

## Mistake Management, Symphony Style

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Mistakes happen – often. Eliminating them is impossible. The real question is: How do you manage the inevitability of making them? I'd like to share a few lessons I learned while playing the bass in a professional orchestra.



To illustrate a common approach to mistake management, here is a favorite musical story:

A young conductor was going to conduct a major symphony orchestra for the very first time. He concocted a clever little scheme, by which he hoped to impress everyone: he sneaked into the orchestra's library and purposefully inserted a wrong note into the second clarinet part. This was in a very dense part of the music, where everyone in the orchestra was playing.

The next day, in the middle of the rehearsal, once the moment of the inserted wrong note had come and gone, this young conductor stopped the orchestra. He nonchalantly said, "second clarinet .... in bar 47 .... you played a B-flat. It should be a C-sharp."

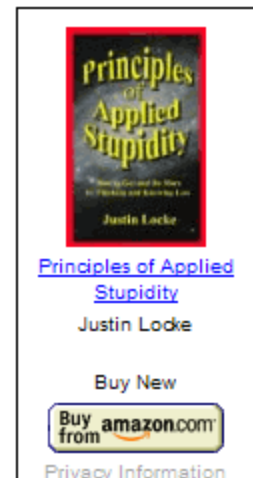
And he sat back, waiting for everyone in the orchestra to be impressed with his fabulous ear.

The second clarinet looked up and said, "I *did* play a C-sharp. Some idiot copied the part wrong."

The first time I told this story in a presentation, it got a bigger laugh than I expected, and I realized that this simple story strikes a universal chord (no pun intended). We have all been shamed by "mistake-pointer-outers," and it's nice to hear a story of one who gets his comeuppance.

Mistake shaming is not a small thing. In school, we are all taught that mistakes are inherently bad. We are taught that perfection is possible, and we should be ashamed for not achieving it. I sometimes wistfully think of those good old days in the fifth grade, when it was actually possible to get a perfect "100" on a test.

Nowadays I am lucky if I can distill one success out of every 100 attempts. Even though





the total avoidance of failure is impossible, this relentless training in mistake avoidance stays with us, and it fosters a nearly universal intolerance of mistakes, both in academia and in the workplace.

For example, even though mistakes are inevitable, we often encounter completely unrealistic, utopian, no-errors-allowed policies in all sorts of situations. We often hear phrases like, “failure is not an option,” “our goal is to eliminate all errors,” or the classic “even one mistake is one too many.” Such phrases are heartwarming and inspiring, but they have nothing to do with reality.

Instead, here is how we accommodate mistakes in the culture of major orchestras:

Contrary to the myth of perfection that surrounds major symphony orchestras, even fabulous players make mistakes all the time. Furthermore, in that environment, you cannot conceal a mistake. Everyone hears it, and everyone knows who did it.

So instead of bothering to try to conceal mistakes, it is generally understood and accepted in the orchestra world that anyone – in fact, everyone – is capable of making a mistake. You accept that fact, and you deal with it.

With some mistakes, there’s nothing you can do about it – a finger slips, a wrong note results, and it’s all over. While those mistakes are inevitable and hard to stop, many other kinds of mistakes *are* avoidable, and while they can never be eliminated, the orchestral culture ensures they are kept to a minimum.

For example, stepping in and preventing a potential mistake by someone else does not come across as a personal confrontation, a challenge, or a “status thing.” No matter who you are in an orchestra, and no matter how low you are on the seating totem pole, you have a responsibility to keep an eye on the person next to you or in front of you. If it looks like they have miscounted and are about to come in early, it is accepted (and even encouraged) to quietly poke them in the ribs, wake them up, and point out that they’re coming in early.

This is never resented. In fact, it’s quite the opposite. I have been “saved” by a stand partner more times than I can count, and I have saved a fellow player from making a grievous error many times as well. It’s not in the contract, but it’s in the culture. We know we’re not perfect, so we all help each other out.

Another orchestral mistake management method: In a new piece of music, we may be suspicious about a possible wrong note in the part. Instead of politely ignoring it or concealing it, we will play it loudly to call attention to it and see if the conductor notices. If they don’t say anything we will either check the score ourselves, or raise a hand and ask for clarification. No one is insulted, including the copyist who made the error. We all understand that mistakes happen, and it’s everyone’s job to keep them to a minimum.



Better safe than sorry.

Musical mistake prevention is also embedded in the sheet music itself. You would be amazed to see all the scribbles and warnings – some of them over 100 years old – that are written into the sheet music of a major orchestra. There are all sorts of markings to warn you of traps, such as sudden tempo changes, repeats that may not be taken, rhythmic patterns that are easily misread, easily missed key changes, or the need to turn a page quickly. Messy as these markings are, the librarians never erase any of them. They understand that these markings help to keep mistakes that have happened from happening again.

Granted, no one likes mistakes. They are inconvenient and annoying. But the well-intended concept of seeking perfection and error elimination is dangerous. If your policy is that mistakes are intolerable, as noble as that sounds, you won't stop mistakes from happening. You will just encourage people to cover them up. Or, worse, they will simply deny their existence. The mistakes are still there, they still need fixing, but the fix has now been delayed, and that helps no one

One possible reason why "orchestra culture" approaches mistakes so differently than the business world is that orchestra culture came into being centuries before the Industrial Revolution. The many fantastic machines that have been coming at us since have brought us wealth, power, and perfection, but they have also had a tremendous effect on our collective psyche. It is only natural that we should try to emulate our ever-more impressive machines – but the machine age is over. While machines still offer extreme efficiency and even a sort of limited perfection, it is not sensible to apply that same standard to human beings *ad infinitum*.

Mechanization and industrialization were once the best way to get the most economic bang for your buck, but not any more. We no longer work in factories. As machines have become ever more productive, it has become increasingly fruitless to try to emulate them. It behooves all of us much more to develop those unique, imperfect parts of ourselves that *cannot* be automated. Any computer with music software can play a Beethoven symphony perfectly. Who cares? The value in a live symphony performance is in the subtle variations – and personal connection – that only individual imperfect performers can provide. Your personality, flawed though it may be, is part of your "personal brand." Leadership and imagination are never mistake-free, but this is where your greatest value is to be found.

Being creative and innovative requires that we allow ourselves to experiment and explore. When you explore, whether it's a new piece of music or a new business opportunity, mistakes are inevitable. The best you can do is accept them, and work with your friends and colleagues to keep them to a minimum.



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