I am glaring down a monumental career moment: the first decade. Some of this reflection has been self-induced and some is a result of conversations I’ve had with former students and colleagues alike.

We are all aware of the overused quotes from sports legend Michael Jordan, and if you aren’t, you’re welcome:

● “I’ve failed over and over and over again in my life and that is why I succeed.”
● “I’ve missed more than 9,000 shots in my career. I’ve lost almost 300 games. 26 times, I’ve been trusted to take the game winning shot and missed. I’ve failed over and over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed.”
● “I can accept failure, everyone fails at something. But I can’t accept not trying.”

The 6-time NBA champion, 5-time MVP, 6-time Finals MVP, 10-time All-NBA First Team, NBA Rookie of the year, 2-time Olympic Gold Medal Winner, and a NCAA National Champion reminds us of the amount of times he failed during his career and reminds us of his failures with these powerful words, but when you compare the failures to the accolades, they are wildly disproportionate, and there is a reason.

Any amount of success one receives in their career comes from the grind; the days you showed up after a mistake, the days you didn’t want to do the “thing(s),” and the days when “other duties as assigned” are your only focus. The bad days, the tough feedback, the “I’m disabling my email notifications on my phone” days ... these days shape us and ultimately guide our work.

Why “a memoir” you may ask? Well, like Mike, I’ve been wrong so many times. Many of my mistakes, I was aware immediately afterward, others came in the form of feedback from students, peers, friends, supervisors, parents, alumni, the student newspaper, everyone, and anyone. I am almost certain I’ve messed up things and still have yet to realize it. I am clearly a work in progress, or as my friend Erin Fisher so eloquently states, I’m radically unfinished.

Mistakes are inevitable; we will never be perfect. Through my lack of perfectionism, I have noted a few themes. These have helped me lessen the blow back and eventually helped me learn from those little blessings in disguise:
Apologize – But Don’t Overdo It
Owning the mistake and apologizing makes a world of difference. It grounds the conversation and allows for a starting point to a new conversation or focus. As my therapist Lynn often reminds me, apologies are taught at a young age; we tend to believe someone after action. Don’t overdo an apology, let your recourse happen through your actions. It completes the storytelling aspect of an apology.

Slow Down
Many of my mistakes have come as a result of doing too many things. Being intentional with time is so important. Blocking my calendar and owning my time for proper review of items is key to limit those mistakes. If your mornings are better thinking times, block them. If it is evenings, block those. Utilize that time for the details. If you need more time in general, simply reply acknowledging your receipt of “said item(s)” and provide folks with a deadline you will respond.

Ask for Feedback
When we apologize and begin to have a different conversation, it is also valuable to ask for their feedback ... i.e. “What do you suggest I do next time to avoid X?” “How could we do better in the future for X?” As humans we often want to be heard, especially if we felt the pain from the mistake. Allowing for that space continues to reinforce your initial apology and your future actions.

Reevaluate Your Game Plan
Workflow and cadence are highly researched topics in business, if mistakes, especially similar ones continue to occur in your work, it may be time to pause and figure out a new approach to your day. At this point, I sound like a broken record, but how and where you spend your time is a direct reflection of your priorities. If we are not investing in the areas, we are making mistakes and we are not learning from them.

Take Better Care of Yourself
I have no doubt you are tired; it is all in higher education. We have many resources which go unused, annually: paid time off, mental healthcare access, mindfulness or continuing education classes, and discounts at fitness studios to name a few. Most of us are sleep deprived, under hydrated, trying to work, all while maintaining a social life and responding to texts. Balance or an attempt to balance takes effort — it’s time to get serious about our physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing.
Mistakes, without a doubt, will continue to rear their poorly timed heads. We can’t avoid them. We get better in all aspects of our life by focusing on our areas of weakness, by discipline, and by the uncomfortable. Spend time investing in yourself and your growth. I challenge all of us to spend more time learning from each other and listening to how we are growing as professionals, rather than the echo chambers we sometimes forget to leave.

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Helen’s love for fraternity/sorority life began when she joined Pi Beta Phi Fraternity for Women at Franklin College. She would go on to earn a master’s degree from the University of Colorado, Colorado Springs while in fraternity/sorority life. She now works at the North American Interfraternity Conference as a vice president for campus operations. Helen previously worked as a campus-based professional at Northeastern State University and the University of Iowa.