



# Bainbridge Leadership Center

Changing the world one leader at a time

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By Donna Zajonc



## Leadership Matters



### Do You Ruminare on Mistakes?

Many of you may know that I am a baseball fan. I grew up playing softball (the only sport available to girls in our small Missouri town prior to Title IX) and continue to enjoy the artistry and finer points of the game.

Last week I watched a relief pitcher on my favorite team, come in to pitch in the ninth inning. Our team was up by one run. With one fast ball he gave up a two-run homerun and lost the game for his team. I felt bad for him and later wondered if he got any sleep that night. "Probably lying awake worried about that homerun," I thought.

The next morning I read his quote in the newspaper: "It was just one pitch," he said of the homerun. "It's going to happen. I got over it right away. I think that's something that comes with experience."

His healthy approach got me thinking about how important it is to let go of mistakes. Baseball players with a .300 batting average are considered excellent hitters. That means they are not successful over two-thirds of the time! They learn to step back into the batter's box and be ready for another pitch just twenty seconds after failing to get a hit. Are you that resilient, ready for another challenge after a mistake or do you ruminare on your missteps?

Leadership requires that we have a healthy amount of ambition and drive. We want to succeed which means we must take risks and try new approaches. This is fertile ground for frequent miscues.

The science of leadership is revealing there are some important patterns of thought that can help you let go of mistakes and be ready for the next pitch. However, many people ruminare on their mistakes, going over and over the details, again and again, looking for any clue to what happened. Most of us want to "fix" what we did wrong so we lay awake worrying about the minutiae.

Ruminating on the mistakes causes us to relive the episode and in doing so we relive over and over again, the stress and anxiety associated with the mistake. The reoccurring waves of fear release an avalanche of destructive neurochemicals in our brain. These neurochemicals literally make us hypersensitive and may cause us to make the mistake again in the future.

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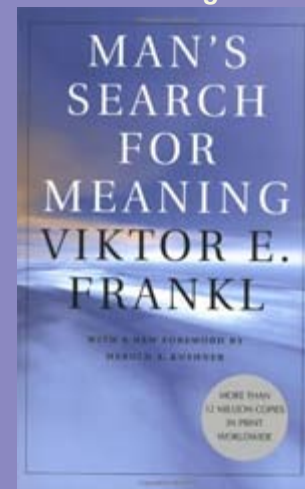
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#### Book of the Month

*Man's Search for Meaning*



by Viktor Frankl

A true classic, written in 1959, Frankl, an Austrian born psychiatrist, chronicles his experience in a concentration camp and how we can find meaning in even the most difficult situations.

The newly sensitized neuro-receptors evoke the memory of the mistake deep into the brain and increase rapid recall when the slightest trigger brings the memory back to awareness. Bumping up against the experience again, increases uneasiness and will trigger a rush of unexpected anxiety. Once the next wave of anxiety rushes through our system, we lose our healthy focus and are more likely to commit the mistake again.

If taken to an extreme, ruminating can actually cause neurosis and pre-occupation with things that might go wrong. In other words, we look for what might go wrong, rather than what might go well. If this pattern begins, our self-perception becomes entrenched in a negative view of the world as we anticipate all that might go wrong.

There's a much healthier way to approach mistakes. We can learn to reflect on the situation, identify and describe the good. The pitcher did an amazing example of "describing the good." Even in the face of the homerun and lost game he described how the experience helps him be a better pitcher.

It is essential to admit the mistake. If not, rejection of reality may cause a repression of negative emotions that will explode at another time. Repression or denying the truth of the mistake prevents learning but admitting to the mistake is different from obsessing over it.

Leaders who learn to successfully work with mistakes and set backs learn to make sense of the experience. In retrospect, we often have gratitude for the mistake because it helped us create a new direction. Leaders who do this, ask themselves questions similar to these:

In what new ways must I develop to avoid that mistake in the future?

Where did I fall down on my responsibilities?

What can I learn from the mistake?

What am I pretending not to see?

These questions strengthen the pre-frontal cortex of the brain that allows rational perspective and new learning to grow and evolve. When the pre-frontal lobes of the brain are activated, the part of the brain that is in charge of ruminating relaxes.

Try these strategies to also help you learn from your mistakes and avoid the toxic game of endlessly mulling over details:

- Use a journal to reflect on the situation. Describe the good more than emphasizing what went wrong.
- Find a good friend or confidant and describe the situation. During the conversation use phrases like: "Now I see that I could have....." or "I understand that I..."
- Avoid associating with people who want to gossip about the mistake and continue to talk about the gory details.
- Take forward action. Do something, anything, to move forward and help regain positive momentum.

There's a Chinese saying about a seeker who climbs a very high mountain to ask a wise man about the meaning of life.

*What is the most important aspect of one's life, wise man?*

[Buy online at Amazon.com](#)

### Best Online Video

[In this rare clip](#) from 1972, legendary psychiatrist and Holocaust-survivor and author of *Man's Search for Meaning*, Viktor Frankl delivers a powerful message about the human search for meaning.

### Quote of the Month

*"Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms - to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way."*

Viktor Frankl

### Best Leadership Article

[Open Teamwork: Building Compatible and Productive Teams](#)

by Will Schutz

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Experience.

*How do you get experience?*

Good judgment.

*How do you get good judgment?*

Bad judgment.

Experience teaches us through our mistakes as much as our successes. Be open and ready to describe the good in either.

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## Testimonials

*"I had the wonderful opportunity of introducing Donna Zajonc as a keynote speaker for our International Institute of Municipal Clerks Annual Conference. With her broad governmental and political experience, she brings a wealth of knowledge and passion to the task of inspiring, motivating and teaching leadership skills. Book her...now!"*

Charles E. Tokar, J.D., MMC  
International Institute of Municipal Clerks President

## Considering a Staff Retreat?

Give me a call to facilitate your next staff retreat or planning session.

**206-780-9300** ([read more](#))

## Individual Coaching

Beginning in June, I have room for one or two new coaching clients. If you are ready to tackle professional or personal issues that keep you from being the person and leader you want to be, please call or email me at: **206-780-9300** or [Donna@BainbridgeLeadership.com](mailto:Donna@BainbridgeLeadership.com) and we will schedule a 30 minute complimentary session to see if coaching is right for you.

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