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Transforming Breakdowns in the Workplace

When we embrace a workplace breakdown as an opportunity for personal growth, others will follow our lead—new outcomes will emerge.

During any given day in the life of a company, breakdowns are common and numerous—almost expected. Breakdowns are things that we do not expect or intend to occur and can range from misunderstandings among people to technology problems, late shipments, missed meetings, cancelled travel plans, and so on. Typical reactions to breakdowns are frustration, disappointment, embarrassment, anger and blame, among others. Emotions evoked by a breakdown event are escalated when we are ill-equipped or unwilling to unravel them in order to discover new understandings of them and thus a new way forward.

Those willing to step outside of typical reactions to breakdowns, and instead embrace them as opportunities for personal growth, can affect meaningful change. Indeed, it may be that the crucible of a breakdown may provide the best ingredients for demonstrating positive cultural change. That is, a new response shows up most clearly when in high contrast to the status quo. New responses tell us that things *really are* changing.

Visible opportunities for leadership, from any employee, can emerge from a breakdown; however, this only occurs when those involved desire to find a new way forward and hold the intention to respond thoughtfully. Anyone in an organization can choose to demonstrate new, more effective ways of responding to difficult situations and enlist others to follow their lead.





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Dealing with a Breakdown

The following tips can help navigate a breakdown:

- Identify and acknowledge the situation to yourself.
- Get clear about your feelings around the event—who or what is upsetting you?
- Consider that the real source of your upset may be your expectations, values or commitments; or perhaps you are upset because you have failed to communicate about the breakdown.
- Turn your attention to dealing positively with the breakdown and preventing it from causing harm to others or your relationships.
- Create a more generous, useful and less-upsetting interpretation of the event and choose to embrace it.
- Remember that being effective is more important than being right at the expense of making others wrong.
- Choose to be extraordinary in the workplace—a leader—and to use the situation for positive change.
- Once you are holding the breakdown from a new perspective, trust that a useful way forward will emerge and then choose your words and actions carefully before responding.

Transforming workplace breakdowns into culture-building opportunities requires strong intention to do so. Whether it is our official role to lead an organization, or we are drawn to “lead from the ranks”, we can choose to address workplace breakdowns as opportunities for positive change by speaking more openly about issues, listening deliberately and responding in new ways.

By willingly walking into versus away from breakdowns, we can—one person at a time—help bond a culture through difficult situations and create a workforce that responds more effectively to future unexpected events.

About JMJ

JMJ Associates is a global consulting firm specializing in enterprise transformation. If your company seeks to create breakthrough performance, eliminate workplace injury, form more effective teams, enhance leadership, or build a sustainable future while consistently reaching targets, JMJ is prepared to help. We serve clients from offices in Austin, Doha, Durban, London, Perth and Singapore.

