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Cleaning Up Your Blooper Reel

Recovering from Communication Bloopers



Sometimes the best part of going to a movie is staying until the end to see the blooper reel. It has become such a fad that you'll see bloopers added to the end of most productions and performances. A blooper is defined as an embarrassing error, but we love seeing behind the scenes, catching people with their guard down, and experiencing what really happened.

The truth is few performances go perfectly, and it often requires a series of takes to get a wrap. The same can be true of communication situations, although we rarely view our communication bloopers as quite so entertaining.

A mistake in an important meeting or a big presentation can be devastating. It isn't funny and it never feels good. While we have helped many people increase their effectiveness, no one is perfect. There are bad days, and there are poor presentations. But what really sets an effective communicator apart is how those situations are handled.

Through our formal surveys and informal interviews with communicators, I've learned two things about communication mistakes that intrigue me: the longevity of communication impressions and the lack of closure around mistakes.

We talk about the impact of impressions a lot in our courses. Over and over again we validate that impressions are formed quickly, and they last a long time. We've gathered these facts statistically and anecdotally. Before most coaching engagements, we collect information on a coaching candidate by asking for impressions from many different perspectives. Inevitably, someone shares an impression created by a situation that happened six months or even a year ago.

When people share positive impressions, they give multiple examples of the same attribute. People will tell you that someone comes across as confident, and they'll share many examples of how they observe this. It's the repetition and consistency that establishes their belief. But, poor impressions seem to focus on a specific event or interaction and cloud the impressions that come after it. Someone will tell me that an individual is brash and aggressive, and they'll give an example of a meeting where that impression was set. When I ask for other examples, they say, "I see it all the time," or "It's just their way," etc. I'm actually never sure that it has happened repetitively. Often, the negative impression has clouded the encounters that came after it.

Mistakes happen, and poor impressions can be changed. But, the longevity of impressions is the more damaging part. And, that's the second thing that intrigues me. Few people clean up their mistakes.

Every communicator I know, including myself, has made mistakes. But, the good ones diffuse the negative impressions before they set in. Most people don't do that. They can tell me that the mistake occurred. But, when I ask them what they did to close the loop, most haven't done anything. They are resigned to the impact and hoping that time will cure it. In fact, the opposite seems to be true. The more time that lapses, the impression seems to set in and it can be very hard to overcome.

There are two steps to recover from a communication blooper: awareness and solution. And, you should treat them differently.

Awareness is something that can happen as soon as 30 minutes after a meeting and must happen within 48 hours of a mistake. It's acknowledging that you didn't do well or didn't answer the question correctly. It's taking ownership for the mistake, and it sends a signal to the listener that you have good awareness. You didn't do well, but you owned up to the error and seem to understand the impact of the error on others.

Interestingly, awareness is the part of the impression that observers worry about most. When they describe negative impressions, they talk about the impact it has on others and the communicator's lack of awareness of that impact. In fact, awareness is as much a part of coaching as solving the impression itself.

The first step to clean up a blooper is a quick stop by someone's office, a short email or even a phone call that says, "I didn't handle that well today." "I want to apologize for not having the information you wanted. You will have it by Monday." Or, "I was flustered in our conversation today, and I didn't come across the way I wanted to. I hope you'll give me another chance to show you that I am confident about our direction." Don't wait until you have the right answer, unless you can have it quickly.

Most missing information or solutions aren't easy to retrieve. That's why it was missing in the first place! So, you solve for awareness first and then you bring the solution or missing content back to them when you have it.

In fact, the solution can present an opportunity for a second impression. When you circle back with a solution, you have the opportunity to modify the initial impression and many will let it go. This helps the listener separate the impression of you from the complexity or frustration related to the solution itself.

If you can diffuse communication mistakes as they happen, you may find that you and your listeners can laugh through them and move beyond them, just like those movie bloopers.

Call us when you need us!

