



PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

By JUSTIN DRAEGER

How to recover after a colossal mistake

HAVE YOU EVER FILED something in the wrong place, forgotten an appointment or unintentionally overlooked an e-mail from your boss? If so, make amends and move on. This article isn't about minor flubs that everyone makes from time to time. It's about recovering from a serious blunder that might get you fired, or even blacklisted, in your field. A few important steps taken before, during, and after an enormous error can help you bounce back.

Preemptive action

The best way to mitigate damage after a huge mistake is to exhibit exemplary performance before a catastrophe occurs. You will have set the stage for how an employer will deal with you.

Scott Weaver, president and owner of the Douglas Aveda Institute, says that employers often view mistakes as investments in their workers. "What are the odds that an employee will make that same mistake twice?" he asks. Weaver says that if an employee has shown commitment to the organization and has proven his or her ability in the past, he would be reluctant to fire that employee even when the stakes are huge.

Weaver puts his money where his mouth is. The opening of his fourth and newest location was delayed awaiting final inspections by the state. During the delay Weaver instructed his facilities manager to hire security to protect the supplies, products and other valuables stored in the as yet unused school.

He received a call from the police on New Year's Day informing him of a burglary at the site. His facilities manager had failed to hire any security. Before taking any action Weaver examined the employee's past work history and found it to be exemplary. The mistake was large but not consistent with his past performance.

The employee's future at the school? Safe. "If I hired someone new, I would risk that the same mistake would be repeated. My facilities manager is a stronger and more loyal employee than he was before," explains Weaver.

Never, never agree to silence

Employees often sign non-disparage agreements before they begin work. Non-disparage agreements are intended to prevent an employee from "bad-mouthing" the employing organization after a separation.

"Never agree to non-disparage agreements," says Jeffrey Sonnenfeld, senior associate dean of executive programs at the Yale School of Management. "Never give up the right to speak your mind or defend yourself. It will come at such a high price— your reputation."

Sonnenfeld likens non-disparage agreements to prenuptials. They're really awkward to talk about. If your employer whips one out, "look at it as a warning sign, and consider it a deal breaker," he says.

Fight back

When your employer, coworkers, or friends and associates tell you that you're in the wrong, the easiest course of action is to take your lumps, show contrition and move on.

That's a mistake, according to Sonnenfeld. "Beyond our health and the health of our family, there isn't much worth more to us than our reputations," he says. Even in cases where the employee is clearly to blame, it's important for him or her to make sure that all of the facts are out in the open clearly articulated. In most cases, huge mistakes are the result of missteps by several people—including management.

Some employees avoid fighting back to avoid further attention. Sonnenfeld says that when your reputation is under attack, you should respond immediately, thoroughly, and rationally. Even if you have no hope of keeping your current job, you should still fight to preserve your reputation for future jobs.

Seek the help of others

So how do you know when to hold 'em and when to fold 'em? Get some objective advice. However, friends, family or others under your sphere of influence should be avoided, because they may simply agree with your

thinking. Instead, seek advice from mutual business associates or others with nothing to gain or lose by telling you the truth.

If someone you consult believes that you're being treated unfairly, perhaps you can enlist that person to your cause. Perhaps he or she can explain your situation to your boss or the professional community. Sonnenfeld says that recruiting others who are objective to tell your story goes a lot further than telling it yourself.

If such an advisor believes you are solely to blame for the misstep, he or she will probably tell you. But out of respect, he or she might also offer you a new job or tell you of other opportunities if the fallout becomes severe.

Contrition isn't enough

Employees who want to salvage their reputations after an undeniable, catastrophic mistake will not be able to do so by apology alone, no matter how sincere. Contrition must be followed up with actions that seek to set things right.

"Everyone loves a comeback story," says Sonnenfeld, who points to Mattel's CEO Bob Eckerd as a good example of someone who demonstrated contrition and action after the Chinese lead paint debacle. Sweeping it under the rug with an apology will likely get you demonized. But apologizing and detailing exactly what you're doing about it—as Eckerd did—will most likely deflect a lot of misgivings.

In sum, when an employee feels the mistake will always be held against him, he's better off moving on. Saving your job is a good idea only if it's a job worth saving. It pays to know when it's time to move on to the next challenge. ■



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