

Mistakes and Errors

Mistakes and errors are part and parcel of being a musician but it's tricky to know the right response to have when things don't go quite as we'd expected. This is all about how to deal with these things in the context of three different situations: practising at home, Thursday band practices, and Sunday services. For the sake of this topic I'm going to make a distinction between a mistake and an error. This doesn't stem from any officially recognised musical definition, but because we need a quick and easy way to differentiate between genuine accidents and things that we should have prepared for a little better.

We're going to define a **mistake** as something that's just an accident. This is something that might inadvertently happen; dropping a drum stick, accidentally coming in a bit early on a verse, playing a wrong note or playing a wrong chord when we usually get it bang on.

We're going to define an **error** as something that you should have sorted before-hand; like using a guitar lead that you know crackles, not knowing how a song goes because you've not spent enough time learning it, not listening to others on stage, snapping a string when you know your strings needed replacing beforehand, playing too loud or maybe trying to show off a bit too much.

At Home

When practicing at home, mistakes and errors kind of blend into the same thing. Something that would be a real problem on stage (such as a crackly lead) are more just annoying at home. When we really mess up it's more of an opportunity to improve rather than to get annoyed and panic over.

Mistakes at home are really good ways for us to work out what needs improving in our playing and what we need to work on more intensely. The things we need to look out for at home are not letting ourselves get too frustrated and annoyed when we can't play certain passages and to stop ourselves getting more and more wound up. If you find yourself getting really flustered, just take a break. Play something easy that you enjoy, or maybe just have a break from practicing completely and come back to the part you were struggling with when you're in a better frame of mind.

In band practice

When we're in band practice the difference between mistakes and errors starts to become more apparent. If we're learning a new tune and we're struggling to get the structure right or the arrangement is taking a while to sort out, this is often just part of being a musician, not something to get annoyed by. As long as we've listened to the track and have the chords ready then we don't need to worry if practice is going slowly. Sometimes band practice is amazing, with everyone in the zone, but other times it might take us a little longer to work things out.

If, on the other hand, it's because no one has learned the song or we've turned up without the right music or equipment then this is where we need to start being accountable. This is something that could have been prevented if we'd been properly prepared before band practice and is something we need to work on.

The trick is with working out if it's a mistake or an error is to think "Could this have been prevented if I'd been a bit more prepared?". This doesn't mean that we need to beat ourselves up if we're making mistakes through trying different things and seeing if something we worked out at home works in a band situation. Mistakes are all part and parcel of learning and working on songs as a band. Things we can brush off without letting them get us down (although we need to still work on ironing them out of course!).

The errors that we need to be accountable in band practice are things like if we're turning up unprepared or consistently late, coming with the wrong attitude, not being willing to work hard, or any other things that we could have taken steps to avoid but we didn't. The first person who is responsible for sorting out these errors is the person themselves but after that it falls to the person/people leading the team to find out why these things are happening. Remember that people often have a lot on their plate so maybe the first step is to find out why these things are happening in a softer approach. Is it the person's attitude that needs looking at? Maybe they are struggling to cope with the demands of the music or maybe they don't know how to learn a track effectively away from practice time. Maybe they are having a difficult time personally and this is affecting other areas of their life. It's a really tricky situation to sort out and usually the best course is to open a dialogue to find out why these things are happening away from the group and take each situation in a case by case matter.

On stage

This is where the biggest differences between mistakes and errors occur. I'm sure we've all been there on a Sunday when we played pretty well but we had a real clanger at one point in the service. Maybe the band messed up the intro to a song or the singer came in with the wrong lyrics or the drummer dropped a stick. I've had loads of conversations with people about how well the music went in the service only to be met with a variation of "yeah, but I really messed up that bit in...". This is something we need to work on putting properly in context. There's loads of times where the music was amazing in the service and the spirit moved in the worship time. In terms of leading the congregation through our ministry, we did our job really well but we suddenly become obsessed, not with all the good parts of the service, but the 4 bar section that we messed up that no one really noticed. We need to put our mistake in context. If the spirit moved people in the worship time, allowing them to connect in a deeper way with God, then by obsessing over the mistakes we made we're undermining what happened in the service. You need to not let it affect you and try to keep on track; feeling shame about it is not the right response. The right question is not "Why did that bit go wrong?" but "Why was that other bit so good?".

On the other hand, sometimes we gloss over errors that really are a lot more serious than we realise. If we go on stage with a guitar or lead that we know doesn't work

properly and then your guitar crackles all the way through the service, this is an error. It affects the ministry in a way that could have been avoided if we'd made the effort to get it fixed or borrowed some equipment that works. The same if something goes wrong with the structure of a song. If it's just an accident that happens once in a service, that's fine. If someone (or even the whole band) messes up an entire song because it's not been practiced properly or it isn't ready for Sunday service yet, then that again is an error that could have been avoided.

The difference between mistakes and errors is not always clear cut but the more we look out for them, the better we'll get at knowing whether it was something that needs further reflection or something we can just brush off. We need to approach worship at home, on Thursdays, and on Sundays with the right attitude and be ready to treat mistakes and errors with the right response.

Always think:

1. Was that just an accident and do I really need to obsess over it, or can I let it go?
2. Could that have been avoided if I was better prepared?
3. Did I know that could be a problem before stepping on stage?
4. How can I learn from this and be a better musician next time?
5. What could I do next time to make it better?
6. Do I need someone else to help me with this or can I fix it myself?