

SMART BUSINESS

INSIGHT. ADVICE. STRATEGY.™

[Print](#) [Close Window](#)

Lessons learned

How to help everyone learn from mistakes

By **Brian Horn**

Being a benevolent dictator can be a difficult task, but that's what Nick Cinalli tries to do at O'Donnell & Naccarato Inc.

"You need to be understanding, yet firm, and you need to know when to put your foot down but not necessarily go around throwing your weight," he says.

The president and CEO of the 100-employee structural engineering design firm — which has grown 100 percent during the last seven years — says that to achieve that balance, you have to start with a positive outlook.

Smart Business spoke with Cinalli about how to act more benevolently and less like a dictator and how to help everyone learn from people's mistakes.

Q. How do you know when to put your foot down or when to be nice?

You start out by being nice. That's easy for some people to do and harder for others. I tend to be a little bit on the softer side. I tend to always look at the good things in people, and I'm tolerant of people if there are mistakes made.

But then, I become a stern dictator if the same mistake is made twice.

Q. How has being a benevolent dictator benefited the company?

It lets the staff be individualistic so they're not afraid to make that move. They know that there is some level of understanding that is going to be available to them. I don't want staff to think they can constantly make a mistake, or even the same mistake, without any consequences.

Yet, at the same time, we all understand, I understand, that mistakes will be made.

You try to get the staff to understand that it's OK to think on your own, to be independent, to be individualistic. But, at the same time, be very careful in your service and process and try not to make mistakes.

If you make one, obviously, the ramifications are they are going to owe me or someone an explanation, but they aren't going to get fired for it.

Q. How do you communicate to employees that you understand mistakes happen?

The first thing we do is tell them, 'Don't be afraid; we're not going to fire you at the first mistake that occurs. But use your intelligence and try not to get there.'

If you get to the point where that does happen, then we tell them, first of all, they aren't going to get fired over it. Then, the best way to establish it is to show it.

Once you've done it once or twice, if there is a problem that occurs by one individual, usually everybody knows it. It's very hard to keep that a secret. Then, if you show that the ramifications are not being fired, that's about as good of a technique that you can use to make everybody understand that that's what you are doing.

Q. How do you handle bad decisions?

What I instituted here, and it's only about a year old, I've been searching for ways to transfer the positive out of the problems to other people. In other words, learning from our mistakes.

Generally, the individual who is involved or individuals who are involved will learn from their mistakes, obviously. But the challenge is, how do you get that to other people in the company?

You don't want one team to go through a problem and then have the next team do exactly the same on the next project.

We have these sessions of 'lessons learned.' So, if an issue crops up, we'll call the meeting and have everybody in there. Then, what I try to do is have the individuals involved make a presentation. It's not even a presentation, it's a talk-through — 'This is what happens; these are the parameters.'

The other key I tried to do is have it immediately. Sometimes, we have them before the issue is even resolved, while we're in the midst of it.

When the problem is resolved and everybody is calm, there is no passion left. You tend to just talk about it as a, 'This is what happened and blah, blah, blah; it's over.' While you're in the middle of it, you tend to show the nervousness that goes with it and the frustration and the need to come up with unique ways to solve whatever that problem may be.

Then, the benefit that came out of it, that I really wasn't looking for but was pleasantly surprised, is that by the fact that you're getting people together, you end up with a lot of brains in one room. So, other people put in their opinion, and some of them are very good.

Instead of being a one-person or three-person problem, it becomes a 50-person problem, and everybody benefits from it and everybody sees the pain the people involved are going through.

HOW TO REACH: O'Donnell & Naccarato Inc., (215) 925-3788 or www.o-n.com