

IoNTELLIGENCE Brief | Newsletter 8 | November 2017



Key Points

- **November's theme: "Mistakes"**
- **Acceleration: Want to avoid errors? Be like pilots and surgeons - have a checklist**
- **Thinking Tool: M.A.S.T.E.R. your Mistakes**
- **Read *Anti-Fragile* and Watch "The Fog of War"**
- **What Confucius and Cicero had in common, and how it's news that you can use today**

For better or worse, people associate me with mistakes. I tell myself it's because I wrote a book on how to learn from them as well as why it's so important; that's more comforting than any other explanation, to be honest. However, I still believe that the topic of errors should be of interest to everyone. **We all make mistakes: sometimes small ones, occasionally big ones, and all too often the same ones.** So I'm tackling that theme this month, and I've curated everything from a quick tip to avoid making them, what to do after you've made one anyway, and some of the best books and docs on the broader idea of failure and how to insulate yourself from its consequences ...

Acceleration

Use a Checklist. For Everything.

Atul Gawande's [*The Checklist Manifesto*](#) changed my life - probably because in it he described how introducing checklists into operating rooms and pilot cockpits *saved* lives. A checklist is simply a written guide through a series of (usually sequential) procedures. Behind that simplicity lies a super power, however; the whole point of the exercise is to outsource the tedious task of remembering repetitive steps so that you can free up your brain's RAM for more creative - and important - mental activities. As productivity guru David Allen points out, "your mind is for having ideas, not holding them."

Pair this with *Dilbert* creator Scott Adams (not your usual business guru!), who quite sagely advises that "losers have goals; winners have systems."

Conclusion: You don't have to be a world-class pilot, a surgeon - or cartoonist, for that matter - to benefit from the surprisingly powerful but humble checklist. They help us manage the increasing complexity of our careers and lives. **Use them anytime you have to do anything twice and it will save you time and precious mental bandwidth.**

Thinking Tool

Made a Mistake? Use the M.A.S.T.E.R. Checklist to learn from it quickly

I've probably spent more time thinking about mistakes than is recommended by mental health professionals, but one of the (few?) benefits is the following tool. I've taken a stab at creating a **simple yet comprehensive system to quickly learn from an error and immediately incorporate the insight** to avoid repeating it in the future. I also designed it to be supple enough to work on the back of a napkin or in a more extensive application, such as when analyzing a disastrous product launch.

1. **Make Peace with your Mistake.** Face, own and then embrace your part in the error. These three steps are critical to surviving the initial moments after a mistake, and they allow us to take the next step in the process - figuring out what went wrong. But you can't see the truth until you accept the truth first ...

2. Analyze it. Draw up a “Mistake Map” in order to sort out where you might have gone wrong.
3. Search for the true source of the mistake. Try to identify the “Critical Failure Factors” and the “Error Gene”.
4. Take in the right lesson(s): All too often, we draw the wrong conclusions from a miscue. Be mindful of correct the cause - rather than the symptom - of the mistake.
5. Eliminate the Error Gene and then Erase the Mistake. This step can be summed up with the following aphorism: remember what not to do and forget what you did.
6. Reprogram yourself to sidestep that “Mistake Trap” going forward. There is a big difference between knowing what to do ... and doing what you know. It’s not enough to identify the cause of the mistake; you also have to proactively change the behaviour whenever a similar situation presents itself. Learn to recognize the warning signs that you’re about to slip on that familiar banana peel and you’ll never have to deal with that particular type of error again.

Conclusion: Almost everyone agrees that we should probably learn from our mistakes. The better question is *how*. Try the 6 Step M.A.S.T.E.R. Checklist as one way to quickly yet systematically profit from your failures. [Go Deeper ...](#)

Binge-Worthy

[*Anti-Fragile: Things that gain from disorder*](#) by Nassim Nicholas Taleb
(published 2012)

Dense, pedantic, at times infuriating ... but also brilliant, iconoclastic and life-changing. Both things can be true, and there is no easy way to categorize this book.

It’s equally hard to distill its core lessons to a paragraph, but here goes. Taleb makes a very compelling case here (as well as in his previous two books, the now-famous The Black Swan and the less well-known Fooled by Randomness) that life is much more unpredictable than we realize. Modern society has fooled itself into thinking that the market and Mother Nature are both more easily forecasted than they actually are (witness the unforeseen Great Recession and “once in 500 year floods” happening 18 months apart). His solution? We need to become “anti-fragile” - his neologism for a state of being that is more than *just* resilient, where we also actually benefit from volatility and shocks to the system as well.

Robust systems can withstand shocks; resilient one can snap back from disruptions. Anti fragile organizations actually get stronger. **Nature is the best example of an anti-fragile system**, whereby forests are initially devastated but ultimately prosper after fires that eliminate the dead wood (literally) and create a fertile topsoil ripe for renewal.

So how do you use this concept in real life? Here is one way to look at it. Relying on Corporate employment (a single employer) is fragile; having a niche occupation with a few clients is more robust; but having a small business with a few employees and a number of clients from different industries is anti-fragile. It's all about being small, agile, adaptable - and having redundant systems and plans in place.

If this sounds like a complicated argument, you're not alone; I didn't grasp the idea completely at first and Taleb himself takes the whole book to develop it. But even though this read requires real work, it's worth it. In a world increasingly defined by the acronym military planners use - VUCA, for volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous - anti-fragility is a viable if not vital counter-strategy.

Conclusion: Being "robust" or "resilient" is not enough. Perfect robustness is unattainable, so you want to adopt an approach that regenerates itself by **benefiting from - rather than suffering from - random events.**

Pair this with [The Fog of War documentary \(released in 2003 | iTunes and Netflix\)](#):

After the heavy lift of Taleb's tome, this will seem like a guilty pleasure - but it's far from it. Helmed by one of the best documentarians on the planet, Errol Morris, "The Fog of War" examines the many mistakes made by the US during the Vietnam War. What makes this so compelling is that the principal protagonist is none other than the Secretary of Defense at the time, Robert McNamara. **Imagine a doctor performing an autopsy on his own body (figuratively speaking!)** and you can readily see where the Morris mines the film's drama and power. As a documentary, it is stunning; as an exegesis of one of the great military blunders of the 20th century, it is unparalleled. This film should be required viewing for all generals and admirals going forward - so they can, in philosopher's George Santayana's famous words, not be condemned to repeat the past.

Philosophical Espresso Shot (a double!):

“A man who has committed a mistake and who doesn’t correct it is committing another mistake.” (Confucius, Chinese Philosopher)

“Any man can make mistakes, but only an idiot persists in his error.” (Cicero, Roman Philosopher and Politician)

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