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Recovering from Embarrassing Moments

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I was all ready for my presentation. I had carefully prepared my remarks, dressed for success, and arrived early to check out the venue. My host greeted me cordially and oriented me to the equipment that I would use. Because the room was large and acoustics were sub-optimal, he suggested that I wear a lapel microphone. I clipped on the device, tested the volume, and promptly forgot about it. Then, shortly before I was to speak, I made a quick trip to the ladies' room — with the microphone working perfectly.

When I returned, the audience seemed highly entertained about something, and only when my distressed host informed me of my blunder did I understand the source of their amusement.

Most of us have experienced embarrassment — both in our personal and professional lives. Even the best-laid plans can't prevent an occasional gaffe, but how we handle it can determine what happens next.

Acknowledge

You can start defusing an awkward moment immediately by simply acknowledging the situation. Trying to act as if it didn't really happen often makes things worse. When I received the news, the audience could see that I got the message, and that seemed to add to their delight. Rather than running for cover, I joked about how I had seen that scenario in a movie and found it extremely funny — when it happened to someone else. The fact that I didn't get defensive or hostile toward them for laughing at me immediately created a supportive atmosphere in the group and, amazingly, the presentation went well.

Accept

What's done is done. You can't change the fact that you spilled a drink on your boss or mispronounced your guest speaker's name. Imperfection is a part of the human condition. We all make mistakes or behave inappropriately at times during our lives. Don't continue to punish yourself but rather start to strategize about how to recover and to avoid a similar situation in the future.

Apologize if Appropriate

Sometimes our moment occurs when we embarrass, distress, or offend someone else. We may bring up a painful memory or realize that we have revealed something to that person that he or she didn't know — until now. Before we get too concerned about our own chagrin, we need to take care of the other person's feelings. A sincere apology is in order, and that person may or may not be receptive to your explanation or reasons for the incident.

If you can remediate the situation, do so, but you may have to leave it at your apology and let some time pass before trying to address it.

Advance

Some of our most significant growth comes from painful experiences. For one thing, embarrassment teaches humility and empathy. Any time our self-image takes a hit, even a temporary one, we can emerge with valuable insights and better ways to move forward.

What's Your Story?

If you have an embarrassing moment to share, let us know how you handled it.

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