

Overcoming Work Mistakes: Learn How To Speak Up And Move On

The Huffington Post Canada

Shelley White

First Posted: 10/13/11 07:49 AM ET Updated: 10/13/11 07:49 AM ET

It's like something out of a bad dream.

You're in the middle of a typical day at the office, feeling like your usual confident, competent self. And then, bam! It's like ice water down your back. You realize you've made a mistake -- a big one. You accidentally sent a sensitive email to someone you shouldn't have. You totally forgot about a lunch with an important shareholder. You misspelled a valuable client's name in a press release. You messed up -- big time. Now what?

Your first instinct (after hyperventilating) may be to hide under your desk. But is there a way to face your big boo-boo and come out of it looking good -- or at least with your job intact?

Toronto-based Human Resources Consultant [Sari Friedman](#) says it's better to own up to your mistake as soon as you realize you've made it.

“Otherwise it will come back and haunt you,” she says. “Owning up to a mistake gives you the chance to speak to it before someone puts you on the spot.”

It may be scary, but admitting you made a mistake can actually show strength of character, says Toronto psychotherapist [Kimberly Moffit](#). On the other hand, covering up your error or laying blame on others can make you look bad.

“The ability to admit that you've made a mistake shows not only character, but also confidence because you're not afraid of how you'll look,” she says. “In contrast, making excuses comes across as shallow and insecure, as if you're trying to cover up your personal weaknesses.”

[Christian Codrington](#) is senior manager at the British Columbia Human Resources Management Association and he acknowledges telling your supervisor you've messed up is easier said than done, especially if you have an arrogant or difficult boss. But if you fess up with a plan, your blunder can demonstrate your ability to handle adversity.

“We're all going to make mistakes, but the mark of the valued employee is how they recover from their mistake and what they say they learned from it,” he says. “It's really good if someone

can come with a solution. It doesn't necessarily mean you will go out and do the solution, but you can say, "This is what I'd like to do, but I wanted to check with you first."

If you made a mistake that's likely to tick off an important client, fixing it might mean apologizing to the offended party and sending flowers or a fruit basket. Though you might be tempted to keep things hush-hush and do all that yourself, Friedman says your boss could actually help you figure out the best way to fix things, as opposed to making things worse.

"Your boss might be able to say, "I know this client, they would rather not have the ass-kissing, let's just let it go and not send them a basket,"" she says. "Or they could say, "I know Murray, he's going to want a pair of gold hockey tickets.""

As well, your mistake might help your boss discover areas in which your company needs to improve.

"Sometimes the company may need to say, "We need to pull up our bootstraps,"" says Friedman. "If this employee has forgotten about a meeting, we need to upgrade our Outlook or everyone needs a BlackBerry." They get that chance to make sure this doesn't happen in the future."

One thing *not* to do? Don't apologize by email, just to avoid getting yelled at.

"I'd be really careful about how you do it," says Codrington. "If you normally speak to someone in person and then you try to patch up your mistake through email, it looks like you're embarrassed and ashamed."

Friedman also warns against email apologies. "Don't use email for emotional things, because email can't convey emotions well," she says. "You want to have a dialogue."

Beyond the effect it has on your career, making a big mistake at work can be personally demoralizing and upsetting. Moffit says that it's important to give yourself a break and recognize that everyone makes mistakes. As well, you can do proactive things to ensure it doesn't happen again.

"If your schedule is too packed and your levels of stress are too high -- causing you to make more mistakes -- then sit down with yourself, a friend or a therapist to create a healthier schedule that includes downtime for yourself," she says. "This way you can feel confident moving into the future knowing that you're doing your best to prevent future mistakes."

As well, Moffit recommends a lunchtime or after-work chat session with a trusted friend or colleague to help alleviate some of your feelings of guilt or embarrassment.

"Most of all, having somebody to confide in or share work horror stories with will help you feel supported and not alone."

"The Huffington Post" is a registered trademark of TheHuffingtonPost.com, Inc. All rights reserved.