Hello, and welcome to another troubleshooting session here in the Supervisors Circle. Troubleshooting sessions are an opportunity to come together and talk through some of the challenges that people are having being supervisors. There are lots of different opportunities and roles that you can have in these troubleshooting sessions.

You can come on live or submit your trouble anonymously to be discussed. You can come and help other people talk through the trouble they are having. You can come and sit back and listen to the conversation. And always after these sessions, we post the questions in the forum, and you can continue the conversation there.

So, let's take a look at today's trouble.

My best employee, my favorite employee, messed up big time. It had a big negative impact on our team and our work. It's really unlike him, and I'm not sure how to handle it. I don't want it to seem like I'm paying, playing favorites. So, I want the rest of the team to know I'm handling it. And I don't want him to think I don't appreciate him, but I also need him to know how badly he messed up. What should I do?

Like a lot of the issues here in the Supervisors Circle, I am sure that this resonates with you in some way, shape, or form, if not in its entirety. And this one is so broad. I would guess that you are probably relating to it in, in lots of different ways because we don't have a lot of specifics. I really want to look at each part and pick it apart because even though this is short, there are a lot of big themes in just this little section.

The person writing in talks about messing up big time and having a big negative impact. Guess what? There are a lot of big themes in this. I do not want to say little trouble because I understand this is a substantial issue, but in, let's say this little amount of text that we have, there's like three immediate themes that jump out at me. that is to try and take a little bit of time to talk about each one because they all come into play for me in terms of how to address, what, what my opinion- all of you may have other opinions as well (that's why we're here) about some things to consider as you figure out the best path going forward, what you should do with this employee.

So yes, we are all going to mess up on our own as leaders and supervisors. Our staff are going to mess up, sometimes big time like in the case of this example. It is really important for us to think about as best we can ahead of time, how we handle these situations, both in terms of our own mistakes and when other people are making mistakes, how do we respond to those mistakes? That is when our leadership can really shine through, or that is when we can really drop the ball with our leadership, depending on how we respond to these situations. And believe me, if you have not experienced this already, you will, mistakes happen.

Sometimes they are within our control, sometimes they could have been prevented, sometimes they are completely out of our control. Sometimes things just happen. There is always a lot to think about when a mistake happens, and we are going to take a look at the information we have with this particular mistake and some of those themes that jumped out to me.

First and foremost, let's talk about the mistakes. And I did intentionally put messing up in quotes here.

For all of us, it is really important to think about the role of mistakes and messing up and what that role is, will be, and should be on our respective teams.

Everything is a balance.

We come back to that balance over and over and over again. We know that we cannot learn and grow without those mistakes.

I was just home visiting family and have a lot of nieces and nephews and a lot of international influence in my family, lots of languages being spoken and lots of people learning languages that are not their first or second or even third language. We always have a lot of discussions about what languages people are learning and different apps we are using and all this.

One of my nieces is really fascinated by language and really loves to hear it and absorb it and hear all the cool things about it and is so reluctant to speak it. She is so afraid of making mistakes and it is hard to move past that. It is hard when you have that fear.

Language is such a practical, real life example that if you are not willing and able to get over the fact that you're going to make a million times a million mistakes in the process of learning that language, you're not ever going to get to the point where you're actually learning it. It is true of language. It is true of absolutely everything.

You know that quote, one of my favorites, as cliched as it might be, everything is hard before it is easy. That is true in supervising, it is true in everything we learn and do.

There is this really important component of mistakes to understand, which is we need to make mistakes in order to learn and get better as managers and leaders ourselves, we need to afford that grace.

We need to appreciate that so much of what we're learning to do in terms of the skills and the art that we talk about of being an effective supervisor, we can't practice on our own. We have to practice it with another person in live time. Things like giving feedback and running a meeting. You cannot really- there are levels to being prepared and practicing ahead of time, but the actual act of it, it is not a musical instrument.

It is not practicing a language.

You cannot really practice it until you are doing it in a real-life situation, which is part of what makes this so challenging. In the beginning, when we are the least confident in most cases and the least, the least skilled that goes hand in hand and the greenest and the newest is when it is hardest. It is really, really hard that first time we sit down for a one-on-one. The first time we hire someone, the first time we fire someone and not having done it before, how hard that can be.

Looking back if you are a little bit more seasoned, you have been doing this a little bit longer, I hope you look back and say, wow, I can't believe that I did it that way, or I would never do it that way anymore, right? Like that growth means that you look back and say, look at all these mistakes I made along the way. That is the growth part.

You need to allow for mistakes. You need to allow people to learn and grow, which requires those mistakes. The balance is if people continue to make the same mistakes or really, really big mistakes or too many mistakes, then are they the right fit for that position or that task or that role?

Like almost everything we talk about it, it is impossible to quantify that. It is impossible to say, well, if they make three mistakes, it is okay, but if they make four, then they should not be doing that task, right? It just does not work that way.

It is that balance of welcoming and encouraging mistakes. At the same time, if the mistakes are, are continuing to happen after that learning moment, I mean, that is hard too, right?

Because for some people they make the mistake once they learn the lesson and then they do not make it again, lesson learned, and they move on. For some people it takes two times and then they learned it and they moved on. For some people it might take longer. And is that okay?

Is it okay that it takes three or four times for them? I don't know. I don't know. That is part of the balance. It is part of all those details and circumstances and for you to make that call, which isn't always very clear, it's really hard.

The other side of being open and welcoming to mistakes is that welcoming risk, of taking risk and trying things and being open to big chances and big decisions depending on your field and line of work. In a lot of cases, that's where great things happen. By taking risks and in many cases taking big risks, there is often big, a big probability that there will be a big mistake. There will be a big quote unquote messing up.

So, what is your comfort, your risk averseness? Your risk averseability? Risk averseness, I think it is, to taking chances to trying new things for swinging for the fences, so to speak. What is your willingness to try big things, knowing that there is a big possibility that they're not going to work, but if they do work, they're going to have a really big impact?

You are setting the tone for your team. What is the message you are sending? If you are sending a message that mistakes are never okay, then is that a standard that is realistic for the people that you are able to get on your team? In most cases, no. In most cases, that is not possible.

Another consequence of that expectation is you have people who then are not comfortable sharing their mistakes because they're not acceptable.
And so, you get a lot of covering up and lack of accountability because the messaging is

that mistakes are not okay.

This is important to think about as the leader of a team. What is your attitude? What is your approach? What is your messaging? What is your response to mistakes and messing up? How is that done verbally? How are you expressing that to your team? How is that done through your actions and your responses when your team messes up? How are you modeling that? What are you doing when you make mistakes, and you mess up? How are you modeling for your team the way you want them to do it?

There are a lot of pieces when mistakes happen. The first one is accountability.

You want people to own up when they make a mistake and be able to, to take ownership of that. Are you doing that? Are you taking ownership when you are making your mistakes and therefore modeling for your team to do the same? There is a balance.

You had said in your letter that you want him to know, let me get the wording right. "I also need him to know how badly he messed up."

Why? What is behind that?

First, you have told us that this is your best employee. Chances are he knows how badly he messed up. Therefore, he already feels, I would imagine pretty terrible about it. My question to you here is what benefit is there to piling onto that?

Yet another balance of accountability and blame / guilt?

Yes, he needs to take accountability and own it, but what role does blame and guilt play? What does that help? Who does that serve? How does that help the situation?

I recently had very recently this trip, I just took a disaster of a car situation. I got what I thought was a simple, flat, annoying in its own right, that just every step of the way went from bad to worse. One flat was actually two flats. And then instead of getting two tires, I ended up needing four tires. And then when they were putting the four tires on, they found all this other stuff and the mechanic had to get the parts. So, I had to leave the car, but I had a flight back at, or I needed to drive back, but I couldn't. So, I had to get a flight, and then I had a conference coming up, so I had to reroute that, and it was just one thing after another.

My parents kept saying, well, what did you hit? And I kept saying, I don't know. I hit something in the road, I don't know what I hit. And it does not matter at this point.

Like it does not matter. I hit something and my car needs work. I have to figure this out. How do I get it towed? How do I get my tires? How do I get back to Maryland? How do I do this? How do I figure this out?

When it comes to mistakes and messing up, like everything else we deal with, how we approach it depends on the circumstances. In the case of my car, it was a done deal. I hit

something. There was nothing to investigate. I hit something. I don't know what I hit in the road. There was something I hit in the road and now my car needed to be fixed.

Sometimes in our work, something happens and it is never going to happen again. We cannot explain it. We don't know what it is, and our energy really needs to be on fixing it. How do we, we have this issue, we have this problem. All our energy must be on fixing it. We are here, we do not know how we got here. There is probably no way to figure it out. Let's focus our energy on the solution. In other cases, it will be important to figure out how it happened, particularly if it is something that is likely to come up again, so that you have the opportunity to get ahead of it next time to say,
Okay, next time this should happen how do we do it differently? What did we learn this time around so that when this comes up again, we are better prepared, we can be more proactive, so we don't have to do the cleanup on the back end.

Really thinking about is there a way to figure out why and how and who, if not, then stop wasting your time there. Just get to the solution. If it matters, the why and how and who. There is a time and a place to figure that out. But even in that situation, in many cases, the first step is fixing it, is figuring out how to fix the issue, what is most pressing.

Now, what happens a lot with mistakes is we need to fix the result of that mistake, that consequence, that impact in the case of this situation, the big negative impact that we need to start there. Let's fix whatever that is. And then once that crisis, once that thing is under control, then let's go back and let's reflect and figure out what went wrong instead of starting there when the crisis is still going on and nobody's doing anything to fix it, because they're so focused on why and who and how while the issue is still brewing, right? So, figuring out that, but in most cases, making sure they know how badly they messed up is not fixing anything. In this case, when it is your best employee, which makes me believe they probably don't mess up that much, and you're going to pile it on and pile it on and pile it on, that's a really quick way to get your best employee to walk out the door.

I spent a lot of my career inside a classroom and then transitioned into out of classrooms, still working with youth. In lots of program environments where you are standing in front of a bunch of kids and you are trying to teach them and engage them and, and learning and fun activities. For most of us who do this as a living, you know when things go well, and you know when they do not. We get observed a lot by funders and principals and things. Very often when you know it did not go well and someone is observing you and you sit down and then they tell you it didn't go well, what is that helping? Why do we need to know how badly we messed up? Or why do we need you to tell us how badly we messed up when we already know in a lot of cases?

I really encourage you to think about this statement and instead focus on do they understand the impact? It sounds like they do. If it is a case where they do not understand why it's a big deal, why it matters, yeah, sure, make sure they know well because this thing happened. Here is the consequence of that, here is the result of that. It is a big deal. So, they appreciate what the result of it is. Sure, that is an important context, but to make them feel bad and guilty for it, that does not fix your problem. That

does not make it better.

Be very careful here about wanting to make sure they feel really bad that they did it. That is not what accountability is about.

The second piece of this, you do call them your favorite employee with a, please do not tell anyone. My guess is for a lot of your staff, they probably know that, or they have some level of understanding that that is true. As human beings, it is hard to hide those things. We do gravitate naturally to some people more than others. That is how human relationships work.

The best we can do with this is be aware of staff that we do naturally gravitate toward and staff that we gravitate away from staff that we don't really like very much and still do our best to build those professional relationships, make sure that we are not treating them any differently in terms of opportunities that we are giving to them and how we're evaluating them and who we're chit-chatting with before and after meetings, who we might be taking to lunch, these sorts of things.

It can be hard to hide completely who we like and who we do not or who we might like a little bit better or even a lot better. My guess is we have that emotional intelligence to have a sense of, oh, my boss really likes this person or does not really like this person. It can be hard to hide that, but through your actions, you need to not let your actions reflect that, that because you like this person, you're giving them preferential treatment or you're letting things slide for one person that you don't let slide for another person, for example.

Make sure you are being really conscious in terms of how you're building relationships with people and, who gets your time, who gets your lunch invitation, who gets an invitation to a conference, who, who you are investing in both socially at work and professionally and giving those opportunities to.

The last piece of that yet, another balancing example is that balance between transparency and confidentiality. This is a tricky one when it comes to matters of personnel. You mentioned that because of this favorite and you also I imagine suspect, your staff has a feeling that this person is your favorite. You do not want them to think you are letting it slide. I am going to set that aside for a minute and I will come back to it. In a broader sense, the balance between transparency and confidentiality shows up a lot, perhaps none so prominently as when it comes to personnel issues.

When a staff messes up in a way that does require some documentation, does require an HR loop in or conversation or even some level of interference from another part of the organization. There are ethical considerations in some cases, legal considerations where you have to honor confidentiality when staff are receiving perhaps accommodations for documented disabilities that they have that might appear to be preferential treatment or they're getting something or the expectations are different or the working hours or whatever is different than what another staff is getting that they, you might hear some comments or complaints from staff. There is a confidentiality expectation on your part.

This can be really tricky.

You need to be very conscious of what you say. There are moments throughout your leadership where it is good and important and helpful to remind staff that there are moments where you are able to be transparent. It is really open and you are as transparent as you can be. There are other moments, particularly when it comes to their unique employment situation where ethically, legally, and morally, you are bound by confidentiality, and you afford them those things as you would any other person on the staff. They are not things that you are able to discuss. Sometimes that is all there is to it.

In this case, it does not sound like there is any, there would be any legality involved. If you were to say to staff, I know he messed up, I am handling it. I do not think that is necessarily a legal issue, but it could be a little ethically weird for you to be talking about your team and singling out how you're handling a particular staff's mess up.

That does not mean you cannot talk about it at all, particularly if as it sounds, this is something that impacted the whole team, there is an opportunity here to have a conversation about it. As a team, there is an opportunity for this person to take ownership and accountability with the team.

There is an opportunity to troubleshoot and problem solve and critical think through the solution as a team. There is an opportunity to discuss how to prevent this from happening again. As a team, there is an opportunity to model taking accountability, to have this conversation about mistakes and what to do if you make a mistake and what is the role of mistakes in learning and these bigger things we have been talking about today.

It does not mean you just pretend nothing happened.

People know something happened, and it sounds like more than just knowing they were impacted by what happened. You do not want to take the responsibility of confidentiality to a place where you just pretend nothing happened at all. That is not beneficial either. As a skilled leader, you can use this as an opportunity to say this thing happened.

Your best employee can take it as an opportunity to take accountability for it. And as a team, talk through some of those bigger issues.

All these things we have talked about are true for you too. When your mistakes come up and they will again and again and again and again.

How are you showing accountability and taking responsibility for your mistakes? How are you focusing on fixing first the results and the impact, getting that problem solved first and foremost, and then going back and reflecting and figuring out what happened and how to prevent it from perhaps happening again? How can you use it with your team protecting again, what needs to be protected in terms of confidentiality, but using

it as a team to be open and have a discussion as a team about what happened, what's going on, what's the plan going forward, and how you can support one another through it the next time?

I hope that helps.

I hope that gives you some ideas about how to approach this situation with the staff, with your team going forward and some ideas about how to approach this as mistakes pop up the next time.

I have no doubt the circumstances will be different so then the response is necessarily different. There is always a little adjusting depending on the details. I hope these things to consider are things you continue to consider with each mistake as they arise.

I also hope as you have some time to think about what we talked about, that you share your thoughts in the forum as well.

If you would like your trouble shot on our next session or an upcoming session of troubleshooting, just send us an email through the contact form in Supervisors Circle and we will be happy to get you on the schedule.

Thank you so much for your time and attention and for investing so much into becoming the best supervisor that you can be.

We'll see you next time!