



# Dealing with Blunders

**The key to an effective presentation is to focus on impact, not perfection.**

By Cyndi Maxey and Kevin E. O'Connor

Professional speakers strive for excellence. They practice the words, timing, and delivery of their talks. They research and energize the audience; they mix and mingle.

But, in spite of their preparation, they know that their presentations will probably not go perfectly. They accept this reality because they also understand it is more important to make a lasting impression than it is to give a perfect presentation.

When you think about impact rather than perfection, your whole mood and emphasis change. Impact makes a difference for someone else; perfection makes it all about you. Successful speakers understand that their imperfections are paths to trust, help, and collaboration with others. And some of the best moments they have experienced in front of groups occurred when they survived mistakes, unexpected reactions, or untimely events.

Try to make an impact by showing the audience you are focused on them. Here's how:

**Be yourself.** When you are in front of a group and something goes wrong, everyone watches you. Swallow your pride, breathe through your anger, gather your senses, and move on.

Furthermore, don't over-apologize, say you're embarrassed, or waste time because of it. Just move on. Take a cue from comedians and celebrity interviews on television. When they make a mistake, they just keep going.

**Build rapport.** Memorable speakers are effective because they build a natural rapport with their audience members. When something goes awry, they apologize quickly (if necessary) and find out later what went wrong and how to make it better.

They also know how important it is to laugh at the bizarre things that can—and do—happen, as this short anonymous anecdote illustrates:

A CEO was scheduled to speak at an important convention, so he asked one of his employees to write him a punchy 20-minute speech. When the CEO returned from the big event, he was furious. "What's the idea of writing me an hour-long speech?" he demanded. "Half the audience walked out before

I finished.” The employee was baffled. “I wrote you a 20-minute speech,” he replied. “I also gave you the two extra copies you asked for.”

What is the lesson? Always review your notes and presentation materials. If you are concerned that you have repeated yourself or are speaking at the right speed, ask the audience. They will know. And if you want to know what they know, ask a good open-ended question and listen to their feedback.

**Get back on course.** Jerilyn Willin is a consultant and speaker who also owns Old English sheep dogs trained as show dogs. Once at a major dog show, her oldest dog, Greta, unexpectedly jumped over the barricades and ran aimlessly around the show floor. A voice over the loudspeaker announced: “Dog off-course, dog off-course!”

As the day progressed, Greta’s behavior did not improve, and the announcement “Dog off-course!” was made repeatedly. By the end of the show, the judges knew the dog so well that the announcement became: “Greta off-course, Greta off-course!”

Thankfully, Jerilyn is able to laugh about the incident now, but Greta is currently on hiatus from the show arena as a result of her “off-course” behavior.

As a speaker, you may also go off-course: Audience reaction to your ideas may be more negative than you expected; the crowd may be in a less mellow mood than you’re accustomed to; your stories may fall flat; or you may have questions that begin as soon as you do. Consequently, you must learn to adapt in the moment. Aim for flexibility in these kinds of situations. Then later, you can take a break and regroup. Speakers and presenters who insist on having things “their way” usually lose their audiences in the long run.

**Adapt on the spot.** Ask questions and be honest. If you don’t understand why you’re off-course, say so. Ask what you could do differently. Then do something about it.

It’s important to thank the audience for pointing out crucial details. Then, you should summarize the key ideas and take short a break. Afterward, ask everyone to share one word that describes their reactions to what happened.

Here’s one good example of adaptation on the fly: Once we listened to a speaker at a major conference on Valentine’s Day. Suddenly the fire alarms started going off. The hotel’s announcement to stay in place was made, and the speaker, who had now been interrupted three times by the alarms, regrouped by saying, “Those were probably from my mother; she has this way of reminding me to send her flowers today...” It was a great way of adapting to what could have been a disorienting moment.

**Set up a give-and-take relationship.**

Recently a management consultant introduced himself and his talk, and then he added how he expected interaction from us. “You cannot hurt my feelings by disagreeing with me,” he said. “I’ve been married 38 years.” That moment of humor clarified our role as audience members during his presentation: We were allowed to disagree.

When someone disagrees with you, make sure the first words out of your mouth are “thank you.” Audience members like to be appreciated, and they like to feel safe. When they stick out their neck, make sure that you acknowledge it.

**Put it in perspective.** As William Shakespeare wrote in *As You Like It*, “All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players.” As a speaker, you have an entrance and an exit. You’re not onstage forever. This is one presentation among a lifetime of events. So, keep your sense of humor, learn from the mistake, but move on.

As you rack up experience with presentation after presentation, you will increase your learning. Treat each presentation or speech as an educational experience and not as a final judgment. Remember, the speaker

## Three Ways to Keep a Discussion Going

**1** Say “tell me more” with an interested, expectant look on your face and then wait for the answer.

**2** Call people by name and ask them to share their perspectives. Do this only if they give you a nonverbal sign they are with you or want to participate. Never call on people cold—they usually have no idea what you are talking about and it can embarrass them. Better yet, allow everyone to talk to a partner first, and then ask for input—you will always get it.

**3** Save a few questions to ask when you really need them. Prepare them in advance, and write them on your flipchart. If no participants respond, tell a rehearsed story about the last time you asked this question.

who never makes a mistake probably isn’t speaking much.

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