

# Lean Focus



## 20 Big Mistakes Over 20 Years

By Damon Baker

It is not how many or what type of mistakes we make in life, but how we respond (or not) to the lessons they teach us.

Let's be honest...making mistakes and failing is something that makes us all uncomfortable. Present company included. We tend not to ask for candid feedback from others because we do not want to hear something we view as negative, in turn, rocking our confidence to the core. The truth can hurt and leave you feeling vulnerable and exposed in a way that can be very difficult to recover from.

If you think for a second about the aim of continuous improvement (kaizen), we observe a process, identify wastes, and put into place countermeasures to improve. Processes and problems do not have feelings, people do. Much of what stands in the way of driving sustainable improvement in an organization is the personal attachment people create with their work and lack of transparency. Their reluctance to be transparent stems from the risk of being exposed for making mistakes or being viewed as a failure. Essentially this reaction is an evolutionary response that is based on self-preservation.

For an organization to move ahead with building a culture of continuous improvement, it has to create a psychological safety net that rewards risk taking, expects autonomous decisions, and makes learning from mistakes a priority and a deliberate action we take every day in the business. To get the conversation started, I thought I would open up and share 20 of my own big ones over the last 20 years. Please enjoy at my expense.

1. Working for a company's mission I was not passionate about for far too long.

2. Failing to recognize my team and others (as often as I should) for a job well done.
3. Working for a boss who did not make my development a priority.
4. Believing I could "force" people to embrace continuous improvement.
5. Not going to gemba and observing first-hand to grasp the real situation.
6. Not setting clear expectations and holding people accountable.
7. Not pursuing my dreams earlier.
8. Trying to adapt to someone else's version of who I should be.
9. Giving feedback without asking if it is even wanted.
10. Not taking the opportunity to have crucial conversations with key people in my life.
11. Taking myself too seriously and not making work fun for myself and others.
12. Setting unrealistic expectations of my team.
13. Failing to consider alternative perspectives and truly listen to others' concerns.
14. Not trusting my gut feelings about people or situations.
15. Not recognizing my role in developing and helping others achieve their dreams.
16. Not being candid enough in a way that builds trust. Or being too candid in a way that destroys trust.
17. Not taking the time to get to know people before tackling their problems with them.
18. Not standing up for things I believe in that conflict with my values.
19. Not asking for help when I needed it sooner.
20. Advocating too hard for my position or solutions and not building consensus.

### **Bringing It All Together**

Fail fast, fail early, fail often, but learn from it. If you are not making mistakes in your life, you are not trying anything new. We build new cognitive muscle and skills when we learn how not to do something. Doing what we already know how to do keeps us where we are. Failure is a vital part of the growth process and should not be viewed as something to be completely avoided. Own up to your mistakes, for collectively they form your experience and experience is what people truly pay for. Have the humility to learn from them and adapt better approaches in the future. START DOING.

*How have the mistakes you've made in your life shaped your growth as a leader? Please share your thoughts in the comments section below, as I learn just as much from you as you do from me.*

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**BACKGROUND**  
Damon is the President & CEO of Lean Focus. For over 25 years, he has been implementing lean in consulting, operations, continuous improvement, and GM & VP-level leadership roles for such companies as Danaher, HNI, Eaton, Argo Consulting, Experian, and Winegard.  
Trained by disciples of the Toyota Production System, he worked in a Shingo Prize winning facility and is a Shingo Prize Examiner. Over his career he has demonstrated hands-on leadership and facilitation of 500+ kaizen events for 50 major corporations in 16 different countries. Damon led the North American Danaher Business System Office. While at Danaher, one of his mentored operating companies was nominated Most Improved Plant, and one of his factories won Best Plant Worldwide 2 years in a row. Damon holds an MBA from St. Ambrose University and a Bachelors of Arts in Management and Marketing from Iowa Wesleyan University.

**INDUSTRY EXPERIENCE**  
Aerospace and Defense, Automotive, Electronics, Capital Equipment, Chemicals, Protective Packaging, Residential Construction Materials, Water Quality, Dental, Test & Measurement, Sheet Metal Fabrication, Life Sciences, Medical Devices, Discrete Assembly, Oil and Gas.

**LEAN EXPERIENCE**  
Building/Installing Problem Solving & Kaizen Cultures, Operational Due Diligence, Acquisition Integration, Strategic Planning & Policy Deployment, Sales Force Efficiency & Effectiveness Tools, Pricing Margin Analysis, Transactional Kaizen, EBITDA focused operational improvements, Cellular Manufacturing, 6S & Visual Management, Standardized Work, Mistake Proofing (Poka Yoke), Visual Controls, Setup Reduction (SMED), Total Productive Maintenance (TPM), Daily Management Processes, Leader Standard Work, Working Capital reduction via Kanban & Pull Based Inventory tools, DSO Reduction, and Accounts Payable processes, Value Analysis & Engineering, 3P, Accelerated Product Development Tools.

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