

# Stories about **LEADERSHIP**

## A STORY ABOUT WILLINGNESS TO LEARN



The mistake is small enough to be overlooked, and big enough to cost us an entire day.

At first, I see it as just a glitch in the process. Station 4 is running slowly, materials are incorrectly sorted, and one pallet has been handled twice. Upon closer inspection, it becomes clear: the new material preparation checklist wasn't used during the early shift. Three hours later, we have the first parts with the wrong alloy.

No drama, no accident. But a chain of small inaccuracies that add up. In the end, there are two pallets of scrap, a dry entry in the quality log – and that silent blame game that always arises in teams when something goes wrong.

When I arrived at the hall around 10 a.m., I immediately felt the tension. You couldn't see it, but it hung in the air like dust.

Marco stands at station 4, arms crossed, staring hard. Tobias is sorting materials. Miriam speaks quietly to a new colleague who is far too quiet. I catch fragments of sentences.

"...it was right there." "...we should have known." "...always the same thing."

I know that feeling. When mistakes happen, teams tend to go in two directions: either they become more honest – or they become more cautious. More cautious means: saying less, covering their bases more, learning less.

I'll go to Tobias first. "What happened?"

He glances up briefly, puts the scanner away. "The new checklist wasn't included. We provided the old one. I didn't check it either."

"Who didn't use the checklist?" I ask.

He flinches. "I don't know. Just anyone."

"Just some random person" is the most dangerous phrase in a culture of blame. It spreads misinformation instead of taking responsibility.

I see the new colleague. Her name is Jana, she's been here for two weeks, quiet, careful, still finding her feet. Her gaze flickers back and forth between me and Tobias, as if she has to decide whether to hide or say what she knows.

I exhale. If I ask about blame now, nobody will learn.

If I don't ask questions, nobody learns.

Months ago, during a coaching session with the management team, the coach said something that confused me at the time because it seemed so counterintuitive: "A good culture of learning from mistakes is not about being happy about mistakes. It is about being happy about learning."

Learning-friendly. Not: "It's not that bad." But: "What can we learn from this?"

I'm calling a quick meeting to clarify things. Ten minutes, right here in the hall. Not in the office. Not later. If you let mistakes go unaddressed for too long, rumors spread faster than facts are learned.

"Hold on a second," I say. "Let's sort this out together."

People start arriving, not everyone, but those who are affected. Marco stands with his arms folded, Tobias seems tense, Jana looks as if she wants to hide in her work boots.

"We made a mistake today," I begin calmly. "Two pallets were scrapped due to incorrect material provision. That's annoying. And now I want to understand how it happened – not to shame anyone, but to prevent it in the future."

Marco snorts softly. "That's what happens when you constantly introduce new rules and nobody is properly trained."

"That's a valid point," I say. "We'll look at the training in a moment. First of all: How exactly did the early morning deployment go?"

Tobias seems uncertain. "We sorted as usual. The checklist wasn't there. I didn't notice."

I nod. "Okay. Why wasn't she lying there?"

Silence. Eyes wander.

I look at Jana. "Jana, you were scheduled for this morning. What did you experience?"

She was startled for a moment. "I... I thought the list was just a suggestion. I took the box like Tobias. I didn't mean to disturb anyone."

There it is. The error has a name – not as blame, but as a diagnosis. And it has something to do with onboarding and team dynamics, not just with equipment.

I nod slowly. "Thank you for saying that. That was brave."

Marco wants to say something, but I briefly hold up my hand. "Jana, you're new. It's our job to..."

To make things clear to you. If rules are not clear, that's a leadership problem and a team problem – not just yours."

I see Tobias' face relax. Not because he's out, but because the spiral of guilt has stopped.

"Okay," I say. "We'll now look at three questions:

**What was the cause?**

**What was the leverage?**

**What can we change immediately?**

We'll go through it.

**Causes:**

- The checklist was distributed, but not visibly displayed at the material storage area.
- The new colleague was unsure about the validity of the rule.
- The early shift was understaffed and focused on routine tasks.

**Leverage:**

- Visibility of the checklist.
- A clear statement of what constitutes the "new standard".
- Buddy for newcomers during the first four weeks.

**Immediate measures:**

1. Large laminated checklist located directly at the material station.
2. A short standard announcement during shift changes: "This is binding from today."
3. Jana will be paired with Miriam as her buddy for the next two weeks.
4. I'm doing a 15-minute refresher training session for both shifts tomorrow.

"What do we need from you?" asks Marco, who still seems a bit tense.

"That you don't use routine as a shield," I say honestly. "If we change standards, we have to all wear them. And if someone is unsure, the team needs to notice before we have rejects."

He looks at me, blinks. "Okay," he says then, more quietly. "Understood."

After the round, I briefly step aside with Jana. "How was today for you?"

She looks at her hands. "I was afraid everyone would be angry."

"It's normal to be angry," I say. "But fear in here shouldn't become normal. If you're unsure, ask. That's not a sign of weakness."

She nods. "Okay."

The next morning, I hang up the laminated checklists myself. Not because it's my job, but because it sends a signal: We are visibly learning here.

During shift handover, I clearly state: "Yesterday's mistake was our shared learning point. Starting today, we'll change things like this." No drama. No irony. Just direction.

Two days later, the rate is stable. We haven't just fixed the mistake, we've turned it into a learning experience. And I realize: that's actually the core of leadership – not avoiding mistakes, but keeping the organization capable of learning.



# Takeaway inspiration

## Willingness to learn

A willingness to learn and a culture that embraces mistakes mean treating errors as learning opportunities rather than as sources of blame. Leadership creates a space where the root causes of errors are openly identified and immediately translated into improvements.

When a mistake happens, ask three questions as a team: What happened? Why did it happen? What specific changes will we make starting today? And stop any cycle of blame early, before it prevents learning.

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS ABOUT WILLINGNESS TO LEARN

1. Where do we react to mistakes by looking for blame instead of the cause?
2. Which standards are not clear enough for newcomers?
3. What mistake can we visibly translate into learning this week?



Feel free to contact me anytime::

Victoria Beckers

E-Mail: [beckers@energie-durch-entwicklung.com](mailto:beckers@energie-durch-entwicklung.com)

phone: +49 172 90 69 280

Energie durch Entwicklung GmbH

Hufeisen 13 | D-41352 Korschenbroich

[www.energie-durch-entwicklung.com](http://www.energie-durch-entwicklung.com)