

*An insightful British comedian explains why managers at all stages of their careers should embrace subordinates who make lots of little goofs.*

# No more mistakes and you're through!

Sixteen years ago Britain's satirical comic and self-described "off-the-wall weirdo," John Cleese of Monty Python fame, decided to make training films for corporations. "I was after a fast buck," Cleese, now 48, explains, "But I made a disastrous miscalculation. I got interested." So interested that Video Arts, the London-based company founded by Cleese and two British TV producers, grossed \$14.5 million in 1987 and has produced more than 80 training films

dry, often surreal wit to nuke serious, commonsensical points stick. ForBES sat in on a speech, "The importance of Mistakes," that Cleese recently delivered to a training and personnel conference in New York. The material was so relevant to managers at all levels of their careers that we have reprinted, with Cleese's permission, excerpts below. (Video Arts' Northbrook, Ill. office will soon market a tape of the entire performance, that use at \$95.)—Dyan Machan

'It is between five o'clock in the morning and midnight.' Right? You can't argue with that. No chance of error there. Or I could tell you that it is 23 minutes of 2, when it is in fact 24 minutes of 2. Which of those is more useful to you? The true one or the mistake?

"It's self-evident that if we can't take the risk of saying or doing something wrong, our creativity goes right out the window. Because the essence of creativity is not the possession of some special talent, it is much more the ability to 'play.' MacKinnon's research at Berkeley in the 1960s and 1970s on professionals rated by their colleagues as highly creative' showed they were no different in intelligence from their less creative colleagues—but that they took longer to study problems and played with them' more. Highly creative people know better how to get themselves into a mode where they are able to respond more spontaneously to their intuitions, to explore out of pure curiosity, to follow little impulses with interest without immediately imposing critical thought.

"For a group to function more creatively, people must lose their inhibitions. They must gain the confidence to contribute spontaneously to what's happening, and the inhibition arises because of the fear of looking foolish. Yes, it's nothing more than the fear of making mistakes. While people are held back by this fear, while they go over each thought they had six times before expressing it in case someone will think it's 'wrong/ nothing useful can happen creatively.

"Now, to come to the second half of my argument, a positive attitude toward mistakes will allow them to be corrected rapidly when they occur.

"In organizations where mistakes are not allowed, you get two types of counterproductive behavior. First, since mistakes are 'bad if they're committed by people at the top the feedback arising from those mistakes has to be ignored or selectively reinterpreted, in order that those top people can pretend that no mistake has been made. So it doesn't get fixed. Second, if they're committed by people lower down in the organization, mistakes get concealed.

"Taking concealment first, Peter Parker, the very successful former head of British Rail, said recently, 'The hardest thing in management is the mistake concealer. If someone walks into my office saying, 'I

CLEESE "[I want to suggest to you that unless we have a tolerant attitude toward mistakes—I might almost say a positive attitude toward them—we shall be behaving irrationally, unscientifically and unsuccessfully

"Of course, if you now say to me, 'Look here, you weird limey, are you seriously advocating relaunching the Edsel I will reply, 'No, Mac There are mistakes and mistakes.' There are true copper-bottomed mistakes like wearing a black bra under a white blouse, or, to take a more masculine example, starting a land war in Asia. I'm talking about mistakes that at the time they were committed did have a chance.

"Let's first concentrate on taking the risk of making a mistake. Has it occurred to you that if you don't take this risk, you can't do or say any thing useful?

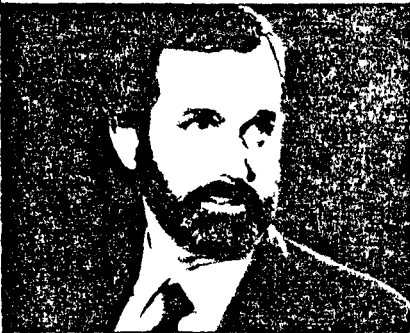
"For example, if you ask me now screwed up," I say, "One on in.," "What is the tune?" I could give you the following guaranteed-true answer, the taboo is not on making

ing mistakes,



John Cleese in a training film  
"The essence of creativity."

John Marwood Cleesa



Born: Oct. 27, 1939 in Weston-super-Mare, England.

1972-present: Cofounded London's Video Arts Ltd., world's largest producer of training films (sales, \$14.5 million).

Films: *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1974), *The Meaning of Life* (1982), *A Fish Called Wanda* (scheduled for release by MGM in November 1988).

Author (with psychiatrist Robin Skynner) *Life and How to Survive Them* (1983). Upcoming sequel, *Life and How to Survive II*.

Degrees in law from Cambridge University (M.A. 1963)

1958-60: teacher (English, history, geography) at St. Peter's preparatory school.

1965: reporter, Newsweek (lasted two weeks).

Career start: While at Cambridge, Cleesa joined the Cambridge Footlights, its amateur acting group, which led to appearances in several BBC comedy shows, including the series *The Frost Report* (1966). Later came *Monty Python's Flying Circus* (1969), which spawned a series of stage shows, books, records and films.

Single, after two years has two daughters, Cynthia and Camilla.

Favorite Book: *Ethel the Aardvark Goes Quantity Surveying*.

Role model: Caligula.

Admires most: Himself.

Favorite pastime: Doing interviews for highly important magazines.

Has done commercials for Sony Compaq Computer, Kroenbourg beer. Asks and gets \$1 million for TV ad appearance.

"The sillier the activity, the more they seem to pay."

it's on concealing them But in a m i s - 'hunches' and then look around for takc denying culture, they are con- examples to fit in with their ideas. cealed and therefore not corrected And that, therefore, in the pursuit of Worse, this have to be told scientific truth, when they have

"This is the essence of a particular worked out their hypothesis, they form of comedy that has traditionally should test it, not with tests to prove been popular in the force in it right, but with tests specifically America, you have a similar form of designed to prove it wrong. In Pop-entertainment, usually callrd Some- per's words, falsifiable. All of which thing Gate, where enure departments shows that current philosophical and of government officials pass their scientific thought has arrived at the working days trying to startling realization that we lean conceal one key mistake This type of only from our mistakes.

comedy is less succsssfu] in Britian, "Now we reach the real problem. If simply because the government there all the evidence from business, sci- has much greater power to suppress ence and psychology suggests that the the best tokcs m the name of national best results are obtained by risking security mistakes, and by having a positive

"Next, let's see what happens if attitude toward them when they oc the people at the top of organizations cur, why are we all so nervous about are determined to show they are in making them

fallible Peter Drucker has a nice "I'm sure that the answer is quite example of ignored feedback when simply that we have all have these ridicu- he refers to a prout he calls lous things called egos Once you've

investment managerial ego This got an ego, you want to be nght. I've is a product that the manager be noticed this even in my 3-year-old lieved in, nay, fought for and which daughter If I ask her a question and has been repackaged, its salesmen she doesn't know the answer, she retrained, tts advert stng changed doesn't want to guess in case she and then the agency subsequently makes a mistake. She changes the sacked, which was then relaunched subject, even though I tell her it as a seasonal product-but which doesn't matter

has never actually sold The manager "How can we solve this problem? has always reinterpreted the feed- You may be able to persuade yourself and others that admitting small mis- back from the marketplace so as to takes nght away protects your ego more efficiently than running the nsk

"If the corporate ego ts so huge and of making a far greater and more pam- unrealistic that failures have to he ful mistake later

repackaged as successes, then disaster "For example, I chose to show my latest film here m New York in a the heads of organizations cannot rough form, and actually encouraged bear to receive feedback that may sug- people to damage my ego by criticiz-

gest that mistakes have been made ing it, so that I can eliminate some of the mistakes and improve it. I feel increasingly be surrounded by yes- safer doing this than sheltering my-

men and will be increasingly cut off self from adverse criticism now only from the feedback they need to stay to run the nsk of discovering m a few on course. (I still treasure, incidental- months' time that it's Britain's an- ly, Sam Goldwyn's memo 'I don't swer to Heaven's Gate People say no-

body likes criticism. True, but I feel tion I want people to speak their safer getting the pain up front. minds - even if it does cost them their "Finally, the most effective way

that we can create an atmosphere of ds,") tolerance and positiveness toward

"So once the corporate ethos is that the corporation cannot have made a mistakes is, of course, to model it. In mistake, then it's going to go further the early stages of a discussion, say and further off course. The CEO be- that you don't know the solution,

comes a bit like a pilot in an aircraft throw up a couple of ideas that, after who says to the altimeter, 'What's the examination, you casually discard height?' and hears the altimeter reply, saying, 'Okay, I don't think that was very useful. 'Better still, discuss a cou-

"What would you like it to be?" ple of recent mistakes, that you've

"The leading philosopher of sci- made and learned from. ence of this century, Karl Popper, says that scientists do not sit around "Any ego-loss suffered is more than dispassionately observing clusters of compensated for in my experience by phenomena and then come up with the ego-gam in showing you've the rational explanations of them He kind of guy who's big enough to admit suggests that scientists really get when he's wrong."