Studying the Accident Reports

by

Cliff Williamson

Danny was a college roommate who had a pilot's license. Every three months or so he went to the local airport and pulled up all available information on airplane crashes which had occurred during that period. He studied them like he was studying for an algebra exam. When I first learned what he was doing, I thought it was a rather ghoulish way to spend his time. But when I asked him why he did it, his answer made perfect sense, and it stuck with me.

¨I study the accident reports so that the same thing doesn't happen to me, ¨ he said.

As a teacher I learned that ¨trial and error¨ was one of the most effective ways to learn. As long as students got quick feedback on their efforts, they could discover a great deal from their mistakes. What was important was that they got the feedback, and got it soon after committing the error.

In the moving business we generally hide our mistakes. As owners and managers we hide our mistakes from our clients, our accounts, and our fellow agents. We might even hide our errors from our subordinates. Our employees hide their mistakes from us, and from their immediate supervisors. They often conspire together to make sure no one gets into trouble. We do our best to look good to each other and to our customers. Often we are doing ourselves a disservice. We are cheating ourselves out of the opportunity of learning.

We hold a special kind of meeting at our company. We call it a Learning Meeting. It is a nice name for a meeting which is devoted to open discussion of our errors. For many that can be a big threat. If it was your error, and you have to come clean with the details of where you went wrong in the presence of your boss and colleagues. It puts you on the hot seat, and that can be painful. It requires a fairly high level of maturity to even consider doing this, so I am not suggesting you rush out and arrange your first session for tomorrow morning. It may take a little prep time. I do suggest you follow these steps.

First, it is important that staff understand and trust that the purpose of such a meeting is not to punish but to improve. Second, the errors to be discussed must be uncovered or admitted before the meeting takes place (not surprise disclosure!). Third, a mechanism must be established to trigger calling this type meeting. And fourth, a record must be kept, summarizing what was learned.

First, set a clear purpose for the meeting. The first meeting must be carefully arranged, with those responsible for the errors well advised in advance about what to expect. It is best if they can tell the tale themselves, and their honesty and contribution to company improvement must be recognized publicly before, during, and after the meeting.

A first set of errors should be easy to come by. We all have errors. They should be the type of errors in which there is an unhappy client, a loss in revenue, a break from procedure, or a problem in communication. Don't go back in history and look for every error you know about. Start with three or four recent ones and keep it simple. The meeting doesn't need to last an hour, and there should not be a lot of lecturing. What happened? What was the cost or result? What can we learn?

How often to meet? We use this strategy to trigger our next meeting. As soon as we have a list of three problem services in which errors were committed, it is time for a meeting. The frequency of the meetings should be determined by the frequency of errors committed. Don't wait too long. Quick feedback is important.

Keep a record of the learning which takes place at the meeting. Stay focused on learning, and not on blame. Blame drives errors underground. Learn from your accident reports.

Cliff Williamson is the managing director of Transpack Argentina in Buenos Aires. He says he makes errors every day. For example, he lost touch with his old college roommate, Danny.