

## **The "Oh, s#&%!" Moment**

**In every career, stuff happens. But if you keep your cool, you can turn a workplace disaster into an image-building triumph.**

By Donna Rosato, MONEY Magazine staff writer – January 24, 2006

NEW YORK (MONEY Magazine) - You can be doing everything right at work -- showing up on time, being conscientious, minding your business -- when bam! Out of the blue, your chair collapses in the middle of an interview. Or somebody sends you a confidential e-mail by mistake. Or you accidentally squirt a huge blob of ketchup onto your boss' shirt.

We spend nearly a third of our lives at work and more than half of our waking hours each weekday, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Something is bound to go wrong from time to time.

But whether you find yourself in a mildly embarrassing situation or you've inadvertently made a career-threatening mistake, there's usually a way to recover with grace and tact -- and with your job. Sometimes you can even emerge looking better than ever.

Remember, your earning power is the single most valuable financial asset you control over your lifetime, more than your house or your investment portfolio. You can't afford to let it be compromised by a wayward blob of ketchup or a misfired e-mail.

So if you've ever wished you could bounce your personal nightmare scenario off an etiquette expert or a high-level manager or an ethics guru, now's your chance. On the next few pages you'll find creative, foolproof solutions to everyday disasters. Let's hope you never need them.

How to deal with:       **Public speaking gaffes, managing the boss, interview irregularities, adventures in e-mail and eating on the job.**

### **Public speaking gaffes**

#### **Getting past the oops moment: Taking the podium**

By Donna Rosato, MONEY Magazine staff writer – January 24, 2006

NEW YORK (MONEY Magazine) - You're giving a career-making presentation to the whole company. The computer with your PowerPoint slides malfunctions.

Don't fiddle with your computer in front of an audience. If it's not fixed in two minutes, ask for a short recess. When Josh Thacker stood up at the Hilton hotel in Austin last May to give a lunchtime demonstration of his company's trade-show software in front of 100 people, he felt good. He had flown in a day early to practice, and it had gone perfectly.

But five minutes into his introduction, his computer locked up. Thacker was worried that the audience would blame the software, so he asked the next presenter to go ahead and left the stage to reboot. That fixed the problem.

Use humor. The audience will be as uncomfortable about your contretemps as you, so loosen everyone up with a joke. When Thacker returned, he said, "I could use a drink. In fact, using our software, I can type in 'beer' and search for exhibitors hosting a reception during this event." Instant laughs.

"I got lots of compliments on my recovery -- and several sales too," he says.

Don't dwell on what happened. And certainly don't overapologize. "If you say 'I'm sorry' too much, it only highlights the mistake," says Corby O'Connor, who teaches business etiquette to corporations.

Tip: Bring enough hard copies for everyone in attendance.

You're trying to impress a client at a meeting. He's whispering and not paying attention. Ask a question or request input. Group participation will usually get him engaged.

Speak his name. Quickly think of a way to use it in the context of your presentation. Say something like, "Mr. Bipsnit made an excellent point on this topic the other day." Hearing his own name will snap his attention back to what you're saying. Especially if his name is Mr. Bipsnit.

In the middle of your brilliant speech to shareholders, the microphone dies. Don't stop. Last April, when actor Jeff Daniels was performing a song during a live broadcast of Country Music Television's video awards, his mike died mid-lyric. He didn't miss a beat, breaking into a monologue until a stagehand came out with a new microphone.

"Things go wrong, but the audience pulls for you," he said later. "They don't want you to collapse and be embarrassed."

Walk around to make sure everyone can hear you. Getting physically closer to the audience will focus their attention on what you're saying, says Lenny Laskowski, a seminar consultant in Stratford, Conn. and the author of "10 Days to More Confident Public Speaking."

Adapt. Poll the audience by hollering out questions. "I have huge respect for people who can manage themselves and an audience," says Steve Sickel, a senior marketing executive at InterContinental Hotels.

"If something goes wrong, it's not a reflection of the person's ability. But someone who can adapt and recover -- that's a skill, and it says a lot about their ability to think on their feet."

## **Managing the boss**

### **Getting past the oops moment: The boss factor**

By Donna Rosato, MONEY Magazine staff writer – January 24, 2006

NEW YORK (MONEY Magazine) - Your boss stops by to check on a project you're late on and catches you shopping online.

Say you needed a five-minute head clearer. That's kind of legit. He might not believe you, but most bosses aren't likely to go ballistic on a first offense.

Keep in mind that even if he doesn't catch you, your company might. Nearly 80 percent of companies keep tabs on employees by tracking Internet connections, and 55 percent retain and review e-mail messages, according to the American Management Association. A quarter of companies have fired workers for misusing the Internet, the survey found.

You probably won't get canned for a quick eBay session, but habitual shopping could warrant a talking-to.

Saying you needed a 45-minute head clearer, however, might not fly.

Your boss asks you who's responsible for a mistake and you know who it is. Do you rat out a colleague? Say you don't know but you'll find out. Then tell the culprit that the boss is onto him and suggest that he come forward. Point out that you're in an awkward position because you know the boss is going to press you.

Focus on a solution. Darnell Lattal, a psychologist and the author of "Ethics at Work," advises redirecting the question by saying, "I'm not sure, but I'm happy to help you figure out how to fix this." Then you look proactive and don't have to be a snitch.

You fax your résumé to a prospective employer from work and your boss finds it. Seize the moment. Once you get over the initial stammering and hot flashes, level with your boss. If you're unhappy with your job, say so. Tell him what is so unsatisfactory about your current gig that you went looking for something better.

Try this: "Okay, you got me. But I'd rather not leave. Can we talk about making some changes that would be mutually beneficial?"

Watch it. Says Sickel, the hotel marketing executive: "As a manager, I can't fault someone for being career-minded. But I would coach them on what's appropriate at work."

In other words: Next time, Ace, go to Kinko's.

## **Irregular interviews**

### **Getting past the oops moment: Acing the interview**

By Donna Rosato, MONEY Magazine staff writer – January 24, 2006

NEW YORK (MONEY Magazine) - In the middle of conducting an important interview, you fall out of your chair in spectacular fashion.

Take notes (after you recover). Some tricky interviewers have been known to do this kind of thing on purpose in order to gauge a candidate's reaction.

"How the other person responds gives you good insight into what that person will be like to work with," says psychologist and HR consultant Barbara Moses.

On his first day on the job at a national insurance company in Helena, Mont., John Graveley had to interview a job candidate. Graveley ushered the candidate in, sat down and promptly fell flat on his back with his feet over his head. It took him several tries to get up, and he finally somersaulted his way upright.

As for the candidate: Was she concerned? Quick-witted? Helpful? Nope.

"She just sat there as if nothing had happened," says Graveley. Needless to say, she didn't get the job.

On the way to a big job interview, you cut someone off to get a good parking space. Guess who ends up across the interview table?

Bring it up before he does. Shrug and say, "I'm really sorry about that. Can we count it as evidence that I'm a go-getter?"

Plead excitement. Say you were so excited about the interview that your courtesy took a back seat and you didn't want to keep him waiting.

"I would give the person a break -- though I might add a few questions to the interview to see if they are a team player," says Sickel.

The interviewer asks about your age or kids.

Ask for clarification. Most interviewers know it's illegal to ask your age, nationality, marital status, sexual preference or religion. But once in a while, one asks.

Don't invoke the law or act self-righteous, especially if you want the job. Debbie Shotwell, group vice president of HR at software maker Taleo, suggests responding with "Can you tell me why you need to know?"

This gives the interviewer the opportunity to explain why she's asking -- or to move on.

Address the underlying issue. Someone asking about your age might be wondering if you're past your prime. Say, "I'm old enough to have the kind of hard-won experience that makes me perfect for this job."

To an inquiry about the demands of kids, reply, "I'm close with my family, but I keep my private and work lives separate."

## **Adventures in e-mail**

### **Getting past the oops moment: Think before you hit "send."**

By Donna Rosato, MONEY Magazine staff writer – January 24, 2006

NEW YORK (MONEY Magazine) - You dash off a scathing e-mail complaining about your boss to your co-worker -- but you send it to your boss by mistake.

Don't let the boss find you first. When Yvette Martin's manager at a bank in Austin chewed her out for a mistake that was the manager's fault, Martin vented in an e-mail to a co-worker. A few minutes later, Martin stopped by to ask her friend if he thought the missive was too harsh. The co-worker's response: "What e-mail?" Just then the manager showed up fuming.

For Martin, it was too late. But the moment you find out the wrong person received the e-mail, walk directly to that person's office, apologize and explain yourself. If she's not there, wait.

Since you're busted, you might as well air your grievance. Tell your boss that you regret what you did but that there's a legitimate gripe behind it. When another manager dragged his feet on an urgent request that Bill Tookoian made for a client of his communications firm, Tookoian fired off an angry e-mail complaining to his boss -- and accidentally cc'd the offending manager. Both recipients were upset, but Tookoian took the opportunity to improve the way requests were processed across the firm.

"That e-mail opened up communication on an important topic and changed how things were done," he says. "That enhanced my reputation as a get-it-done guy." Tookoian is now a senior account executive at that same firm in San Francisco.

Just say no. Still, the best option is to not lambaste anyone in an e-mail.

An e-mail from one of your underlings lands in your inbox by mistake. It describes some of your, shall we say, negative personality traits.

Suck it up. If the criticism is fair, consider this a chance to find out what your employees are saying about you.

"It takes real courage, but have a conversation with whoever sent the message about what it says," says Shotwell, the Taleo executive.

A workaholic client whom consultant Barbara Moses worked with accidentally got an e-mail from an employee complaining about his bad habit of dumping work on people at the last minute. He met with employees individually and asked for their feedback.

"He said it was a real wake-up call for him," says Moses. "This was someone who was really disorganized, and it made him a better manager."

Issue a warning. That's all very nice, but tell the numskull who sent the e-mail to be more careful next time.

You receive a confidential e-mail -- about someone else's salary -- by mistake. Alert the sender. Maybe he's not aware of what he did, but he might figure it out later and wonder why on earth you didn't tell him, says Darnell Lattal, a psychologist and the author of *Ethics at Work*.

Reassure him. Tell him you saw only enough to figure out that the e-mail wasn't meant for you. Promise to keep the information to yourself. Then tell the first five people you see.

Just kidding.

## **Eating on the job**

### **Getting past the oops moment: The art of the meal**

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NEW YORK (MONEY Magazine) - You douse a key client with bouillabaisse.

Don't just sit there.

Early in his career, Joseph Smith, a tax adviser to medical professionals, was dining with a vice president at the hospital where he worked in South Carolina when his attempt to slice a cherry tomato went terribly wrong. Juice shot up in an arc and onto the veep's lap.

Smith got lucky -- while he froze like a kid caught shoplifting, his lunch partner joked that she wanted to replace that skirt anyway.

What he should have done was try to help. That doesn't mean trying to clean it up yourself -- it's never a good idea to swab a colleague's body parts. Hand over a clean napkin and hail a waiter.

Don't just say you're sorry.

"Always offer to have stained clothing cleaned or replaced if it's been ruined," says Peter Post, a director at the Emily Post Institute and co-author of *"The Etiquette Advantage" in Business*.

Tip Don't order bouillabaisse at a business lunch.

At the end of a meal, the check arrives and sits awkwardly for many long minutes. The person who did the inviting should pay, says Post. But if the host lets the check languish, you're in a tough spot: You could glance at the check with an awkward "Okay, let's see what the damage is," but that suggests you're eager to leave when in fact he might have every intention of paying when he's done doing business. Eventually you have to make a call: Wait it out or offer to split it.

Tip When you're the host, avoid putting guests in this position. Give the maître d' your card up front.

At Michael's, a Manhattan power spot, "Barbara Walters will hand me her credit card before the meal and ask me to add a 20 percent tip to the bill," says general manager Steve Millington.

The CEO starts choking.

Help! This is no time to be polite. If he's really in trouble, do the Heimlich. He'd rather have your fist in his stomach than a french fry in his esophagus. That may seem obvious, but hugging from behind the person who determines your salary isn't exactly instinctive.

One Manhattan media executive witnessed her boss choking on a salad while almost everyone sat, paralyzed, not sure whether to step in. One person did.

"When it came time for reviews, the boss was reminded that the person had saved his life. Let's just say she wasn't let go."

If your Heimlich is a little rusty, call a waiter. Don't scream for a doctor -- that'll embarrass your boss. Even when choking, bosses don't like to be embarrassed.