

Anatomy of a Breakdown

How does an organization not only recover, but thrive, after a mistake is made?

From the laboratory of Seven Stones

Consider the not uncommon technical error that unleashes big consequences at an organization. For example, one colleague inadvertently breaks client confidentiality over email, breaking the company's code of ethics and ultimately causing the other colleagues hours of additional work? How does a company handle such a breakdown?

We can tell you because this actually happened. Our clean-up effort required two levels of attention:

1. Attending to the break of trust with clients
2. Attending to the break in trust between each other.

Collectively, we handled the impact on our customers pretty well. Immediate and open communication ensued via email and direct phone calls to each and every client (thus the hours of additional work). Inside of our commitment to exquisite customer service, we took responsibility by naming the mistake, apologizing, asking if there was any impact that we needed to remedy and declaring the breakdown complete. The outcome of this exercise was increased connection with many of our clients, who thankfully were not distressed by the exposure of their emails or the accidental breaking of our word to them that we would never disclose them.

But the matter of what to do about the impact on each other was a different story and in fact, more complicated. These are the people with whom we work with every day, all day and some weekends. (Sound familiar?) There is intimacy and a high level of expectation: we share a

huge commitment to a huge game. Additionally, in this particular case, there was the context of an unkept promise to clean-up a prior breakdown.

And isn't that just the way it often goes? Breakdowns accumulate, strong feelings rise, silence takes over, creativity and innovation are lost to increased mistrust. (Sound familiar?) We hear it all the time with clients.

Inside of our commitment to sufficiency, to each other and to winning the game of growing a business, we dropped our "work" agenda at our next staff meeting, and we handled those feelings. We rolled up our sleeves and had some difficult conversations. We went beyond the clerical error and asked, "what else was in the space to cause this mistake?" Slowly, we moved away from blame and shame towards collective understanding of the whole picture—context, content, the quietest voices, the overlooking, and all the scarcity.

Specifically, were able to acknowledge, adapt and learn. We created the opportunity for everyone to inquire and learn, individually and collectively in a safe space where we owned our mistakes and made amends. Apologizing and the forgiveness that followed helped make us all more available for group process and less distracted by self-loathing. There was room for us to explore what was in everyone's space that might have lent itself to such a mistake. We could trace the breakdown to distraction, fears of spending money, putting off other "clean-up" conversations, shame in hiding what we weren't doing that we were accountable for, among other things. Telling the truth inspired us to let go and move on, to create new



structures and promises for accountability, to prioritize what was most important and put aside other projects. We actually got to re-orientate to each other, ourselves and the business.

By the end of our 90-minute meeting, there was a renewed sense of possibility. The slate was clean and we could create again, create uninhibited, fully, and in flow with ourselves and with each other. There was a palatable feeling of this renewed energy flow, and we all agreed we had deepened our connection and trust with each other, allowing a greater sense of possibility than there was even before the breakdown. We now have a policy and commitment to never overstep scarcity.

We were left wondering what do other organizations do when a colleague makes a mistake, or there is a breakdown that affects everyone? In our organizational experiences, breakdowns were disastrous, either in their explosions or implosions, where much gets left unsaid and feelings leak out over time, corrupting the creativity and productivity of everyone. None of us have ever experienced a process that was relatively quick with an outcome of clear space in which to move on and do good work.

We started to wonder, what would happen in companies that actually cleaned up their mistakes fully, within and without? What would the world look like, for that matter?

Here is a list of the skills we used during our breakdown recovery process. These actions are the foundations for coping with uncertainty, for an ever-fast changing economic (and political and social and climate) landscape, and for shifting into a new paradigm. Take a look: What can you say "Yes! I can do that" to, what are you working on, what are you avoiding or didn't know existed? What turns you on? And, is there anything below that scares you?

- Awareness practice
- Self reflective practice
- Self responsibility—what is my part in this?
- Commitment to clear things knowing it will make a difference
- Willing to get coaching
- Knowing how to design a conversation that will repair trust and heal things
- Ability to speak in "I" language
- Ability to ask questions
- Ability to not know
- Ability to love someone while mad or upset or unclear
- Ability to hold paradox
- Distinctions about scarcity and what fuels breakdowns
- Ability to know breakdowns are just breakdowns
- Distinctions around trust
- Ability to trust

How do you recover from a breakdown that you created or one you didn't that you still had to handle? Is it different or the same if you are in your professional role at work or at home and more personal? Take a moment to consider what new practice or practices you will take on to begin a shift towards recovering from a breakdown in a new way, and tell us at info@sevenstonesleadership.com.

ABOUT SEVEN STONES

Seven Stones is a leadership journeys company founded by Gina LaRoche and Jennifer Cohen in 2009. Our learning programs, coaching practice, organizational consulting engagements and groundbreaking thought leadership work are all designed to help bring about a world that is loving, courageous and just. We pursue this vision primarily by shifting the paradigm from one of scarcity to one of Sustainable Abundance® in the individuals, organizations and communities with whom we work.

