

Most of us would prefer not to dwell on our mistakes, nor to have others remind us of them. Yet, when we give the matter some thought, we see that learning from mistakes—our own and others’—can sometimes launch us into new and unexpected accomplishments. In this issue of the Dispatch, Lance writes about how one might learn from one’s own mistakes, while Bill takes on the subject, with the help of the Book of Proverbs, of learning from others’ lapses. Let us know your thoughts—especially if you have a pertinent story!

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## Learning from Our Own Mistakes

By [Lance Woodbury](#)

In a recent meeting, we were discussing the times in our lives that define us in some significant way. Those “crucible moments” often come through being placed in difficult situations, and we either successfully or unsuccessfully face these circumstances.

But a surprising number of lessons emerge from mistakes of our own making. We often *create* the difficult situation in which we find ourselves. In a phrase, we had “made our own bed.” When I think about the self-made mistakes in family businesses, three categories come to mind:

- **Mistakes around what we say.** When in conflict, people sometimes say hurtful things to one another. With the ongoing nature of family relationships, a hurtful statement can create decades of resentment.
- **Mistakes around how we behave.** By virtue of their economic interest and family name, owners and their family are often granted a level of respect by others. Behaving foolishly or treating others poorly harms not only individual relationships but the whole organization.
- **Mistakes involving our assumptions.** Families have generational histories, unique cultures and behavioral norms which, when not discussed, create certain expectations about how the future might look. By not clarifying assumptions early, we almost ensure disappointment later in our families.

### How to learn?

To learn from our mistakes and get it right, we must *first* become aware of our wrongs. The quickest way to become aware is to be open to feedback, allowing someone’s critique of you to sink in, considering how their appraisal might ring true. It’s not easy to override the self-defense mechanisms of fight or flight; we usually want to defend what we say and do.

If the evaluation of your mistake is on target, the *second* step is to admit, to yourself and to those affected, the error of your ways. Acknowledgement that you were wrong won’t change what you did, but it begins to repair the break with the other person. Admission opens the door to a better future.

The *final step* in the learning process involves reflecting on what you can or will do better. How will you change? There may be a chance to fix your current mistake, but in many cases, the damage is done. The real question is this: Will you do it differently next time? Will you speak or behave differently? Will you discuss some of the difficult decisions of the future?

Your answers to such questions will determine whether you might learn “Proverbial Wisdom” Bill references for us below...



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## Faith and Family Business:

### Learning from the Mistakes of Others (Proverbs 19:25)

By [Dr. Bill Long](#)

The Book of Proverbs is all about learning, making mistakes, receiving correction and gaining in wisdom. We often think of Proverbs as concerned primarily with passing down *principles* of good living from one generation to another, such as the principles of diligence, faithfulness, prudence. Often overlooked, however, is that Proverbs is also concerned with what we might call *relational* learning. For the Book of Proverbs, some of life's most valuable life lessons come in the context of *relationships*.

The verse cited above is a case in point. It says, "Strike a scoffer and the simple will gain prudence; correct a person of understanding and s/he will gain in understanding knowledge." Another verse (21:11) is very similar: "When the scoffer is punished, the simple gains wisdom; when the wise is instructed, s/he receives more knowledge."

The language is dense, but if we look only at the first half of the verse we have: a) the scoffer; b) punishment of the scoffer; c) the simple; d) the gain or benefit for the simple. Proverbs divides the world into several kinds of people, but the main categories are the wise, foolish, scoffers and simple. A scoffer is what we today might call a "know-it-all"—i.e., a person who has seen everything and has a definitive answer for questions asked and even unasked. Proverbs has little hope that they will reform.

But if one disciplines or punishes such a person, we are told that the effect is not on the scoffer him/herself but on the onlookers—the "simple." A "simple" person for Proverbs is a person, regardless of age, who has the potential of going either towards wisdom or foolishness. We might call him/her "naïve" or "unschooled." Such a person is in a vulnerable position because s/he is very susceptible to the pressure of others.

Yet in this passage we are told that the effect of actual discipline on the scoffer is that the simple will learn prudence—which is the first step in wisdom. The value of seeing a scoffer corrected or disciplined may seem to be minimal, until we realize that the one witnessing this correction is a person who may very well take to heart the importance of the lesson being taught.

People make mistakes and are disciplined for them all the time. One of the measures of prudence, according to Proverbs, is ability to learn from the mistakes of others. For the Book of Proverbs, there is a great deal of power not only in a good example, but also in a bad example.

