



## Mistakes: gotta love 'em and learn from 'em Lessons learned from a presentation blooper

By Anne Scarlett, first printed in PSMJ's *AE Rainmaker*

To varying degrees, A/E/C rainmakers are required to deliver presentations to audiences—whether you are an accomplished keynote speaker, an industry expert presenting at conferences, an adjunct professor, or a technical professional that participates in new business pitches. Throughout my career, I've delivered dozens of presentations, and have attended dozens more. When it comes to mistakes, I've seen the good, bad, and ugly.

I'd like to share my own recent blooper. This spring, I was commissioned to deliver a 45-minute presentation at an industry conference. We had signed our contract over six months earlier. When it came time for content development, I mistakenly prepared one full hour—a 'typical' presentation timeframe. One week prior to the conference, I submitted my slides to the organizers. They let me know: 1. my timeslot would shift slightly; 2. there were too many slides to cover in 45 minutes. I assumed they encountered a scheduling crunch and were requesting that I shorten my presentation. So, I opted to remove a 15-minute section from the in-person delivery, but still leave the full version within the handout.

The day of the presentation, my welcoming comments included a reference to the timing shift. During, I made two additional casual timing references. My intentions were to explain the accelerated speed of delivery, along with the reasoning behind why one section would be omitted from delivery. I was preparing the audience to 'hold-on-for-the-ride', and inviting them to leisurely review the content later at their convenience.

Yet, even the most innocent intentions can sometimes backfire; as a communications expert, I should be sensitive to this. My statements—meant to be explanatory and light-hearted—were misconstrued. The organizers and audience were confused, perhaps even uncomfortable, by my timing comments. Post-presentation, the organizers reminded me that our original contract had only allowed for 45 minutes, not one hour. So, in fact, I had unknowingly misrepresented the situation.

Lessons from my faux pas:

1. **Be crystal clear on all parameters**, including timing allocations, when preparing for a presentation. It's important to revisit contract language to ensure your understanding matches the client's expectations.
2. **Frame circumstances in a positive light**. In this scenario, I should have emphasized benefits: "As a bonus, I've included an additional section of valuable information in your leave behind", rather than expressing regret: "Unfortunately, we won't have time to cover this section today".
3. **If parameters have truly been altered, then go with the flow**. Whether you are speaking at a conference or your team is interviewing for a new project, ultimately the audience is your 'client'. Therefore, flexibility and discretion are essential, especially if you are being compensated.

My story leads to the crux of this article. Because many of us spent our first two decades within family and school environments that shun mistakes, as professionals we must adjust our mindsets: embrace our mistakes. Here are just a few

fundamentals on the subject:

- Learning and growth are possible only when you accept responsibility for your mistakes.
- Just because you made a mistake does not mean you are a mistake!
- Talk through mistakes with others. Why did it happen? How will your behavior change next time?
- Sharing mistakes with trusted colleagues will help you accept it. Together, you may discover you are being too self-critical, or you may find elements of humor within the situation!
- Take care not to over-compensate for a mistake, because every situation will have nuances to consider.

Sure, it's glorious to receive kudos. After all, praise is what keeps us motivated and committed to our work! But let's face it: real growth comes from acknowledging—and learning from—our mistakes.