



Make a mistake!

MICHAEL JORDAN IS A PRETTY IMPRESSIVE GUY. Ignore his extraordinary athleticism and basketball prowess. Forget the outrageous sum of money he earns for endorsements. Put aside his great personality and strikingly handsome features. What impresses me most about the guy is his willingness to fail. When the game

was on the line, he wanted the ball—even though he made just a bit more than 50% of his shots. In last year's championship series, Michael Jordan missed 355 shots—more than all but one other player on his team even attempted. Several years ago, he “retired” from a championship basketball team to try his hand at baseball. Objectively, you might say that Jordan's baseball career was more of a public-relations stunt and that he generated more hype than hits. And, despite his enjoyment of golf and frequent forays onto the links, he is, by all accounts, an average golfer who hits more bad shots than good.

Babe Ruth hit 714 home runs; he also struck out more than 1300 times. Reggie Jackson earned the nickname “Mr October” for his ability to deliver home runs at critical moments in important games; yet, in addition to hitting 563 career home runs, Reggie struck out more than 2500 times. Ted Williams was arguably the best hitter in baseball history, but even in his best year, he failed six times in every 10 at-bats. And can you imagine playing a more humiliating position than an ice-hockey goalie? Every time you let in a goal, a red light flashes, and a loud siren sounds.

So, why are we so afraid of making mistakes? I bet I can guess. We expect the business world to be far

less forgiving than the sports world. We think we're not allowed to make mistakes. We think, “They don't pay me to mess up.” Although some companies may be far less tolerant of employee mis-

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takes than others, the high-tech world should be among the most forgiving.

Employers generally expect assembly-line workers or workers doing routine tasks to be consistent and not make mistakes. In my younger days, I delivered *The New York Times*. Making a mistake, such as delivering the paper to the wrong house, tossing the paper onto the roof, or entirely missing the house, was not a good thing, and, if it happened too often, it could get you fired.

As an engineer, you often have

to think creatively about the problems you are trying to solve, the business you are in, and the processes you use. Conventional thinking is the safe approach, but it is the same approach your competitors are using, and it leads to conventional results. Michael Jordan became a basketball superstar because he didn't always take the predictable jump shot. Jordan often improvised his shots based on the game situation. He thought about who was guarding him and where they were positioned, how far he was from the basket, and what obstacles were between him and the basket. His mind would process all of this information, and

he would create his shot. Though your efforts generally aren't a real-time process, they are very similar to Jordan's.

If every one of Michael Jordan's shots had been the same, it wouldn't have taken long for opponents to figure out how to defend against him, and he would have been significantly less effective. Jordan's fearless, innovative style should inspire you to take the perspective, “if you're not making mistakes, you're not trying hard enough.”

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