! In this case, free was better, which distorted the results of the test and caused Spotify to draw an incorrect conclusion about the effectiveness of Spotify Now. One mistake (removing the ads for free users) led to another: deciding to move forward beyond the initial test group based on those misleading test-group results.

The 1% decline in user retention in the broader test group made the mistakes painfully clear. The gap was large enough that the word "failure" applies, as Kevin labeled it.[5] Gradually, Kevin and his team figured out which of the Spotify Now features were driving users away. After removing those and making improvements, the global rollout commenced with "a more modest retention gain," as they would have hoped.

Kevin wrote, "To Spotify's immense credit, rather than punish me, my peers, and the team, we were rewarded for how we handled the failure. The lessons we learned from the mistakes of Spotify Now were immensely beneficial to the company."[6]

As he told me, "Spotify was very good about handling failure, and I learned a lot from the company about how they handled mistakes." When leaders punish people for mistakes, they might say they are "holding people accountable," but that's often a polite way of describing punishment. As Kevin recalled, accountability was different at Spotify, adding, "You still hold people accountable, but you hold them accountable for failing well. That means if I make a mistake, I learn from it."[7]

We risk making mistakes when we create or innovate, or any time we try to improve a product, service, or process. The German word (a very long one, of course) *verschlimmbesserung* means "an attempted improvement that only

[5] *My Favorite Mistake*, "Episode 198, Kevin Goldsmith," https://markgraban.com/mistake198.

[6] Goldsmith, Kevin, "Fail Safe, Fail Smart, Succeed! Part Four: My Biggest Failure," https://blog.kevingoldsmith.com/2020/12/30/fail-safe-fail-smart-succeed-part-four-my-biggest-failure/.

[7] *My Favorite Mistake*, "Episode 196, Kevin Goldsmith," https://www.markgraban.com/mistake196.

worsens things." When it's safe to admit we've made it worse, we can reverse the change or make adjustments in a new attempt to make things better.

Cherish Mistakes

"Cherish" might seem like a strangely positive word to use regarding mistakes. Two of my podcast guests used that word, which has stuck with me since. To "cherish" a mistake means holding it dear because it's meaningful. Instead of celebrating mistakes, the gentler language of *embracing* and *cherishing* our mistakes might be closer to the truth.

The first to use the word with me in the podcast was Greg Cote, a longtime sports columnist with the *Miami Herald*, who reacted to my "favorite mistake" question by saying, "What an odd phrase. It's an oxymoron. Why would I consider a mistake to be something cherished and favorited?"

In 1982, then a reporter for the paper, Greg covered a professional soccer team in Fort Lauderdale. Greg interviewed a player from England, Ken Fogarty, in which Ken said his sister was in the British Navy, heading to fight in the Falklands War. Greg wrote an article about this for the paper.

Greg was chagrined to learn that the footballer was lying. "It was sort of embarrassing at the time, but it taught me a lesson," to double-check everything, and that's why it's Greg's favorite mistake.[8]

The word "cherish" was also used by Matt Boos, now the chief insights officer at a data-services provider, Calligo. He "cherishes" his favorite mistake because he "thinks about it every day." Earlier in his career at a major American telecommunications provider, Matt failed to ask his senior vice president for help when one of his projects was way behind schedule.

Matt was summoned to the VP's office and thought he was about to get fired. Instead, he was asked a calm-but-pointed question, "Why don't you think I deserve the honor and respect of the truth?"

The VP chose to coach and not punish. He encouraged Matt to come forward with problems, as the leader made it clear he was willing (and able) to help.[9] The lesson stuck with Matt as an employee and leader. Leaders can encourage people to speak up about bad news or problems. More

[8] *My Favorite Mistake*, "Special Episode: Dan Le Batard Show Personalities," https://markgraban.com/mistakeLAF.

[9] *My Favorite Mistake*, "Episode 76, Matt Boos," https://markgraban.com/mistake76.

importantly, they must demonstrate that it's safe to do so, as discussed in Chapter Six.

Sharing Mistakes Requires Psychological Safety

Using mistakes to learn and improve requires that we hear about them. But leaders can't just tell people to speak up. Telling them "It's safe" doesn't make it true. Each individual decides if they feel a level of psychological safety high enough that the potential rewards of speaking up outweigh the perceived risks.

As Harvard professor Amy Edmondson, PhD defines in her excellent book *The Fearless Organization*:

"Psychological safety is a belief that one will not be punished or humiliated for speaking up with:

- ideas
- questions
- concerns or
- mistakes."

Leaders can't generally declare, "We are a psychologically safe organization." That's for each person to decide. The real question is, "How safe does each person feel?" Organizations that learn from mistakes share an important cultural attribute. Their culture, the way leaders behave, helps people decide if they feel safe speaking up about mistakes, as discussed in Chapter Five.

The connections are clear. Leaders who openly share their mistakes create an environment where others feel safe and willing to do the same. When an employee admits a mistake, they quickly learn how well their organization tolerates it or, better yet, welcomes it. Does their leader punish or thank them for speaking up? When their candor is rewarded by receiving help instead of abuse, this enables people to admit more mistakes, which leads to more learning and better performance.

Using the word "reward" might seem strange in the context of a mistake. That doesn't mean paying a cash bonus for making or finding mistakes. Leaders must reward the act of speaking up or, at the very least, avoid actions that appear to be punitive.

Words like "embrace" or "cherish" strike a better tone. We can embrace the person (figuratively, perhaps) and remind them we know the mistake was, by definition, unintentional. We can react in kind and constructive ways. Most likely, an employee involved in a mistake already feels terrible. Employees deserve kindness and empathy whether the mistake was an unintended "slip" or an intentional decision that turned out to be a mistake.

Shift Away from Punishment to a Positive Path

Not all mistakes are created equally. Some mistakes cause more harm or damage than others. But the amount of harm is not the criterion we should use to decide if punishment is fair or warranted. See more about the "Just Culture" methodology in Chapter Six.

In some companies and circumstances, we can celebrate mistakes as an opportunity to learn and improve, even when there is a significant financial loss. In other situations, we must work diligently to prevent mistakes that cause harm and death. In part, we can prevent major mistakes by learning from small mistakes (or close calls) of the same variety that do not cause harm. Aviation does this exceedingly well. Healthcare generally does not, as discussed more in Chapter Five.

Edmondson distinguishes between three types of mistakes: *preventable*, *complex*, and *intelligent*. In situations where people are doing novel and innovative things, leaders can welcome intelligent mistakes, if not celebrate them, as discussed in Chapter Seven. Some mistakes are completely preventable in known ways, if people are able to follow their standard process. Organizations can prevent many mistakes through approaches like checklists and other forms of mistake-proofing, as discussed in Chapter Four.

An example of a complex mistake might be a bad surgical outcome resulting from an unforeseen combination of events, leading to an unexpected mistake. In healthcare, preventable mistakes can be fatal, like performing a surgical procedure on the wrong patient or giving the wrong medication. Edmondson says, "Neither preventable nor complex failures are worthy of celebration."[10]

In truth, systemic factors cause most mistakes. If we attribute a mistake to simple human error, we wouldn't shrug it off and say, "Well, we're all human; we all make mistakes. What more can we do?" We do the right things.

[10] Edmondson, Amy C., *The Fearless Organization* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2018).

We don't punish. Instead, we choose to be kind and constructive. Actually, kindness *is* constructive, as discussed further in Chapter Three. We must learn from our mistakes and improve.

Firing a person for a mistake without addressing the systemic causes, especially those factors out of their control, dooms their replacement to the same mistake. Thomas J. Watson, the founder of IBM, was asked if he would "fire an employee who made a mistake that cost the company $600,000." He replied, "No, I just spent $600,000 training [them]." Watson wanted IBM to benefit from that investment, owning those lessons learned instead of letting another company hire away that experience and knowledge.

When we stop punishing people for mistakes, we start a virtuous cycle of increased learning and psychological safety. We don't do it to be nice; the goals are fewer mistakes and better business results.

Identify Mistakes to Reflect, Learn, and Improve

Brook Ward is President and CEO of Washington Health System, located southwest of Pittsburgh. He makes it a habit, whenever discovering a mistake, to ask with a positive tone: "What have we learned?"

To ensure the ensuing discussions are constructive, Brook reminds his organization that "most mistakes are due to systems issues"––bad processes, not bad people. He says this approach helps cultivate an organizational culture where "the team can learn, improve, and not be afraid of mistakes." Brook encourages groups to discuss mistakes, not as a warning for others to be careful, but so they can spread and benefit from actions taken to prevent recurrence. You'll read more about Brook and his organization's culture in Chapter Seven.[11]

When reflecting on a mistake, we can ask additional questions that I learned from the team at Value Capture, a healthcare advisory firm:

- What decision did I make?
- What did I expect to happen?
- What actually happened?
- What do I learn from the gap?
- What would I do differently?
- What would I expect to happen?

[11] *Habitual Excellence*, "Episode 74, Brook Ward," https://www.valuecapturellc.com/he74.

Answering those questions helps us focus on learning from mistakes instead of shaming ourselves or others for them.

Toyota's Culture of Learning from Mistakes

Isao Yoshino, who retired after 40 years in leadership roles at Toyota, the world's largest automaker, says, "The only secret to Toyota is its attitude toward learning. We don't even notice and take it for granted."

According to Yoshino, Toyota has a culture of patiently "reflecting, learning, adjusting, and continuing to try until they succeed. They are willing to experiment and embrace failure and bad news as possible sources of learning."[12]

I've worked with many people who don't like the word "problem" because it seems negative. Some people feel the same way about the word "mistake." But with the right kind of leadership, we can turn the negative into a positive. Instead of sugarcoating the situation by choosing softer words, we can lean into problems and mistakes––recognizing that the problems exist whether we like admitting them or not.

Toyota people often say, "No problems is a problem." Having no problems is a problem because it means you don't understand your business or are not admitting the truth. Toyota leaders realize that they must make it psychologically safe enough for people to reveal problems and mistakes, and they work hard to cultivate that culture.

Toyota leaders do this by visiting a site and asking questions like, "What are your top three problems right now?" They're asking about priorities, but that question assumes problems exist, which permits others to acknowledge and discuss them. In other workplaces, asking a closed-ended question such as "Do you have any problems right now?" might lead to a quick "No" response, especially if leaders haven't proven they can react constructively when somebody answers "Yes."

When driving their first American import model, the 1955 Toyopet Crown, Shoichiro Toyoda recalled it was "dangerous to enter a highway on an uphill slope." He admitted the Crown had poor acceleration and was chagrined to realize that Toyota had exported cars to America without performing enough

[12] Anderson, Katie. *Learning to Lead, Leading to Learn: Lessons from Toyota Leader Isao Yoshino on a Lifetime of Continuous Learning* (p. 21). Integrand Press. Kindle Edition.

driving tests. He said, "After reflecting on it, we decided to give up export for the time being."[13] Toyota's first minivan, the 1991 Previa, was a flop for reasons including [the presence of only two cup holders, which was not nearly enough to please American buyers. Instead of giving up, Toyota learned, adjusted, and improved. Its second-generation minivan, the Sienna, had *fourteen* cup holders.^15] Toyota continued iterating (and adding four more cup holders) and, by 2019, had surpassed Honda as the top-selling minivan in the United States.

Toyota's management system and its culture helped them become the world's largest automaker, setting a new standard for quality and productivity that drove other global automakers to eventually try copying their practices. Non-automotive manufacturers learned from and emulated Toyota, and their influence extended to companies in healthcare, software, and different service settings.

I'm not saying Toyota is perfect. No company or person is. I would cringe if a leader somewhere in that vast company chastised a team member for making a mistake today. Punishment should be the exception at Toyota, based on the company's stated values and practices. But, sadly, it's the norm in most workplaces.

Toyota employees have learned to expect a constructive and non-punitive reaction when they make or admit a mistake. If the actual response is ever some form of punishment, that would be a surprise and a problem––a gap and a mistake. I've heard enough stories from former Toyota employees that reinforce the perception of a common and consistent culture that Toyota has cultivated across continents and decades.

Younger Companies Can Cultivate This Culture

Entrepreneur Joel Trammell, most recently founder and chairman of Khorus Systems, a strategy-execution software provider, tells CEOs, "Anytime somebody brings a problem to you, the first words out of your mouth need to be 'Thank you. Thank you for letting me know that we had a problem. Now let's talk about how we're going to solve it.'"[14]

[13]Wilson Center, "Toyota in the U.S.: Learning from Our Past As We Prepare for the Future," https://www.wilsoncenter.org/event/toyota-the-us-learning-our-past-we-prepare-for-the-future

[14]*My Favorite Mistake*, "Episode 122, Joel Trammell," https://markgraban.com/mistake122.

When leaders react constructively, Joel finds that employees will "start bringing you more and more problems. And they bring you problems when they're small fires instead of after they've blown up, when there's no way to solve the problem."

Our organizational culture is like a garden. To have lasting and thriving plants or crops, our cultivation efforts can't be a one-time project; it's an ongoing effort. If you work for a large company with a long history of rocks, weeds, and poison in the soil, it's incredibly difficult to change the culture. A leader might be able to do so in their local department, with a budding garden and learning from mistakes. But that brings the risk of an executive swooping in and destroying the crops by punishing mistakes.

It's easier to cultivate a culture of learning from mistakes in smaller companies, especially when that's the clear intent from the beginning, as it was at Garrison Brothers Distillery (founded in 2005). You'll learn more about the Garrison Brothers culture in Chapter Two. Another company with this culture is KaiNexus, a small-but-fast-growing Texas-based software company (founded in 2009). Co-founder and chief operating officer Matt Paliulis says, "KaiNexus hasn't made any major mistakes, at least any existential ones. But we make a lot of little mistakes and learn, and that is why we are thriving."

Psychological safety doesn't just appear. Leaders at KaiNexus very often, and very visibly, behave in ways that create the conditions for employees to decide they can feel safe speaking up. In some settings, admitting a mistake can feel risky, if not dangerous, if people think leaders will punish them. But leaders can create conditions where that risk seems very low or non-existent. When leaders admit mistakes, with a focus on learning, that's the first step in cultivating psychological safety. The second step is rewarding and not punishing employees who do the same.

One of those leaders is Chris Burnham, the senior director of lean strategy at KaiNexus. During a biannual meeting, Chris candidly told the entire company, "I made mistakes." He reviewed what had gone well in the first half of the year and what had gone wrong––a standard that everybody follows in giving updates.

Chris explained his mistakes, what he learned, and how he planned to adjust––a decidedly positive view of mistakes. Chris told me, "I make mistakes every day, some big, some small. But I own them all. Mistakes are how I learn and gain experience." Chris believes his transparency helps his teammates feel comfortable bringing him problems they can solve together.

While leading a team, Chris is able to follow the lead of Matt and other

senior leaders, including CEO and co-founder Greg Jacobson, MD. They all admit mistakes. They nourish the culture by reacting to mistakes with the intent to learn and improve. Throughout this book, you'll read more stories illustrating the culture at KaiNexus and how they're not just reacting kindly and constructively to mistakes but also working to prevent them.

Positive thinking starts with the way we react to our own mistakes. Leaders can then extend their focus toward helping others and cultivating the culture. It's not a matter of being nice; it's about being positively helpful.

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