

Leadership Barometer 176 When You Are Wrong **Robert T. Whipple, MBA CPTD**



When most leaders are in the wrong, they try to rationalize it. The common myth is that admitting a mistake weakens your reputation. In reality, the exact opposite is normally the case.

The logic here is compelling, and we all learned it as children. Bad things are sometimes going to happen. Trying to cover them up leads to more severe punishment.

Ways to wiggle

There are dozens of ways leaders try to duck their responsibility. Here are a few examples of common ploys:

1. Say someone else did it
2. Pretend it did not happen
3. Downplay the impact
4. Indicate you were distracted and did not know
5. Change the facts so it looks like a win
6. Shift the discussion to another subject

The sad truth is that the more you try to get out of an embarrassing mistake the lower your credibility will be.

Turn being wrong into an opportunity

The greatest asset a leader has is his or her credibility. By freely admitting to something you did wrong, you demonstrate integrity and humility. Those two characteristics go a long way in terms of building trust with people.

Most people are willing to forgive an occasional mistake and give you another chance.

Handled well, a sincere admission and apology makes a huge difference in your reputation. That is true for many, but not all mistakes. There are two categories of mistakes where admitting it will lower trust in you.

When admitting you were wrong will lower trust

The first category is repeated mistakes. Let's suppose you got the numbers wrong when reporting your group's performance upward. Now suppose this is the fourth time you have done that. See their reaction when you tell your people "Well folks, I did it again." Not good!

The second category would be if the mistake had a sinister motive or revealed that you are clueless. For example, suppose you forgot to grant a raise that you promised. If you reveal that you are basically incompetent, you cannot expect a positive reaction in return.

Formula for increasing credibility

There is a six-part formula for explaining a mistake that will endear yourself to your people.

Part one – Explain what happened as objectively as possible. Indicate that the outcome is not what you intended or expected.

Part two – Apologize. Indicate your remorse and acknowledge the negative impacts of your gaff.

Part three – Say what you learned from this incident.

Part four – Indicate how you are going to make it right. Give specific steps you intend to perform to reduce the damage.

Part five – Show how you will prevent a recurrence of that kind of thing in the future.

Part six (very important part) – Ask if there are any other ideas on how you can prevent this from happening in the future.

Conclusion

In any enterprise, mistakes are going to happen. Nobody is perfect. If you follow the simple advice in this article, it will go a long way toward enhancing trust. You can turn a negative incident into something powerfully positive for your reputation.

Bob Whipple, MBA, CPTD, is a consultant, trainer, speaker, and author in the areas of leadership and trust. He is the author of: *The Trust Factor: Advanced Leadership for Professionals*, *Understanding E-Body Language: Building Trust Online*, and *Leading with Trust is Like Sailing*

Downwind. Bob has many years as a senior executive with a Fortune 500 Company and with non-profit organizations