

# Learning from mistakes

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## Overview

In this Module you will be taken through the 10 steps to effective learning as they apply to your desire to improve the way you learn **Mistakes**. Steps 1 to 3 are designed to increase your motivation. The remaining steps are designed to help you succeed.

### 1. Be clear about what it is you want to learn

This step helps you clarify and define exactly what it is you are trying to learn and to what level of competence

### 2. Be clear about why you want to learn

This step helps you fully understand your reasons and the likely benefits to you of improving how you learn Assertion.

### 3. Envision the end-point

This step helps you imagine and visualise as concretely as possible having succeeded in achieving your learning goals.

### 4. Create learning targets

This step helps you formulate your learning goals in a practical way.

### 5. Understand how you best learn and the types of learning needed

This step introduces you to the different approaches to learning that you can adopt (learning styles) and the different kinds of learning involved in learning to improve your learning.

### 6. Explore Learning tools, tactics, and techniques

This step introduces you to 10 Powerful Learning Tools, Tactics and Techniques you can use to improve the way you learn. The exercises will help to *think* and deepen your understanding of the area you want to improve and actually suggests specific tasks you can *do* at your computer and away from it (in your work and life environment), to dramatically improve your capability.

### 7. Create a Personal Learning Plan

This step introduces you to a structured planning process to help ensure that you are clear about what you want to do and by when. The plan promotes commitment and the monitoring of progress.

### 8. Get going

This step helps you with the practicalities of starting to carry out your plan.

### 9. Keep going

This step helps you with the practicalities of keeping going especially in the face of disappointment, frustration, setbacks and pressure from other sources.

### 10. Celebrate success

This step encourages you to mark not only completion of the plan but key stages along the way. The message is simple. Give yourself the treat you promised yourself!

# 1 Be clear about what you want to learn



One of the great burdens of life is making mistakes. Generally we hate them, get punished or low marks because of them, and do our best to avoid them. At best we conceal them and at worst we blame others for them. The real challenge though is to learn from them and in ways that teach us important lessons that we won't forget.

This module enables you to learn more effectively and more powerfully from mistakes and errors.

Possible objectives

#### Choose the most important ones that apply to you

1. To increase your learning skills generally
2. To get a better understanding of mistakes and the role they play in effective learning
3. To overcome your tendency to make mistakes to overcome your fear of making mistakes
4. To learn more effectively from experience in general

What else do you want to learn about learning from mistakes?

## 2 Be clear about why you want to improve learning from mistakes



Why do you wish to improve in this area? Choose the reasons that most apply to you.

Increased confidence	
Greater self esteem	
Overcoming fear of making mistakes	
Overcoming frustration	
Sense of achievement	
Avoid repeating the same mistakes	
Want to experiment more	
Sense of being in control of my learning	

Are there any other reasons why you want to improve how you learn from mistakes?

# 3 Envision the end-point

This is a crucial stage, which is often missed.



Not envisioning the end-point can deprive you of early pleasure of clear progress and it can also undermine weaken your motivation when the going gets tough.

Imagine you have succeeded in your overall aim.

**First of all what is the aim?**

Think about these questions

- Picture yourself performing at the desired level.
- Where will this be?
- Who will be involved?
- Exactly what would you be doing, what would you be saying
- What will others be doing and saying?
- How will you feel?



If it is enough to merely imagine the end-point, that's fine. If you can right it down then do so.

<b>Where and when?</b>	
<b>Who else is involved?</b>	
<b>What are you doing/saying?</b>	
<b>What are others doing/saying?</b>	
<b>How will you feel?</b>	

One effect of envisioning the end point in as much practical detail as possible is that it helps to energise you, to get going and keep going, and to maintain effort especially in the face of set-backs and difficulties.

Keep a record and keep it where you will see it regularly. Add images and graphics. Personalise it.



### **Make yourself a Change Shield**

Another more concrete way to envision the end-point is to make yourself a shield of change.

If you are that way inclined draw a picture of yourself being strategic. Be creative, have fun with it. Try and capture the changes you want to see in yourself.

Create a Change Shield for yourself or better still with friends or colleagues at work. For guidance see [10 Steps to Improve Your Learning](#)



## **4 Create learning targets**

Learning targets are derived from the overall objectives and create



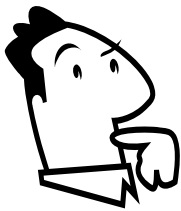
- Greater precision
- A sense of being in control and managing the process
- The ability to monitor your own progress
- The satisfaction of seeing progress
- Knowing when you have arrived

<b>I will know that I have improved from one level to the next because of</b> <b>Things I know</b>
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<b>Things I can say or do</b>
<b>How I will feel</b>
<b>I know I will be making progress if...</b>

# 5 Understand how you best learn and the types of learning needed

## Learning styles



In order to learn well you need to

- Have experiences and plenty of them
- Review and reflect on that experience
- Draw lessons and insights from the experience
- Plan to gain new experiences that result in improved performance

Most of us have strong preferences for one or more of four styles of learning. From your knowledge of yourself, do you know which your preferred learning styles are?

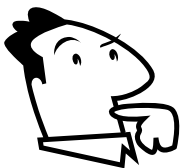
<b>Activist</b>	This is me Not really sure No idea
<b>Pragmatist</b>	This is me Not really sure No idea

<b>Theorist</b>	This is me Not really sure No idea
<b>Reflector</b>	This is me Not really sure No idea

If you are not sure about your preferred learning styles, go to [10 steps to improve your learning](#) for an introduction.

If you have a strong preference for one or more of these modes that will indicate how you are likely to begin but it is important not to get stuck in one mode at the expense of the others.

### Different types of learning



The types of learning involved in improving your Learning From Mistakes are

<b>Practical skills requiring practice and feedback to get right</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Analysing, objectively, the reasons for undesired outcomes</li></ul>
<b>Feelings and attitudes you need to get right</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• A positive approach to error-making</li><li>• Being ready to experiment and try</li><li>• Taking the emotion out of mistakes</li></ul>
<b>Understanding of concepts and theory</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The difference between intelligent and stupid mistakes</li><li>• Different kinds of error</li><li>• The critical role of error-making in the development of understanding</li></ul>



# 6 Explore learning tactics, tools, and techniques

## 1. Describe your mistakes neutrally and objectively



Think of a mistake that you have recently made and try to describe it as specifically and as accurately as possible

<b>Where did it happen?</b>	
<b>When was it?</b>	
<b>What happened?</b>	
<b>What did you say/do?</b>	
<b>What did others say/do?</b>	
<b>What made it a mistake?</b>	
<b>How did you feel at the time?</b>	

If possible, try and describe at least two more mistakes

<b>Where did it happen?</b>	
<b>When was it?</b>	
<b>What happened?</b>	

<b>What did you say/do?</b>	
<b>What did others say/do?</b>	
<b>What made it a mistake?</b>	
<b>How did you feel at the time?</b>	

Another example if you can

<b>Where did it happen?</b>	
<b>When was it?</b>	
<b>What happened?</b>	
<b>What did you say/do?</b>	
<b>What did others say/do?</b>	
<b>What made it a mistake?</b>	
<b>How did you feel at the time?</b>	

## 2. Face up to the emotion of making mistakes

For all of us making mistakes is



- Irritating
- Embarrassing
- Threatening to our self-esteem
- Feared

- Career-limiting (sometimes)
- Punished or ridiculed by others (often!)

**And as a result**

- Ignored (where possible)
- Concealed or
- Blamed on others (where possible)

**And in general we feel mistakes are**

- Best avoided

This can be a shame because it discourages from making the kinds of mistakes from which we learn powerful lessons and make creative strides forward.

Most of us tend to play it safe and keep our heads down.

Facing up to and talking about mistakes is hard for us all, but if we don't we will not learn powerful lessons and we will go on repeating them. Taking the emotion out of mistakes or at least separating the emotion from the learning is essential.

Systematically and objectively describing mistakes helps remove the emotion.

**3. Classify the mistakes you make**

Use the framework below to classify important mistake you feel you are prone to.

**Mistakes to do with Goals**

<b>Working with unclear or conflicting goals, or not agreeing goals with others.</b>	
This is true of me most of the time	
Some of the time (but the consequences are usually serious)	
Rarely and the consequences are not serious	
Some examples from my experience:	

**Mistakes to do with Information Handling**

<b>Working on the basis of assumptions and generalisations that are not tested. (Unjustified generalisation)</b>	
This is true of me most of the time	

Some of the time (but the consequences are usually serious)	
Rarely and the consequences are not serious	
Some examples from my experience:	
Concentrating on only a narrow or small part of the available or potentially available information; ignoring potentially useful information. (Selectivity)	
This is true of me most of the time	
Some of the time (but the consequences are usually serious)	
Rarely and the consequences are not serious	
Some examples from my experience:	
Acting without regard for consequences or side-effects; more concerned with the present. (Blinkered thinking)	
This is true of me most of the time	
Some of the time (but the consequences are usually serious)	
Rarely and the consequences are not serious	
Some examples from my experience	

**Action mistakes**

Act too quickly in response to internal or external pressures. (Pressure to act)	
This is true of me most of the time	
Some of the time (but the consequences are usually serious)	
Rarely and the consequences are not serious	
Some examples from my experience:	

Refusing to act on the basis of gut feel/intuition. (Over rationalising)	
This is true of me most of the time	
Some of the time (but the consequences are usually serious)	
Rarely and the consequences are not serious	
Some examples from my experience:	

**Follow-up mistakes**

Assuming that things are happening, or will happen without the need to check or ensure that they are happening (Monitoring)	
This is true of me most of the time	
Some of the time (but the consequences are usually serious)	
Rarely and the consequences are not serious	
Not reflecting on actions taken, or consider underlying causes of failure or success (Reflecting)	
This is true of me most of the time	
Some of the time (but the consequences are usually serious)	
Rarely and the consequences are not serious	
Some examples from my experience	

Having classified them you can think more clearly about what you need to do about them.

**4. Move from Blame to Gain**



Instead of blaming yourself and feeling miserable try changing your habits.

Instead of Blame	TRY	Gain
Don't judge yourself " I am an idiot"	TRY	Exploring 'What happened and why?'

Don't focus solely on the emotion "I'm furious with myself"	<b>TRY</b>	Remaining calm "I'll think about his when I have calmed down"
Don't reacting to what you think happened 'Surely you should have...'	<b>TRY</b>	Finding out what actually happened ("'I'll take this one step at a time...')
Don't blame people for getting it wrong (('You should never have let this happen')	<b>TRY</b>	Focusing on the processes that allowed the mistake to happen (('What could have been done differently?')
Don't look only at the negatives "I have only myself to blame"	<b>TRY</b>	Providing support and encouragement 'This is difficult for me but this has happened to us all"
Don't focus on effects 'This is going to cause enormous problems for me"	<b>TRY</b>	Focusing on causes "What I want to understand is all the things that enabled this to happen"
Don't feel guilty	<b>TRY</b>	See it as a powerful learning opportunity "What can I learn from this?"
Don't regard mistakes as something that must be avoided at all costs "This should never have happened"	<b>TRY</b>	See mistakes as critically important to effective "I learned a lesson I will never forget"

## 5. Learn from the Greats



**Anonymous**

There is no point making mistakes if we do not learn from them.

To err is human but to forgive is not company policy.

If I had my life again, I would make more mistakes.

Learn all you can from the mistakes of others. You won't have time to make them all yourself.

**Cicero (43 BC)**

Anyone can make a mistake but only fools persist in making them.

**Swift, Jonathan (1667 – 1745)**

A man should never be ashamed to own that he has been in the wrong, which is but saying, in other words, that he is wiser today than he was yesterday.  
*Thoughts on Various Subjects*

**Magee, William Conger (1868)**

The person who makes no mistakes does not usually make anything

**Hubbard, Eldred (1927)**

The greatest mistake you can make in life is to constantly fear you will make one.

**Ford, Henry (1863 – 1947)**

Even a mistake may turn out to be the one thing necessary to worthwhile achievement.

**Stravinsky, Igor (1882 – 1971)**

I have learned throughout my life as a composer, chiefly through my mistakes and pursuits of false assumptions, not by my exposure to founts of wisdom and knowledge.

**Soros, George (1930)**

Once we realise that imperfect understanding is the human condition, there is no shame in being wrong, only in failing to correct our mistakes.

**Larson, Doug**

To err is human, to admit it, superhuman.

**Price, H.H.**

It is the capacity for making mistakes that is the mark of the higher stages of intelligence. *Thinking and Experience 1953*

## 6. Understand the difference between Intelligent and Stupid Mistakes



It is most important to distinguish between “intelligent” and stupid mistakes.

In short we need to make lots and lots of intelligent mistakes because they are the inevitable result of experiment, exploration, imagination and creativity. It is through these processes that the world becomes a better place. If all we did were to repeat successful formulae of the past nothing would change.

A stupid mistake is one that could easily have been avoided through greater care or planning that could have reasonably been done.

But what makes a mistake intelligent?

- The action leading to the outcome that is judged to be a mistake is usually well planned

- It is not clear in advance what the outcome will be
- The consequences of failure are not critical
- Rapid feedback is possible
- Follow-up action can lead to a different outcome

Intelligent mistakes are good for you and can lead to levels of learning and to insights that can be achieved no other way. Stupid mistakes are not so good for you, unless by never repeating the actions that led to them, they are never repeated.

## 7. Get to grips with recurring mistakes



Many people complain that they make the same mistake over and over again even though consciously they know that they wish to avoid making them.

Where do they occur?	
How often do they occur?	
What usually happens?	
What do you do that makes it a mistake?	
What do others do that leads to the mistake?	
How do you feel at the time? How do you now?	
What have you done to prevent it occurring?	
Why do you think the mistake recurs?	



Show this analysis to someone you trust. Ask them for their views of the analysis, but NOT for solutions and answers. The objective at this point is to agree an objective description.

Recurring mistakes are usually being caused or influenced by non-obvious factors, otherwise the solution would be easier to identify and implement.

## 8. Question others about the mistake they have made



People do not routinely talk about their mistakes. However by approaching experienced people, explaining your reason, you can learn a great deal. Most people whom you would regard as very experienced, even experts in their fields have made many mistakes along the way. Many would say that they could not have reached their own level of performance without learning from critical mistakes.

Try saying:

I am interested in learning as much as possible from experience. Can you tell me about some of the mistakes that you have made from which you learned important lessons?

Where did it happen?
When was it?
What happened?
What did you say/do?
What did others say/do?
What made it a mistake?
What did you learn from it?

You might be asked to share some of your mistakes, so think about it beforehand.

## 9. Systematically question your own assumptions



One possibility is that you are trapped by your own habits of thought and action. You need to question your own assumptions and think and act differently, otherwise the same patterns will repeat themselves. See [Learning to Think Creatively](#)

## 10. Create a support mechanism for yourself



It is never easy making mistakes. Big mistakes can make you feel daunted, vulnerable, disappointed and even depressed. Before they happen, why not get into the habit of raising and discussing mistakes with friends and colleagues whom you respect and trust. You can arrange to give constructive feedback and moral support for each other. See [Learning from Networks](#)

# 7 Create a Personal Learning Contract to improve how you learn from mistakes

Your personal learning contract is a statement of commitment to yourself and is also a means to monitoring progress.



The contract can be as detailed and as structured as you see fit (this varies greatly from person to person) but it should at least contain statements of

<b>Why do you want to improve how you learn from mistakes?</b>
<b>Why?</b>
<b>The level you are starting out at (as precisely as possible)</b>
<b>The level you wish to achieve (as precisely as possible)</b>

<b>The specific actions you are going to take including the tools, tactics and techniques you are going to use</b>		
<b>This week</b>		
<b>Next week</b>		
<b>By the end of month one</b>		
<b>Month two</b>		
<b>Month three</b>		
<b>Month six</b>		
<b>Beyond six months</b>		
<b>How you will know you are making progress?</b>		
<b>How you will know you have succeeded?</b>		

Keep a record and look at it from time to time. If you can involve others in your commitment you will increase your chances of success.



## **8 Get going**



If you have got this far you are already going, but the critical thing is to take action that enables you to feel you are actually improving. There are several ways to do this.

- Meet up with a friend or colleague whom you have not seen in a while and describe or demonstrate what you have done in the interim.
- Refer to your progress indicators and tick them off as you make progress.
- Aim for early success. It reduces the risk of giving up early on.
- Remind yourself of the expected benefits and potential rewards. Look back at your envisioning exercise or your Change Shield.



## Keep going



Getting going is hard enough, but to keep going is often harder still.

- Refer to your progress indicators and tick them off as you make progress.
- Recognise that guilt and anxiety about progress is inevitable
- Re-adjust goals and timescales to be more realistic in the light of experience.
- List early warning signs that may block you progress and think about responses that would help

Danger signs	Responses



Meet up with a friend or colleague whom you have not seen for a while and describe or demonstrate what you have done in the interim

Identify your personal reinforcers that will help you to keep going regardless of

- Set-backs
- Disappointments
- Frustrations
- Unexpected problems

**What might they be?**

- Pressures from other sources

**What might they be?**

Reinforcers are REWARDS you can give yourself (treats) that you would not otherwise have had but for the progress you have made. They include a meal out, chocolates, an outing, champagne, a weekend away, etc or whatever takes your fancy.

Equally reinforcers can be PUNISHMENT that you inflict on yourself for lack of progress that you had committed to. This can be denial of the promised treats or something stronger like paying out to a charity. On balance rewards work better than punishments.

What support do I need and what can I put in place?

**My REINFORCERS are**



## 10 Celebrate success



Finally don't forget to mark the achievement of having moved from one level of performance to another. It is always a satisfying feeling to know that you have done it, but there is also the intrinsic satisfaction of performing at a higher level than previously.

Some forms of learning are acknowledged through accreditation and certificates, but vast amounts of personal learning and growth are not recognised in this way. Much of the most important learning (tolerance and understanding, effective parenting, leadership, teamwork) is not recognised in this way.

Try to find ways of expressing the pleasure of the learning you have achieved.

**If I achieve my overall goals my overall REWARD will be**

Ultimately, the best way is simply to think and act in new ways and feel the benefit for you and for others, and then commit yourself to further learning.