maximus insights

when should you let an employee make a mistake?

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"Put my training wheels back on," Sophia said in a stern tone, "Or I'm not going to ride my bike!" She had just turned four that day and wanted to learn to ride a bike like her older sister. Now she wasn't so sure. After a lot of encouraging and a little stubbornness of my own, she was willing to try. We agreed to practice 15 minutes a day until she got it.

A couple of days later we weren't getting anywhere. It's not that she wasn't trying, it's just that she didn't seem to be able to get her balance on her own.

Then it dawned on me: I was getting in the way. I didn't want my baby girl to get hurt. And I was afraid if she fell she would give up trying completely. So as soon as she tipped to one side — even a little — I caught her.

In other words, Sophia still had training wheels on her bike: me. If I wanted her to learn, I had to let go — figuratively and actually. It's not that I planned to let her fall to the ground, it's just that I had to let her fall closer to the ground. So she had the opportunity to catch herself.

Learning to ride a bike — learning anything actually — isn't about doing it right. It's about doing it wrong and then adjusting. It's not about being in balance, it's about recovering balance. And you can't recover balance if someone keeps you from losing balance in the first place.

So my job got a lot harder. I had to use more refined judgment. Was Sophia falling to the left? Should I reach out before she hit the pavement? Or was she just leaning? Could she steer in the other direction and recover? I had to time my catch just right.

That challenge — timing the catch just right — is the central challenge we face as managers. It's the sweet spot between micromanagement and neglect. Allowing for failure, while ensuring the safety of our employees and our companies.

If an employee comes to you with a presentation that doesn't meet your expectations, what do you do? Take it, fix it, and present it yourself? Tell them what he's done wrong and ask him to fix it? Allow him to present it without making changes and let him face the consequences? Each choice is legitimate in the right circumstances.

Our job is to gauge the circumstances correctly. What's the risk? The consequences of failure? Is time critical? Will mistakes destroy the person's reputation forever? Or will it be an effective learning experience? As a friend of mine is fond of saying, if you keep catching the vase, everyone is going to think the shelf is sturdy.

Once we gauge the circumstances, we can adapt, changing our response to help the employee learn to recover, stay upright, and keep pedalling.

That adaptation is more difficult than it sounds. It means resisting, or at least questioning, our natural tendencies. Because we all have a favourite response when our expectations aren't met. What do you do when you've given direction to an employee and she doesn't follow it?

Maybe you tell her even more clearly what you expect from her and require that she try again. Maybe you ask her what she was thinking and how she plans to approach it next time. Maybe you sit down and do it with her. Maybe you do it yourself. The question is, if you're going to choose a different response, how do you choose?

Here's one way: Ask yourself what it will take for the employee to recover herself.

How close is she to the ground? Is she falling or simply leaning? What will help her regain her balance? What can you do that will give her that opportunity?

When I was first teaching Sophia to ride her bike I made all sorts of excuses for her. She's only four; her sister was six when she learned to ride. I wondered if I was pushing her too hard. So my natural tendency was to rescue her.

What I eventually realized is that I was really making excuses for myself. I was afraid of her skinned knee and bruised confidence, so I didn't give her the opportunity to fail. Which meant I didn't give her the opportunity to succeed.

As soon as I changed my approach to teaching Sophia — on the third day of our routine — she learned to balance herself while pedalling. The next day she managed to stop by herself, and the day after that she learned to get herself going from a standstill. By the end of the sixth day she could turn in a figure eight. No training wheels necessary.

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