

When Things Go Wrong

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Six years ago, Ana Silvia Valencia got the shock of her life. After several years of teaching the deaf, the young school principal almost lost hope when she discovered her students had made little progress. The children were signing words, but not sentences. Their silent words had no grammatical structure. In essence, the school had been giving the children a larger vocabulary, but not the language skills that would enable them to read and write—the basics for further education and eventual employment.

Sharilyn Knaus, a short-term missionary, had made the unhappy discovery that the children were not signing in complete sentences. Devastating as this was, the real blow came when they realized that the children were merely mimicking their teachers. The problem was not that the children weren't learning, but that the teachers weren't teaching. For years Valencia and her co-workers had poured their lives into dozens of children only to discover they had left out vital components necessary to learn to read and write.

Down but not out, Ana Silvia Valencia, founder and principal of the Christian School for the Deaf in San Salvador, did the one thing leaders often find hard to do: she swallowed her pride and became a learner.

Today, the Christian School for the Deaf is a shining example of extraordinary achievement. Not only has the school achieved high levels of educational quality, but it has also earned the distinction of pioneering Christian education for the deaf in Central America. The school's curriculum and approach to teaching may be a model for Christian educators throughout the Spanish-speaking world.

"It never occurred to us this was happening," said Valencia. "At first we were all confused and deeply disappointed. Some of the teachers felt guilty, others wanted someone to blame. Worse," she said, "I didn't have a clue about how to correct the problem." Fortunately, she had three things going for her: a teachable spirit, a wise co-worker, and a clear goal.

When a Problem Surfaces

Upon discovering such a fundamental failure, Ana Silvia made an immediate decision to correct the problem. Typically, when a problem surfaces, a leader can respond in one of four ways.

DENY OR IGNORE THE PROBLEM

A leader can choose to deny that a mistake was made. This response, however, does nothing to correct the problem. And to those who are aware of the mistake, denial makes the leader appear prideful, unaware, or afraid of change.

For a leader to admit a mistake is, seemingly, equivalent to admitting weakness. It suggests his or her leadership may be flawed. Yet, that is precisely the kind of thinking that leads to failure. Denial isolates

the leader from important feedback and reinforces the myth that good leaders don't make mistakes. Mistakes are not the problem. Failing to learn from them is the real danger.

HIDE THE PROBLEM

A second possible response is to refuse to acknowledge the mistake publicly. This too can erode the leader's credibility, and it teaches employees that it's okay to hide mistakes.

BLAME THE PROBLEM ON OTHERS

A third response is to admit the mistake, but shift the blame. Valencia might have blamed the teachers and absolved herself of any responsibility. Finding fault results in humiliation for those who made the mistake and increases the likelihood that future mistakes will also be covered up, rather than acknowledged.

COMMIT TO CORRECT THE PROBLEM

The best response is to acknowledge the mistake and try to learn from it; exactly what Valencia did. She made no excuses and no attempts to shift the blame.

A few other responses were available to her. She could have accused the missionary of imposing standards that their small, struggling school could not meet. She could have denounced her college education for not teaching her more about curriculum development for the deaf. She could have delegated the problem to the teachers, excusing herself from the learning process. Instead, she took responsibility and committed herself to learning how to correct the problem.

First Things First: Set a Goal

To solve a problem, we must first have a clear picture of the ends. What do we want to accomplish? What is the outcome we're working toward?

Valencia's willingness to learn was guided by one clear goal. She knew what the school had to achieve—enable deaf children to successfully transfer into regular schools. A complete education would give them a fighting chance to be gainfully employed in a hearing society. When she discovered that her teaching methods would not achieve that goal, she changed them. We can learn from Valencia that a clear goal serves us in four ways.

MAKE IT MEASUREABLE

A clear goal provides a point of measurement. A goal is a goal only when it is stated in measurable terms, in other words, so you will know it when you see it and when you don't. "The moment I realized

the children were not communicating in complete sentences,” she said, “I knew they were not ready to enter regular school.”

MAKE IT CLEAR

A clear goal forces deviations into the open. It was obvious to everyone that they either had to change the goal or correct the mistake. A fuzzy goal or a changing vision might have made it easy to ignore the mistake and go on with business as usual.

STICK TO CORE VALUES

A clear goal keeps the focus on core values. Their goal focused on the children, not on how the teachers felt, not on Valencia’s authority or sense of importance, and not on institutional traditions or policies.

MAKE IT UNDERSTANDABLE TO ALL

Finally, a clear goal makes it easy to communicate and own. Because all the teachers clearly understood the goal, failure to achieve it galvanized them into action. Figuring out how to design a whole new curriculum wasn’t easy, but they knew what they had to accomplish.

As well, the goal shared by Valencia and her co-workers was nourished by an even greater dream—deaf children coming to know Christ and living healthy productive lives. The big dream gave the goal its meaning and provided a continuous need to learn and grow. In the final analysis, it’s the dream that enabled Valencia and the teachers to face the situation and undertake the difficult task of learning.

The Learning Process

Not every mistake warrants a learning process; that is, some mistakes simply need to be fixed. But when you don’t know how to fix a problem, a dedicated learning process can lead the way toward a solution.

“The problem with learning from mistakes,” Valencia said, “is figuring out how to proceed. When Sharilyn tried to explain what was going wrong, no one knew what she was talking about. We were all in the dark.” How they moved successfully from where they were then, to where they are today, is a direct result of Sharilyn’s approach to solving the problem.

Once you’ve determined that learning is the best option, the following tasks make the process easier.

STEP 1: INVOLVE THE RIGHT PEOPLE

Assigned to train teachers of Christian School for the Deaf in reading development, short-term missionary Sharilyn Knaus began by videotaping the students and teachers in action. She needed

to assess how the students were performing, and videotaping, she said, was the best way to study communication with the deaf.

When Knaus invited the teachers to help her analyze the tapes, they discovered for themselves what was going wrong. Including teachers in the analyzing process allowed them to reach their own conclusions that change was needed.

STEP 2: STRUCTURE THE LEARNING PROCESS

Set a strategic goal for the learning process. Remember that Ana Silvia had a clear goal: prepare deaf children to enter regular school. Learning also begins by asking the team, “What should we know, or be able to do, that would correct the problem?” The answer to this question will guide the learning process. The strategic goal should be clear and concrete in order to plan specific actions steps and measure progress toward achieving the goal.

Map out the learning process. The objective here is to determine a clear action plan. As a team, decide what, when, where, and how the learning process will take place. Also, determine how success in learning will be measured. Without a specific, detailed, plan, learning remains accidental rather than deliberate, too much time is wasted, progress is difficult to measure, and competing demands ultimately derail the learning process.

Create a framework that allows and encourages learning. Many organizations are not friendly toward the learning process; that is, they do not accommodate learning. But if people are expected to correct a problem and make improvements, they must be given the time to explore the whys and wherefores of what constitutes improvement. This process requires time, resources, and a dedicated framework for group interaction.

Ana Silvia opened the door to learning by allowing plenty of team meetings. Not only did she encourage the process, but she also participated as a co-learner. Her interaction with the process had the effect of endorsing Sharilyn’s role as instructor and coach, and it modeled for the team the importance of continued learning and improvement.

STEP 3: UNDERSTAND THE PROBLEM

With everyone aware of the problem and committed to change, the teachers of Christian School for the Deaf were ready to take the next step: understanding the problem. For weeks they stared at the videotapes, taking meticulous notes of every conversation. In the process, the teachers began to see the absence of the speech parts that are almost intuitive in spoken language.

To complicate matters, they also discovered that they were signing in English rather than Spanish. Contrary to popular opinion, Knaus says signing is not a universal language. “It’s just as culture bound as any spoken language. Word order, for instance, is different from one language to another. In order to teach the deaf how to read and write in their native language, you have to use the rules of that language.” That revelation gave the teachers their first clue toward a solution. If the children were going to learn to read and write in Spanish, they would have to learn to sign in Spanish. That meant the teachers would have to come up with sign language rules based on the Spanish language.

STEP 4: WORK TOWARD A SOLUTION

Structure learning into the workflow. The closer people are to a true work challenge—and the more they are able to work in real time with access to resources to meet the challenge—the more they will learn. The genius of Sharilyn’s approach was that she broke down tasks into bite-sized pieces. This allowed the teachers to participate in the curriculum development without radically altering their work schedule. It also allowed them to practice the new ideas in the classroom in real time.

Under Knaus’ skillful guidance, the teachers chiseled out rules for signing in Spanish. With each new rule, Knaus developed teaching techniques for the classroom. In time, they had a collection of teaching strategies and techniques. When the teachers saw that the students were progressing, they asked for help to apply the teaching strategies to other subjects.

Build on early, quick successes. Throughout the process, teachers were creating solutions, putting them into practice, and experiencing the benefits. This virtually ensured a series of small, visible wins for everyone. Considering the fact that curriculum development took a full six years, it would have been impossible to sustain motivation without experiencing tangible results along the way.

Over time, these dedicated learners took the national public school curriculum and converted it for use in deaf education. It took years and the participation of every teacher, but today, the school has six years of deaf education curriculum, from preschool through sixth grade.

The teachers at the Christian School for the Deaf in San Salvador saw their dream come true. That year, the first group of deaf students was mainstreamed into regular schools. Not only were the children ready to learn in regular schools, some surpassed the hearing students in academic

achievement. One child achieved the second highest ranking among all the students tested. “We are amazed at how well the children are adjusting,” reported Valencia. “One of the boys is the captain of a hearing soccer team. Others have joined youth groups and Bible studies of the hearing.” The best part is that the children are able to “hear” the gospel of Jesus Christ, and they have become His ambassadors to those who live in silence.

Mistakes are not the problem. Failing to learn from our mistakes is the real danger. In the final analysis, it's the dream that enabled Ana Silvia and her dedicated co-workers to face the situation and undertake the difficult task of learning. And, they finished the way they started: everybody owned the problem, and everybody created the solution. ■



Source

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