

## How to Recover When You've Blown It



Nobody wants to blow it.

It's an often-preached statistic: out of all the terrors and trepidations that intimidate the human psyche, the fear of public speaking is the most common.

There's a reason for that. Public speaking situations are uniquely laden with great potential. On the one hand, public speaking offers the potential to inspire, encourage, and excite an audience. On the other hand, public speaking offers the potential to completely screw up with a lot of people watching.

More people than would care to admit are terrified of the latter possibility.

There's good news, though. First, as we've encouraged many times over our [decades in media training](#), the ability to communicate well is a learned skill – and anyone can improve. Second: if you speak publicly often enough, at one point or another, you will screw up – and, contrary to what you may think, it is not the end of the world.

Not only is it not the end of the world, but there are also steps you can take to minimize public speaking mistakes even after they've happened. It's just a matter of learning them and putting them into practice. Let's take a look at five common mistakes, and then review how you can recover after you've "blown it."

### First, Prepare

Before we get into public speaking mistakes, a word of advice to help you minimize them in the first place: prepare, prepare, prepare.

We've spoken to this before, but it's always worth reiterating: preparation is essential to communicating well. From busy engineers to high-level executives, most people struggle to find the time to properly prepare for a public speaking situation.

**The unfortunate truth is that most crucial speaking mistakes are the result of poor preparation.**

Mistakes such as a failure to consider situational context, an attempt to “rip-and-read” a pre-written speech without prior thought, or a lack of consideration for likely questions could all be avoided with dedicated preparation.

So, practice and prepare thoroughly for each event; commit time to understanding your audience, your situation, and your purpose, and practice your messaging.

Then, before each speaking engagement, commit additional time to mentally focus on the upcoming task – at least 30 minutes or more. You can’t fly from one meeting, to the next meeting, to a speaking engagement without time to focus for each engagement.

Don’t allow your focus time to be eaten into. Stick to it as firmly as you’ll stick to the engagement itself.

Of course, even with preparation and time to focus, you will still make mistakes – albeit far fewer than you would have otherwise. Here’s how to recover when:

## **1. Technology Goes Out**

We’ve all seen it: the speaker gets up, and the PowerPoint isn’t working. Moments pass, murmurs ripple through the audience, and still nothing happens. The technology has failed. No, this isn’t a mistake or the fault of the speaker, per se – but fault aside, fickle technology can quickly derail a speaking engagement if you’re not prepared to manage the damage.

Don’t allow the issue to develop for too long, causing tension to mount and audience attention to wander; don’t jump in unprepared and off track, grasping for points, words, and message as the presentation wanders into dangerous, uncharted territory.

Instead, make sure to be prepared for this scenario by ensuring you have offline access to your outline – preferably, printed out and on your person.

And, be sure not to wait too long for the situation to be resolved. When there are issues with technology, you have about three to five minutes to fix the technology. After that, you need to move on and continue your presentation.

## **2. You Stumble Over Your Words or Misspeak**

One of the skills we work on with our clients is the ability to adopt a conversational, [relatable tone when presenting](#). It’s a skill that goes a long way toward establishing a speaker as genuine and authentic.

However, you can’t be authentic when you’re reading word-for-word from a slide – and that means that you will likely, at some point, stumble slightly over your words. Perhaps you won’t announce clearly, or you’ll frame a sentence in a way that doesn’t quite make sense, or you’ll misspeak.

This happens all the time in normal conversation. The approach during a speaking engagement should be much the same as the approach that you would take in a casual context: simply take a deep breath,

acknowledge the mistake, and restate what you were attempting to say. Don't make a big deal out of it, but don't allow the moment to pass without clarifying your meaning, either.

For example, maybe you incorrectly cite a statistic – clarify it.

"I'm sorry – I said that 20% of the people in our company are new hires. What I meant was that 200 people in our company are new hires."

This will ensure your meaning comes through, and help to reorient you on your message.

### **3. You Get Into a Topic You Should Be Avoiding**

Rabbit trails happen. They're especially dangerous in a media interview context – reporters, sensing that you're wandering out your comfort zone, may press you for more information on a topic you'd much prefer to avoid.

If you find yourself off topic, don't continue down the rabbit trail. Reorient yourself, focus on the main message you're there to convey, and bridge back to that message.

"I'd rather not focus on Competitor XYZ at this time. What I can tell you is that we're really excited about this new product launch."

### **4. You Thought You Were Fine – and Then You See the Article**

Sometimes, media outlets make mistakes. For misstatements on the part of the media source, you do have the right to call for a retraction. Keep in mind, though, that media tend not to heavily promote retractions, so it's likely that the first take of the story will circulate more widely than the corrected version.

Sometimes, you'll complete a presentation or interview with a feeling of satisfaction for a job well done – only to see the negative result online or in the following day's paper.

Obviously, if this is the case, you can no longer correct yourself in real time, but you can reach out to the media outlet responsible for the story. Sometimes, you may be able to clarify your statements or further influence the story with the message that you intended to convey.

Often, that's not possible. Depending upon the nature of the mistake, you may consider issuing a statement or follow up to clarify things – or, you may just need to let it go.

### **5. You Just Don't Have the Audience's Attention**

During a presentation or media engagement, it's incredibly discouraging to realize that you just don't have it – to be speaking and see that people just aren't paying attention.

Now, let's be clear: **you will never, ever, have the complete, undivided attention of every person in a room.** Full attention wasn't possible before cell phones; it's almost laughable as a proposition now.

If you're taping a media interview and realize things aren't going as you'd like, ask if you can go for another take. You may get another chance, and, if you understand what went wrong, you may be able to improve upon your first effort.

If you're presenting, know this: there will always be people in the room who aren't paying attention to you. Ignore them. Focus your attention and energy on those in the room who are responding well to you; you'll be able to build on their engagement.

When the overwhelming majority of people in a room are not paying you attention as a presenter, though, you have a problem – and, unfortunately, it's not a problem that's easily remedied in that moment.

If you're onstage and lose your audience, there's no going back. Finish speaking quickly and get out of the situation as gracefully as possible.

Do a post-mortem to diagnose what went wrong, and then get training.

## **How to Improve**

Again, understanding how to recover from mistakes is nice, but reducing mistakes in the first place is even better. So, how can you prepare?

Maybe it starts with recognizing that you're not alone. You're not the only one who's scared that you'll blow it when you speak. We've worked with clients up and down organizational charts to overcome the fear of public speaking – from first responders, to engineers, to top-level executives.

### **[Then, get training.](#)**

The truth is that much of [speaking well is psychological](#). Entering a speaking situation with a positive mental framework goes a long way toward making a speaker successful. And, the framework for success is something that is learned. You can improve as a public speaker – anyone can.

[Get in touch with us.](#) We help people communicate confidently through the spoken word.

And, we can help you.