THE MISTAKE THAT MADE MY CAREER

Think being successful means never screwing up? No way! As these powerhouse women can tell you, sometimes it’s the missteps that matter most.

BY LAURA BROUNSTEIN

MESSING UP FACTS
Sheryl Sandberg
COO, Facebook

“My first job was as a research assistant to Larry Summers, then-chief economist at the World Bank. He was giving a speech on education, and I inserted the figures for illiteracy rates in each country. I reported that South Korea had double-digit illiteracy, which turned out to be way too high. In fact, one of the government’s top priorities for a decade had been lowering that figure. When the government of South Korea lodged a formal complaint, I learned to figure out which figures really matter—and triple-check!”

ZINGING A COLLEAGUE
Dana Perino
FOX News, cohost of The Five and former White House Press Secretary

“During one packed White House press briefing, the entire front row of reporters asked me variations of the same question. We exhausted the topic, and I moved on. Then a reporter in the second row repeated the same question! So I embarrassed her by saying, in a sharp tone, that the question had been ‘asked and answered.’ As soon as I said it, I was disappointed in myself. The easiest answer is the sarcastic and mean answer…and it is also the cheapest way out of a tough question. I’m still bothered by my behavior, and I think that’s good because it reminds me to be kind. When I’m not, I know I’ll only waste time feeling bad about what I did, time I could use to achieve something. It doesn’t pay to be a snob.”

LETTING FEAR WIN
Meg Cabot
Author of The Princess Diaries and The Bride Wore Size 12

“I was so afraid of being criticized that I didn’t study writing in college. On the morning I was supposed to graduate, I got a call from my adviser, who said, ‘You never took an English class, Meg. You can’t graduate.’ I was mortified, and I ended up having to get my degree through a correspondence course. Then when I was 26, my dad died. I realized that having someone you love die is the worst thing that can happen—why had I been so freaked out about someone saying something bad about my writing? Who cares? The day I got home from my dad’s funeral, I started sending out my stories and enrolled in some writing workshops. The biggest mistake is never to try, because then where would you be?”

SKIPPING A STEP
Jessica Alba
Actress and founder, The Honest Company

“I knew I wanted to create a brand with safe, affordable household and wellness products that both worked and were beautiful. I pitched the concept to potential partners and was surprised when they suggested I do a fashion or perfume line instead. People were like, ‘What does she know?’ I almost abandoned my idea. Then I realized I needed to find the hard facts and data to back it up. I’m grateful for the resistance—it forced me to do my homework.”