

The Golden Rule of Handling Mistakes

By David B. Burns

Mess-up. We all make mistakes. We're all human. We've all missed deadlines, sent emails to recipients we didn't intend to (or before we edited out the mean and nasty stuff), and/or shipped a client 500 units of the correct item, but the wrong color.

Since we are human and we will make mistakes, how do we regain the trust of those who were the recipients of our mistakes? Let's start with what not to do. Don't deny it, shift the blame, and/or allow someone else to clean it up.

Fess-up. Step up to the plate and own it. Apologize immediately, take responsibility, and communicate that you made the mistake - to everyone affected. And don't try to weasel out with a statement like "Mistakes were made," as if the mistake just dropped out of the sky and no one was responsible. Whenever I hear people in business or politics use this passive construction I sigh, because it sounds just like what it is - a bunch of hooey!

Never ruin your apology with an excuse. Any time you tack on an excuse it invalidates the sincerity of your apology. They don't care if you were rushed, your assistant didn't remind you, or your dog ate your homework. Be honest, take ownership of the mistake and let them know what steps you will take so it doesn't happen again.

Fix-it. If you want them to trust you and do business with you again, you need to absorb the cost of repairing the damage you caused. This is a necessary cost, even though it will likely cost you time and energy as well as money. When you don't fix customers' problems, they end up telling everyone they know to avoid doing business with you. When you do fix customers' problems, going out of your way to repair any damage, they often become the most loyal customers you have. They will tell everyone they know how you went out of your way to make it right.

Mistakes are one of many human variables in all our interactions. Learn from them and do your best to minimize them over time. And when you make your next one, follow the Golden Rule of Mistakes: **Mess-up, Fess-up, Fix-it.**