Mistakes, Errors and Failures across Cultures

Elisabeth Vanderheiden • Claude-Hélène Mayer
Editors

# Mistakes, Errors and Failures across Cultures

## Navigating Potentials

Springer

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# Foreword

I was delighted that Elisabeth Vanderheiden and Claude-Hélène Mayer asked if I could provide a Foreword to their interesting book exploring the genesis of mistakes. Mistakes are perhaps the most common of human errors and often the least understood. My delight came from the fact that the invitation came just as I was completing the renewal of my Certified Instrument Flight Instructor (yes, researchers do have lives outside of the laboratory). To be sure, aviation has had an understandable concern with eliminating mistakes. For the layman, this concern has seemed to be focused on commercial operations. CRM (cockpit resource management) came about after the crash of a United Airlines DC-8 in the northwest which ran out of fuel shortly before landing at the airport. The analysis of the incident revealed that the crew depended too much on the captain as they tried to solve a problem all the while using precious fuel. That incident resulted in the airline, followed by the entire industry, to adopt training on how to delegate and integrate the resources of the crew, hence CRM. But in the public's mind, there seems to be less concern about general aviation in avoiding, if not eliminating, mistakes. Many of the mistakes in this domain may not result in the loss of life, though some do. One case I remember well was that of a doctor and his wife who set off in their single engine for a trip for a mid-south state to Texas. The pilot carefully calculated the amount of fuel he would need to easily reach an airport for refueling. However, for reasons unknown, he underestimated the strength of headwinds as they approached the airport. When on final approach, they ran out of fuel and hit trees just off the end of the runway. Both lives were lost. Another example is from my own early days as a pilot. We had just moved to a state in the Southern United States to a town about 50 miles away from the Mississippi River. On one of those perfect VFR days, we decided to fly over to the river and see the barges from a thousand feet. So, we flew up and down the river for a while and then headed back to the home base. Now, this was normally a 45-minute jaunt in our 172, but it seemed to drag on and on. And then I realized I was lost; all the land looked the same. The two lakes that bracketed the home airport were nowhere to be seen. Finally, I called for help from ATC, who found me, and I realized that we had drifted 50 miles south. Yes, a mistake in that as a new pilot is that I forgot to use the instruments in the plane to triangulate between

two VORs and keep myself on course. But it was an unintentional mistake. But, one, if the weather had turned nasty, could have had undesirable consequence. The point being that there are intentional mistakes (usually accompanied by the optimism bias), such as scud running and unintentional errors. Over the years, the CFI training has significantly changed to a focus on risk assessment and mitigation. And I would suggest that the concept of risk assessment can be applied outside of the aviation community, e.g., in analyzing vehicular accidents such as starting a trip on an icy day without considering the probability of losing control.

What this book takes as its rationale is "are mistakes, errors, and failures culture bound?" To be sure, in aviation, we have known for some time that cultures that are highly hierarchical make for problems in the cockpit. For example, a Korean Airlines 747 crashed on approach to a landing because the first officer would not forcefully speak up when he realized that the captain was allowing the plane to drop below the glide slope. The analysis suggested that Korean culture vested almost god-like characteristics in the captain. As a result, Korean revamped its entire training and evaluation program. Of course, this issue is not confined to one airline or one country; similar events have occurred in many countries. But we tend to see these issues, at least before this book, as restricted to certain occupations and not generally spread throughout the culture and through many aspects of everyday living. For that reason, this book can serve as a guide to future research on mistakes, errors, and failures.

This is an important book; the chapters are written with care to the existing research and applications to real-world issues. The authors are to be commended for advancing our knowledge of this critical area.

**Dan Landis** completed his PhD in General-Theoretical Psychology from Wayne State University in 1963. He has held several academic and research positions. He is currently Affiliate Professor of Psychology at the University of Hawaii at Mānoa, Professor Emeritus of Psychology, and Dean Emeritus of the College of Liberal Arts, University of Mississippi. He is also Past Chair of the Department of Psychology, Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, Research Psychologist at Educational Testing Service, Senior Research Psychologist at the Franklin Institute, and Visiting Research Professor at the East-West Center; Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute (DEOMI); University of Illinois; Victoria University in Wellington, NZ; and Primate Laboratory, University of Wisconsin. He is the Founding Editor in Chief of the *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* (1977–2011), the Founding President of the International Academy for Intercultural Research, and the Coeditor/Author of *Ethnic Conflict: International Perspectives* (1985), of the three editions of the *Handbook of Intercultural Training* (1986, 1996, 2004), of the *Handbook of Ethnic Conflict: International Perspectives* (2012), and of *Neuroscience in Intercultural Contexts* (2015). A Mandarin translation of the 2004 Training Handbook was published by Peking University Press in 2010. He is an Elected Fellow of several organizations: American Psychological Association, Association for Psychological Science, Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues, Division of International Psychology of APA, and

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Finally, we would like to thank our publisher, Springer International Publishing AG, for the continuous support and interest in our projects. Especially, we would like to thank Shinjini Chatterjee and Ameena Jaafar, Ram Prasad Chandrasekar and Nitesh Shrivastava and their teams for their commitment and support with regard to this book project.

**Elisabeth Vanderheiden**
Making mistakes, admitting errors, or experiencing failure is often initially associated with very painful experiences. It is often shameful, can trigger feelings of guilt, can cause great suffering and deep crises, and can have serious personal, professional, legal, or material consequences. But ideally, these events also initiate deep holistic learning opportunities, chances for reorientation, and manifold occasions to develop new visions as a person, organisation, collective, or society, to discover new skills and resources, and to take unknown paths at the crossroads of professional or private life decisions. In this sense, I thank all the people who have given me the opportunity to make mistakes and fail because these extraordinary learning opportunities and catalysts for my personal and professional development would not have existed without them. Above all, I thank those who stood by my side on these occasions, inspired me, and walked with me for a little while or longer on my way to new and sometimes unknown terrains of knowledge, action, and changed life practice.

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