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Admit Mistakes Clearly To Reassure Others, Not Make Matters Worse

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If you've made a mistake, you have a choice: Admit it or keep quiet and hope you get away unscathed.

Leaders acknowledge their big blunders in a forthright manner. They treat the unpleasant task of confessing their mistake as an opportunity to embark on continual learning.

Once you decide to discuss your mistake, it's important to follow through without making matters worse. After all, there's a right and wrong way to articulate your errors. Use these tips to guide you.

Avoid the "but." Rather than admit what you did wrong, your rationale for doing it and how it proved misguided, it's tempting to try to shift accountability elsewhere. That rarely works to your advantage.

"Some people destroy an admission (of a mistake) with an excuse," warned Dave Anderson, president of Learn to Lead, a leadership training firm in Agoura Hills, Calif. "They say, 'I made a bad decision, but' Don't diminish it by pointing to others to blame or trying to broaden the scapegoat circle."

Look ahead. When dissecting a mistake, beware of overdoing it. It's fine to summarize your intentions, your thought process and what derailed you. Just make sure to show how you'll be wiser in the future rather than rue the past.

"Don't have a pity party," said Anderson, author of "[Unstoppable](#)." "Move on. Don't dwell on it."

Expect to disappoint. When you're telling peers, bosses or a board of directors about how you screwed up, expect them to respond glumly. They may even react with anger, anxiety or disappointment. Don't let that throw you.

"If you see (negative) nonverbal cues, don't get rattled," Anderson said. "Stay on track and shift the focus to the solution."

Dig deep. Reassure others that you've learned from your mistake by pinpointing how it occurred. Identifying what led to your faulty judgment can enhance your credibility to fix what's broken.

"Beyond just saying what you'll do to address it right now, explain what you'll do so that it doesn't become a systemic issue," said Glenn Llopis, a leadership consultant in Rancho Santa Margarita, Calif. "You can't ignore the root cause. You have to deal with it."

Know what you don't know. When admitting a blunder, strive to learn and grow. Pose questions that you're still seeking to answer.

"Leaders accept and vocalize the fact that they don't have all the answers," Llopis said. "There may be a better way of doing things that they don't know."

Give concrete commitments. If you're uncomfortable admitting a mistake, beware of making it worse by adopting imprecise or ambiguous language. This risks undermining your attempt to come clean.

"There's a fear that if I get too specific, it will come back to haunt me," said Merge Gupta-Sunderji, a leadership consultant in Calgary, Canada. "But it's better to be specific and quantitative than to speak in generalities, which just makes people suspicious."

If you're notifying the top brass that your team accidentally broke a piece of equipment, say that "it will take up to 12 hours to get it up and running" rather than give a vague estimate that "it will be up and running as soon as possible."

Inject a positive spin. Choose your words with care. Take some of the sting out of your error by recasting it as a chance to gain valuable insight.

"The word 'mistake' sounds so negative," said Farouk Shami, founder and chairman of Farouk Systems, a Houston-based hair care company. "I like the word 'discovery.' You discover what didn't work and learn from it."