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# Recovering a Fumble at the Flip Chart

By MATT VILLANO  
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**Q.** *You've botched a presentation in front of your boss and important clients. How can you salvage the situation?*



Illustration by Dave King

**A.** Take responsibility. Roger R. Pearman, president of Leadership Performance Systems, a management consulting firm in Winston-Salem, N.C., said employees who owned up to mistakes stood a much better chance of surviving them. "Failure to acknowledge that you goofed gets translated into arrogance and insensitivity," he said. "At the very least, proactively initiating a response immediately shows that you care."

**Q.** *Which kinds of gaffes are major?*

**A.** Perhaps the worst blunder an employee can commit during a presentation is displaying an egregious lack of preparation. Karla Robertson, president of Shifting Gears, a business coaching and consulting company in Howell, N.J., said this could show up as erroneous information in a

PowerPoint presentation or as fumbling for answers to impromptu questions. Other symptoms include poor organization, failure to interact with the audience, or nervous, inappropriate humor.

"Many people think they can wing it, but when it comes to a presentation, you have to do

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your homework,” Ms. Robertson said.

In most cases, the magnitude of your lapse will be evident. If you’re not sure how poorly you performed, ask your colleagues for feedback. Holly S. Slay, professor of business at the Rochester Institute of Technology in New York, noted that a number of companies have debriefing sessions during which team members discuss both good and bad aspects of project performance.

**Q.** *Should you apologize?*

**A.** Apologizing for poor performance isn’t really necessary, but if colleagues were counting on you, it may be appropriate to pull them aside and express regret that the presentation didn’t go as planned.

If you feel the need to apologize, do it once, sincerely, and move on. Larina Kase, a co-author of “Anxious 9 to 5: How to Beat Worry, Stop Second-Guessing Yourself and Work with Confidence” (New Harbinger, 2006), said the biggest mistake employees could make was to continue referring to the failure so that nobody forgot it. Another reason to avoid apologies is that you don’t want to come off as groveling.

“Your reaction can be worse than the blunder itself,” said Ms. Kase, who is also president of Performance and Success Coaching, a career counseling firm in Philadelphia. “If you become flustered or if you gush with apologies, you will put your boss on the defensive and make him more likely to be irritated by your performance.”

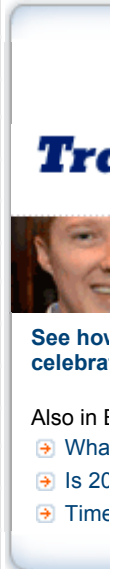
**Q.** *How can you make things right?*

**A.** Request a meeting for pointers on what went wrong. Don’t make excuses; just listen. Absorb the comments, then develop a plan with specific steps toward correcting your mistakes.

“By taking the difficulty and transforming it into an opportunity to show your courage, you turn the boss into a teammate,” said Laurie Puhn, president of Laurie Puhn Communications, a professional development training company in New York.

In some cases, a solution could lead you back to the conference room. In 2003, Harish Rao, then director of information technology for [Howard Dean](#)’s presidential campaign, was asked to investigate databases for a new Web site. Mr. Rao said he summarized his findings in a 15-minute presentation to the politician’s top aides. The aides expected a

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much more elaborate briefing, and were flabbergasted. Mr. Rao asked for another opportunity to present the data. During this second take, he recalled, he wowed the crowd with enough data to make a purchase decision on the spot.

“The first time around, I don’t think I understood the scope of the problem,” said Mr. Rao, now chief strategy officer at EchoDitto, a software company in New York. “I was able to go back, focus on specifics and give everybody exactly what they wanted.”

**Q.** *Can you be fired for bungling a presentation?*

**A.** Depending on the importance of the presentation and how badly you’ve performed, yes. Still, losing your job over one poor presentation is unlikely.

Kevin Eikenberry, president of the Kevin Eikenberry Group, a consulting firm in Indianapolis, said that if a company trusted you enough to let you make an important sales pitch, it would probably give you more than one chance.

“When a company invests in you, they’re investing in your talent and your education over time,” he said.

**Q.** *How can you improve your public speaking?*

**A.** The best way is to practice. Ask the boss for low-stakes opportunities to present information to team members. Get training from Toastmasters International, a nonprofit organization that embraces the group approach to developing public-speaking skills.

Another option is to foot the bill for a class in public speaking. Many companies reimburse employees for this expense.

However you decide to deal with this weakness, be patient. Everyone has setbacks. Babe Ruth hit 714 home runs over his 22-year career but also struck out 1,330 times. [John F. Kennedy Jr.](#) failed the New York State bar exam twice before passing. Allison Schwartz, president of Allium Coaching, a career consulting firm in Los Angeles, said every misstep was an opportunity for growth.

“Success consists of successful experiences and a fair share of failures, too,” she said. “As you get more experience you will see that some of our greatest mistakes are our greatest lessons.”

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