Shit Cases and Comebacks

– openness about mistakes and the ability to get back up again are the same muscle

By **Mads Cronquist** · Cronquist Consult ApS

Every now and then we stumble in the race and fall off. It happens to everyone – employees, leaders and entire organisations. The question is not whether it happens, but what happens afterwards.

Do we hide the mistake and hope no one notices? Or do we bring it into the light, fix it through shared learning and get back on the horse?

This article is about shit cases and comebacks – and about why the two are more closely connected than most people think.

Back on the horse

On the first Sunday of November, the traditional Hubertus Hunt is held in Dyrehaven, the royal deer park north of Copenhagen. Thousands of people turn up, and the obstacle at Magasindammen draws the biggest crowds. Horses and riders must clear a large tree trunk before splashing into the water. We do love a bit of excitement – especially if someone makes a fool of themselves.

Last year I was there myself. A horse refused abruptly just before the obstacle, and the rider performed an elegant somersault and landed on the obstacle – fortunately unhurt. Moments later she was back in the saddle, riding on upright and waving with a smile to the crowd, who breathed a sigh of relief.

Next to me stood a young girl in tears who had had an unfortunate experience on a pony earlier in the race. Even so, she had come to the difficult obstacle to support her fellow riders. These are two different kinds of comeback – and both take courage and the ability to overcome oneself.

Shit cases are good communication

When I was Head of HR Development at Christiansen & Essenbæk, one of our employees – out of collegial helpfulness and eagerness – reached over a safety barrier on a bridge without adequate protection. It was not life-threatening, but as luck would have it, some people from the Danish Working Environment Authority were sitting nearby with a camera.

We could have swept the matter under the carpet. Instead, we used the story on the intranet, and the photos were reviewed at a leaders' meeting. Per, who had put his foot in it, was allowed to explain himself and received a comforting pat on the shoulder. It was not about singling anyone out, but about learning from it – together.

Later, Per was an excellent co-host at our project closing day and stood on the podium when we received the Danish Working Environment Award (ArbejdsmiljøPrisen). Both he and I were immensely proud. The openness did not cost him his standing. On the contrary, it created loyalty – in Per and in all the colleagues who saw how we handled it.

> *Don't hide what goes wrong – bring it into the light, fix it and move on.*

Why we hide our mistakes

It is human to want to hide one's mistakes. The brain's default setting tries to keep us safe by copying the secure past and avoiding anything that might cost us status or belonging. The fear of losing face is a powerful engine.

But in an organisation, hidden mistakes are expensive. They are repeated, they grow, and they undermine trust when they finally surface. Safety-critical industries know this well: It is the near misses that must be brought into the light if you want to avoid the real accidents. At C&E we reduced them by 30%.

The zero-error attitude starts at school, where we learn to get the sums right and earn the best grades. It rubs off on our personality: We dare not expose ourselves and show that we are imperfect, because it makes us vulnerable. At Christiansen & Essenbæk, many of the highly skilled engineers were trained in flawless calculations – and for good reason, as a bridge renovation must not end in a collapse. Zero errors are good for bridges. But carried over into leadership and teamwork, it turns mistakes into something we hide. Success lies in getting back up again.

In License to Fail I wrote about mistakes as fertiliser for new thinking, and about the difference between intelligent experiments and repeated errors – and between areas where you may fail and areas such as safety where you may not. Per's story shows that precisely where mistakes are unacceptable, it is even more important that they come to light. So this article is about something slightly different: What do we do in the hours and days after something has gone wrong? That is when the culture shows its true face – and it is the leader's reaction everyone is watching.

The unpaid second job

Harvard professors Robert Kegan and Lisa Lahey have described the phenomenon more precisely than anyone else. In "An Everyone Culture" they show that most people in most organisations spend a great deal of time doing a second job that no one pays them for: Hiding their weaknesses, looking their best and managing other people's impressions of them. We want to appear brilliant and ingenious in the eyes of our boss, colleagues and customers – and that costs enormous amounts of energy that could have been spent on learning and creating value.

Kegan explains this through the stages of adult development. Many of us operate with what he calls the socialised mind: Our self-worth is largely shaped by how others see us. A mistake is then not just a mistake – it becomes a threat to our identity. Only when we develop a more self-authoring mind can we see the mistake as something we have rather than something we are.

In what Kegan and Lahey call deliberately developmental organisations, this is turned on its head. At the investment firm Bridgewater, employees record their mistakes in a shared "issue log", and the problem is not the mistake but failing to record it. Mistakes are not something to hide – they are the raw material for development. Back on the horse; success lies in fighting on and not giving up.

> *Almost everyone does a second job no one pays them for: Hiding their weaknesses.*

Immunity to change

Why is it so hard to change, even when we want to? In "Immunity to Change", Kegan and Lahey describe how we have a psychological immune system that protects us from what we fear. We drive with one foot on the accelerator and the other on the brake.

Their method is a simple but revealing map in four columns. Imagine a leader who sincerely wants a more open mistake culture (1). Yet in practice she never talks about her own mistakes and prefers to correct them quietly (2). Behind this behaviour lies a hidden, competing commitment: She is also committed to never appearing incompetent (3). And beneath that lies a big assumption: "If I admit a mistake, I will lose my authority" (4).

The point is that the behaviour is neither stupid nor lazy – it is protective. And you do not change it with willpower, but by testing the big assumption in small, safe experiments. What actually happens when I talk about a mistake at the next leaders' meeting? More often than not, the exact opposite of what we feared: Authority grows.

Conflicts on stage – an odd idea

Openness about what goes wrong can be trained. When a well-being survey at Christiansen & Essenbæk pointed to conflict management as a focus area, we chose to do something other than a classic course. We hired a group of creative actors for half a day of interactive forum theatre for all hourly workers and salaried staff – 85 participants in total.

The employees themselves wrote conflict situations from work and private life on slips of paper, which were placed in two hats. The actors improvised on them, and a so-called "joker" involved the audience in finding solutions. In the end, one of the leaders and an hourly worker went on stage and tried their hand at the scene with "a grumpy wife" – to great amusement and heckling from their colleagues.

The evaluation showed that 95% thought it had been a really good and instructive day. But the real gain was that a leader and an hourly worker had stood side by side and failed in front of everyone – and laughed about it. At the subsequent leaders' meeting, the motto for the follow-up became: "Ask, listen – and listen to the end." The best conflict-management tool is attached to the sides of your head: Your two ears. If you remember that ratio to having only one mouth, things usually go well.

The unreasonable is there for a reason

Some mistakes and defeats are our own. Others strike us completely unreasonably. The day a small plane crashed on the Danish island of Anholt in 1998 was my birthday. I was the first to reach the plane and did what I could with my background as an emergency preparedness officer. We saved one life, but three people died – among them the pilot.

It took me 17 years to heal the circle that was broken so suddenly. In 2005 the pilot's daughter, Ane, contacted me. Ten years later I completed a master class in Canada called "Presence", and during one of the quiet "sharings" it dawned on me that I had to learn to understand that "the unreasonable is there for a reason". Every now and then, life presents us with an ugly-wrapped gift that we can find the courage to unwrap and learn from.

After the course I visited Ane and her family in Montreal. Late one evening in their living room I told the story, and the next morning three small faces peeked out from behind the door frame – six-year-old triplets. A new and stronger circle began to take shape. The unreasonable is there for a reason, and we can learn to understand that, as in nature, where manure is fertiliser for growth and development, so it is in life. That is how we grow.

Incidentally, the whole journey began with a discussion about blind spots that stem from our deep-rooted assumptions and competing inner beliefs – exactly what Kegan calls immunity to change. Comebacks are not only about getting back on the horse. They are about daring to see what we would rather not see.

In 2018 I became a pilot myself. My first trip to Anholt was in a plane identical to the one that crashed. I landed the plane successfully and could feel that the broken circle had healed, and a new one could take shape.

Inner readiness – the same muscle

What does it take to get back on the horse – alone or in front of thousands of people? I have had several somersaults in my life, and fortunately a few trophies too. My experience is that it takes what I call "inner readiness": The surplus of mental strength that we can learn to mobilise when it matters, and shut down again when it is no longer needed.

The point is that the same muscle is at work when we dare to talk about a shit case and when we get back up after a defeat. Both require us to overcome the brain's defence mechanism and choose to face reality instead of protecting our self-image.

And like all muscles, it can be trained. That is why our leadership development works with realistic exercises in which participants are put under pressure, make mistakes and have to find their way back and forward again through uncharted wilderness – in a safe setting, before it counts for real. Training and practice are crucial.

Debriefing – from shit case to learning

In aviation and emergency services, debriefing is not up for discussion. After every incident, you go through what happened, what worked and what you learned. Not to find a scapegoat, but to get better next time. As a trained incident commander, and when I was project manager for the Danish Mobile Hospital during the war in Bosnia, it was a fixed part of everyday life. Honestly sharing what is vulnerable is also genuine team building.

In most companies it rarely happens. When something goes wrong, it is either swept under the carpet or turned into a question of blame. Both kill learning. A good debriefing is short, concrete and forward-looking: What happened? What did we learn? What will we do differently from tomorrow?

How to build a culture for shit cases and comebacks

Six moves for the leader:

- **Lead by example:** Talk about your own mistakes – then it becomes legitimate for others.
- **React with curiosity:** Your first reaction decides whether the next mistake is shared or hidden.
- **Share the story:** Use shit cases in your communication – with respect for the person involved.
- **Debrief routinely:** Short, concrete and forward-looking – without scapegoats.
- **Test the big assumptions:** Map your immune system and try out what you fear in small experiments.
- **Train the comeback:** Practise adversity in a safe setting before it counts.

Three questions for you as a leader

Ask yourself:

- When did I last talk openly about a mistake I made myself?
- What happens to the employee who comes to me with a shit case – in practice?
- How do we help each other back on the horse when someone falls off?

Conclusion – getting back up is what counts

Everyone falls off the horse now and then. What sets strong leaders and strong cultures apart is not that they never fail, but that they dare to bring their mistakes into the light, use the learning as a success factor by not giving up, dust themselves off and get back in the saddle.

Openness about mistakes and the ability to get back up again are the same muscle. Train it – in yourself and in your organisation. Bring it into the light, fix it and fight on.

The article builds on, among others, my book "Lederens inspirationsguide" (The Leader's Inspiration Guide, 2012, in Danish), my LinkedIn articles "Det urimelige er her af en grund" (The Unreasonable Is There for a Reason, 2015), "Op på hesten igen" (Back on the Horse, 2025) and "Nødprocedurer" (Emergency Procedures, 2026), as well as Robert Kegan and Lisa Lahey's "Immunity to Change" (2009) and "An Everyone Culture" (2016).

Do you want to strengthen openness and drive in your organisation?

Cronquist Consult ApS helps leaders and leadership teams build cultures where mistakes become learning and where people get back up faster after adversity. Read more here:
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