

The Mistake of all Mistakes!

Mistakes happen and sometimes with more devastating consequences than we care to admit. On the 23rd April 1985 after 2 years of secretive market testing and research (but not sufficient) under the code name Project Kansas, New Coke was launched. The idea for New Coke was partly driven by Pepsi's market share advances. On 10th July following mounting adverse reaction the product was withdrawn. New Coke is still pointed to as one of the great marketing flops of the last century. The gap between hope and reality can be truly humiliating.

The Institute of Medicine's (IOM) (United States) seminal study of preventable medical errors in 2006 estimated as many as 98,000 people die every year at a cost of \$29 billion. If the Centers for Disease Control were to include "preventable medical errors" as a category in their list of causes of death, these findings would make "preventable medical errors" the sixth leading cause of death in America.

On September 4 1957, the Edsel was introduced amidst considerable publicity and the promise of an all-new Ford car. It was Ford's attempt to compete more effectively with General Motors. Seldom was so much expected, and so little delivered. On November 19, 1959 just two years after launching the new model, its termination was announced. The cost was some US\$350 to US\$400 million (over US\$2.5billion at 2009 values). So spectacular was its failure that "to Edsel" is now a term synonymous with failure in business.

Our readers are unlikely to be party to mistakes of this magnitude, but mistakes by leaders ripple further than they imagine, both in their severity and their extent. That leaders are human and err is without question. The issue is what kind of errors do they make, and worse still, repeat? Moreover how do they recover from them?

Errors are as diverse as culture and creed, but those that seem to experience most notoriety across all language and social groups concern an unwillingness to be teachable, poor communication skills, avoiding conflicts, failing to resist fear and greed, putting paper before people, and without doubt the worst of all, refusing to see or admit they might be wrong.

Well has it been said that there are none so blind as those who will not see. Refusing to see (in the case of an individual who alone bears the consequences for his or her own stubbornness) is foolishness. It borders on rank stupidity and irresponsibility when one is accountable for others who suffer from such willful blindness. The book of Proverbs talks of the safety that there is in the multitude of many counselors. This carries the notion of being willing to hear and to adjust direction, even strategy as a consequence of the input from others. Whilst all leaders struggle with their different frailties or inadequacies, the one that seems to be the least forgiven concerns disdain for consultation, feedback and input from others. The refusal to accept feedback is compounded by an equal stubbornness to accept one is wrong. The divide between brilliance and folly is often no more than listening to the counsel and input of others.

Unless we are willing to learn from others, what grounds do we have to share our own expertise? The pain and disgrace of two US Presidents, one as a consequence of Watergate and the other because of Monica, was their refusal to own up and admit their error. To paraphrase Steven Covey it is more important to be taught than to try and teach others.

Until next time "Yebo"

