

Lesson not learned will cost VW



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As it drove to become the world's biggest automaker, Volkswagen forgot the lessons of one of the most painful chapters in its history.

And it will pay a price.

Back in the 1980s, some U.S. owners of VW's Audi 5000 discovered that their sleek new sedans were prone to speeding out of control, sometimes with fatal consequences.

Lawyers and the feds took note. So did the media, most famously in a November 1986 skewering by CBS' "60 Minutes." U.S. sales of the VW subsidiary brand plunged, from a then-record 74,000 in 1985 to just 12,000 six years later.

In the end, Audi was vindicated. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration concluded that drivers were stepping on the wrong pedal.

Case closed, as Audi crowed in full-page ads at the time. But while Audi may have won the technical argument, it had already lost the human one. "Told you so" does not mend fences as well as "We are so sorry."

I'm bringing this up, as you might expect, in light of VW's diesel-emissions debacle.

If the company's signature brand had once been so crippled by botched handling of a murky technical issue, how could anyone not have fathomed the damage that would be caused by bold deceit -- software rigged to make a car behave during testing while allowing it to spew as much as 40 times the legal emissions when it wasn't being monitored.

I know, VW's a big company. And Audi's home in Ingolstadt is a long way - - physically, culturally -- from parent VW's in Wolfsburg.

Plus, the 1980s were a long time ago.

Precisely.

Remember what General Motors CEO Mary Barra told employees last year after an outside investigator ripped a dysfunctional culture that allowed a defective ignition switch to unleash so much damage.

While promising to move forward, she also made it clear that she wanted the pain -- and the lessons -- to burn with every GM employee forever.

"I never want to put this behind us," Barra said.

Naive? Maybe.

But imagine if VW leaders had said something similar decades ago following the Audi crisis. And imagine those lessons being reinforced with each generation of new employees.

Over the years, VW bosses have inspired workers to resurrect the Beetle, make VW the industry's benchmark for interior design, create the cars that have lifted Audi to 71 consecutive months of U.S. sales gains, and climb -- amazingly -- to the top of world luxury sales charts.

Now the company is bracing for untold damage to everything that's been achieved.

And it was avoidable. If only the 1980s lessons of Audi had been branded on the psyche of every VW employee.