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Title: Margin for error: Making mistakes — and recovering from them

Public Relations Tactics

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Summary: As Homer Simpson would probably agree, recovering from mistakes is an important skill to master. "There are distinct steps one must take to recover from a mistake," says Wendy Kaufman, president of Balancing Life's Issues, Inc., a provider of training seminars on enhancing work/life balance.

Full Text: Did you hear about the scene in "The Simpsons Movie" when Homer Simpson, a master of mistakes, dumped an overflowing silo of pig manure into Lake Springfield and caused the entire town to be encased in a glass dome as a protective measure by the U.S. government? It was the "D'oh!" heard around the world.

While dumping manure into a lake is not usually a career-enhancing move, Homer Simpson has a talent for making and recovering from mistakes. After all, the man held 188 jobs in the first 400 episodes according to his creator, and he didn't get fired from all of them.

As Homer Simpson would probably agree, recovering from mistakes is an important skill to master. "There are distinct steps one must take to recover from a mistake," says Wendy Kaufman, president of Balancing Life's Issues, Inc., a provider of training seminars on enhancing work/life balance.

First, the person who made the mistake has to process what he or she has done. "The immediate human reaction is to say, 'I didn't do this,' which makes the mistake even worse. If you don't process the mistake, you'll never get to the next step," Kaufman says.

Kaufman was asked to coach a senior executive and his boss who had a tense relationship. She says, "Their bad relationship can all be traced back to the day when the senior executive blew off a meeting with his boss. The boss found his behavior unprofessional and disrespectful. In truth, they never got past this incident because the senior executive never took responsibility for his actions."

Second, the person must own the mistake in its entirety and show remorse. "You immediately lose credibility if you place blame," Kaufman says. "Don't bring up extenuating circumstances. If you're late, don't blame it on the traffic because there is always traffic or accidents or whatever."

Dan Meyerson, senior vice president of leadership and development, Bank of America, agrees and adds, "I always say, 'Bask in the glory of your mistake.' In other words, be comfortable with it and show others you can come back even stronger after making a mistake. It's important to show that it won't affect your self-esteem."

Last of all, clearly outline an action plan to ensure the mistake doesn't happen again. "This way, the boss can think 'I'm really angry but she owned it and has a new plan. What more can I ask?'" Kaufman says.

Vincent Milich, a senior consultant with the Hay Group, a global management consultancy, adds, "These steps work whether the mistake was made with a client or internally."

What is not included in these steps is beating yourself up. If you're not busy making and fixing mistakes, you're not really in the game.

An individual mistake

Marie Federico, human resources director for the Fireman's Fund Insurance Company and former human resources manager for Chase Bank, learned how to recover from a mistake as most of us do — the hard way. Federico had been working tirelessly on moving a bank operation from Long Island, N.Y., to Florida. She had successfully found many people new jobs and was instrumental in retraining others while keeping the operation flowing smoothly.

At a large town hall meeting with a new executive joining the division, Federico became a focal point for the employees' frustration over the business relocation. One aggressive employee asked, in front of 500 people, why Federico hadn't been fired. The response from the executive was, "If she doesn't do her job, she will be fired." The entire room then started hooting and hollering. "I was mortified that the executive played into them," Federico

says.

Eventually the executive apologized to Federico but the mistake and the subsequent embarrassment were done. Processing what happened took a few weeks.

"First, I was in shock since I'd been working so hard to support those same people that were heckling me," she says. Once the shock wore off, Federico humbly realized that she was, in part, to blame. "In hindsight, I should have managed my own internal public relations better. I was naïve about how these employees would behave. I should have prepped with the executive more about my efforts and begun the session listing some of the many successes we'd already had."

An organizational mistake

When a company makes mistakes, it should follow similar recovery steps. Several years ago, a young man was shot outside Ravenswood Hospital in Chicago. Because the hospital wasn't a Level 1 trauma center and the emergency room was full, no one came to help and the young man died. "None of these reasons were relevant," says Wendi Taylor Nations, a Porter Novelli executive vice president who helped the hospital with the situation. "The fact was that a young man died and the hospital didn't act appropriately when he was injured."

The hospital took action after the tragedy. "The administration expressed sincere remorse, took full responsibility, didn't point fingers to others that could have responded and were very clear about how they would handle similar situations in the future," Nations says. Obviously no measures would bring back the young man, but his family had some comfort knowing something similar would not happen in the future.

The trick to benefitting from mistakes lies in quickly, intelligently and meaningfully recovering. So, starting today, use these techniques to make your recovery flawless.

Susan Kushnir is senior vice president and global director of knowledge, development and learning for Porter Novelli.

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