

# FORTUNE

ASK ANNIE

## I Want to Talk to a Human Being. Is It Too Much to Ask?

FORTUNE

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By Anne Fisher

**Dear Annie:** I run a small (22-person) unit of a medium-sized company. Earlier this year we got a new senior-management team that wants to foster creativity and innovation, in part by having us managers "encourage risk taking." So I've been trying to persuade my staff to go ahead and take a leap without worrying too much about failing. But it's so contrary to the play-it-safe, by-the-book culture we've had until now, I don't think the message has much of a chance to get through. Any ideas on how to prove we mean it?

-- *Roll the Dice*

**Dear Dice:** Your group is of such a manageable size that you might want to try an approach that executive-development coach **Jeffrey Patnaude** (<http://www.patnaude.com/>) invented some years ago: failure parties. At the end of each workweek, you lay in a modest supply of champagne and invite your whole crew to convene at, say, five on Friday. Go around the room and have each person recount his or her biggest mistake of the week and what he or she learned from it. "The mistakes might range from not returning an important phone call on time to screwing up the paperwork on a major order, but they should all be genuine failures that people have the courage to share," says Patnaude. "There's usually a lot of toasting, laughter, and shouts of 'hear, hear'-but everyone gets to learn from everyone else's errors, and you get some great suggestions for continuous improvement. It also destigmatizes failure-and it's fun." In a culture that has been risk-averse until now, you may have to start the ball rolling by going first.

One of Patnaude's biggest clients is Cisco Systems, where CEO John Chambers has been known to pick someone out of the crowd at a 400-manager meeting and ask, "What do you think my biggest mistake has been lately?" The brave soul who answers honestly gets to hear, "You're right, and thank you. Now, here's what I learned from that bad decision ..."

Is top management at your company taking any similar approach? If not, you shouldn't expect miracles. No one in the middle is going to believe it's okay to fail if the people at the top keep pretending to be infallible.