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Learning from Mistakes: How Companies Build a Genuine Error Culture

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Why a good error culture is difficult but important

Error culture in companies is not a new topic, yet in many companies it is not really established. This is also noticeable from a customer's perspective when you point out errors but immediately realize that there is actually no interest in them. Yet companies with a good error culture can gain considerable competitive advantages. After all, companies depend on constantly reinventing themselves. Especially in today's digital age, in which even previously established companies and industries can face major upheavals faster than expected.

How to recognize a good error culture

A good error culture can be recognized, first, by the fact that customers' experiences with the company's services are actively and systematically captured and used to improve processes. Ultimately, it is customers who determine what an error is. Second, by an atmosphere in the company in which everything may be constructively criticized. Everything should be open to question, even if the decision is then made not to address errors further in processes for understandable reasons. And third: errors may also be allowed.

Especially in areas with a high workload and minor consequences of errors, it should be acceptable to make mistakes in order to achieve speed. At the same time, in processes with serious consequences of errors, care should be taken to ensure that no errors occur. This also means that lessons are learned from errors and that the same errors are not made again and again. Ideally, the person responsible does a better job because a critical error has been etched so firmly into their memory that it is never made again.

Effects of a good error culture

First of all, a good error culture can create a more relaxed working environment. When everyone pays more attention to the further development of processes so that fewer errors occur, studies show higher employee satisfaction. Second, customers are more satisfied because their concerns are handled faster and better. This also involves taking reports of errors seriously and using them for further development. Third, a good error culture lays the foundation for fundamental changes, e.g. towards digitalization. Overall, the company thus moves closer to developments in reality, as it is able to absorb them. This sometimes requires courage and investing money in unknown development - and also losing it. Trying things out and gaining experiences



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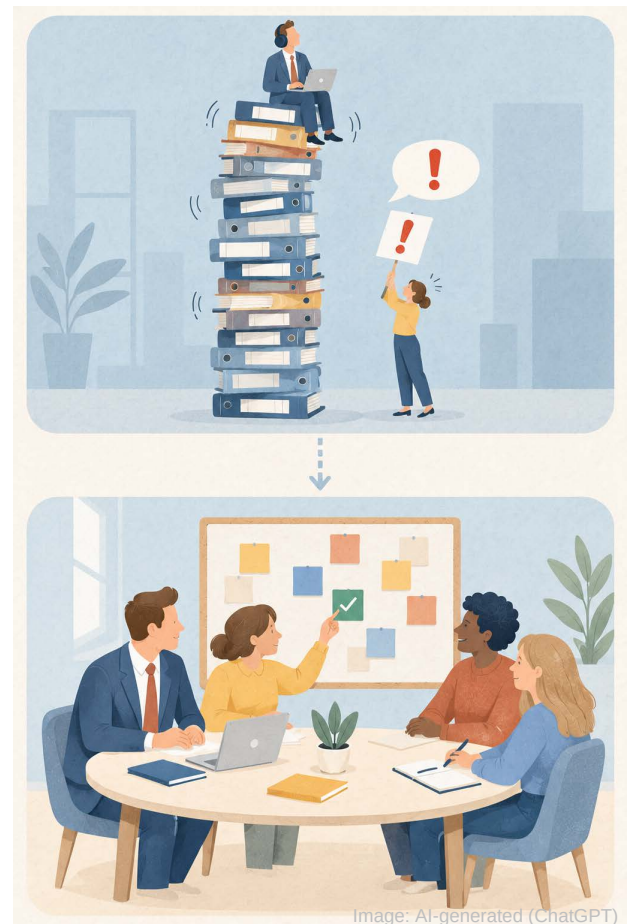
are an essential part of error culture, but they enable further development before market realities with losses in revenue and profit make things stressful and demand even greater losses.

Limits of an error culture

The limits of an error culture lie above all in the fact that, in organizations, it is only one topic that interacts with other topics. If the importance of hierarchy is a dominant way of thinking, it becomes difficult to establish an error culture that thrives precisely on operational employees pointing out errors. The responsible managers must regard the topic as relevant; otherwise little happens. Furthermore, error culture is usually limited to incremental improvements in processes and distracts attention from larger changes, which often go hand in hand with technologies leading to entirely different processes. In addition, an error culture does not address the issue of processes failing to meet customers' needs. In any case, there should be an overarching strategy within which errors are addressed. This can also define which errors are relevant and which are recognized as potential risks but not addressed further.

Establishing an error culture

The most important aspect of establishing an error culture is staying power. Many companies, and employees too, are oriented towards a functional structure with a long tradition of bureaucracy, which focuses more on hierarchy and on processing tasks correctly according to specifications. Rethinking takes time, but it can be accelerated through a number of measures. It is important to identify relevant people who will support the topic. They should be equipped with the necessary concepts and methods in workshops, ideally in a neutral, simulated process environment. Then, small measures should be started that lie within the responsibility of the process owners. These can be reported on, and the positive effects made transparent to others, so that other employees become interested as well. After that bigger topics can also be



tackled, as employees have grown used to change. It becomes part of their everyday work, and they realize that changing is not so bad after all.

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