

Reputation rescue

The first step to dealing with a terrible mistake is admitting it

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Lying awake in bed, you obsessively analyze the events leading up to the incident -- but you still can't understand how it happened. You haven't eaten in days, and you're pretty sure you've got an ulcer.

Despite the crushing anxiety, there's no way to avoid it. You have to go to work tomorrow and face up to your horrifying mistake. But you can't help but wonder: is there any possible way to resuscitate your reputation -- and your career -- after such a bungle?



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It wasn't my fault, I swear!

Whether you've been caught having relations with a co-worker, got hammered at the office Christmas party or lost a big account, you can bounce back -- as long as you can forgive yourself.

"To err is human, and more than likely everyone will have some kind of embarrassing situation in their career lives to greater or lesser degree," says Michele Waters, a Victoria-based executive career coach.

The first step to rescuing your reputation is creating a strategy for dealing with the fallout. Even before you've done the walk of shame to your cubicle, know how you'll deal with this -- you will need to be proactive.

"I think it's so important, whatever the scenario, that the person immediately take some kind of action to find out what people are doing and saying, and to make an effort to stop the rumour mill that might be happening," Waters says.

This shows courage and a willingness to come clean, which people will find admirable -- after all, owning up to a poor decision is never easy.

Generally, it's a good idea to call a meeting for those affected, even if you're junior and need your manager's permission to do it. This allows you to bring the issue into the light in a safe place.

At the meeting, apologize sincerely for what you've done -- without getting into unnecessary gory details (what exactly happened in the supply room closet isn't

anyone's business). This is your chance to tell your side of the story before second-hand information exaggerates the incident.

Choose your words carefully, selecting more neutral terms (like "love relationship") over loaded ones (like "affair").

The meeting should allow people to air their grievances and ask questions. What you hear may not be nice, but "at least it's getting off their chest in that room, rather than it festering," Waters says.

After the meeting, don't apologize endlessly -- grovelling doesn't help your cause. Keep a low profile and do your work more diligently than ever. If you've bungled a work project, ask to take on an extra assignment to prove you're committed and have what it takes.

As the dust settles, take note of how your colleagues are relating to you. You may need to speak to some of them one-on-one if they're keeping mum but behaving negatively.

Remember that it isn't OK for people to hold this over your head endlessly. Those who are using it as ammo may be difficult people to begin with, but make sure they're not making things unnecessarily hard. You may have to assess whether you want to stay.

If you do consider leaving, don't do it right away, Waters says. Take some time to repair the damage done. And make sure you're fully aware of whether your boss will provide a reference -- and what kind of reference. If you're not sure whether to trust that he'll vouch for you, have someone in your network call for a mock reference.

While it's no easy thing to deal with a major screw-up, mistakes are inevitable, and they can be valuable learning experiences. Keep things in perspective, Waters urges.

"The person who's made a poor judgement isn't the first person in the world to do this -- or the last."

Remember that people will eventually turn their attention to personal crises, other work issues or another person's horrible blunder.

And don't forget about the many things you've achieved in your career. This mistake is a glitch that can be overcome -- but you must be patient while the incident fades away, Waters says.

"It takes time to build up a reputation, it takes time to pull it asunder, and it'll take time to build it up again. But it's a new day. After the incident has happened, it's a new beginning."

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