

By Calvin Sun

Who can forget Leon Lett, Thanksgiving 1993, and the football game between Miami and Dallas? In the closing seconds of that game, played during a sleet storm, Dallas held a tenuous 14-13 lead. Miami had the ball and was attempting a field goal that could put them ahead and win the game. Dallas blocked the kick, but only partially, and the ball landed on the ground beyond the line of scrimmage. At that point, Dallas didn't need to do anything at all. Time could have run out as the ball rolled on the ground, giving Dallas the win. Or Dallas could have taken over the ball on downs and simply kneeled down once or twice to run out the clock. Inexplicably, though, Dallas player Leon Lett went after the ball, slipped, and made contact with it. With the ball now live and in play, Miami recovered, attempted another field goal, and won the game. Lett's mistake turned certain victory into defeat.

We may mess up sometimes in our work. The mistake we make, unfortunately, could be a major one. Mine never occurred on national television but nonetheless had serious repercussions. In a previous job, I helped develop a software system for a state transportation department. As a security officer, I had full authority to all files (both production and test, in different libraries) on the machine we were using.

One day, while I was performing SQL queries and insertions, the telephone rang. Users were telling us that a production table had bad data, and when we looked, we discovered that that table had *exactly* the same contents as our test file. Even worse, our review of the journal entries for that file showed that my user profile was associated with the insertion of that data. We fixed the problem, but believe me it was an experience I will long remember.

As you can see, I'm qualified to talk about handling mistakes. I hope you never find yourself in a similar situation, but if you do, here are some measures you should take.

1 If possible, come up with a plan to fix the problem

Don't just walk away and wash your hands of the situation. True, other people might have to be involved in solving the problem. However, if you caused the problem, you are responsible for coming up with the plan to resolve it. The plan needs to address the actions that need to occur, the people who need to take them, and the amount of time you think the actions will take. The people involved most likely will be the boss, your co-workers, and any internal or external customers affected by the mistake.

2 Come clean with your boss

Trying to cover things up rarely works. If and when your boss finds out, say, from someone else (worst of all from your boss' boss), things will be even worse for you. In this kind of situation, it's important that you be in control of the message. So as hard as it will be, you should summon up your strength, take a deep breath, and go talk to your boss.

3 Let the boss know about that plan

In this situation, and in fact at any other time, never to go to the boss with just a problem. Go with a solution as well. In this case, go with the plan you developed and show the boss that, to at least some degree, you're in control.

4 Tell the affected parties

Let those affected by your mistake know what happened, but spare the technical details for now. Instead, focus on how the situation affects them: what limitations are in place, what functions are unavailable, and how long these limitations and lack of function are expected to last. Most important, offer any workarounds you can. Ask for their suggestions as well. If the mistake involves a system outage, perhaps some veteran techs can remember what they did in the old days, before that system was in place. If you have to and can do so, think about calling retirees for their ideas.

5 Don't blame others

You're no longer in grade school. Trying to blame other people makes you look unprofessional, diminishing the opinion that others have of you. Conversely (and paradoxically), taking responsibility and admitting your mistake can win you respect. Your co-workers might end up thinking, "You know, even though [your name] messed up, it took a lot of character to admit it. [Your name] is a real stand-up person, and someone who can be counted on."

6 Stop looking back

Learning from the past can help prevent repeat mistakes. However, don't confuse learning from the past with *dwelling* on the past. The latter involves endless self-recrimination and often self-pity, neither of which helps resolve the situation. If you find yourself dwelling on the mistake in this manner, stop it right now and read the next tip.

7 Prepare and issue a "lessons learned" document

"Those who do not remember the past are doomed to repeat it." "As a dog returns to its vomit, so a fool repeats his folly." Maybe you've heard these or similar sayings. Their point is clear: We need to understand the mistake we made so that we can avoid it in the future. Documenting the mistake, and the steps taken to resolve it, are key in this regard. In doing so, be sure to cover the conditions that led to the mistake, the steps taken to correct it, and the measures taken to prevent its recurrence.

In my example of the bad SQL table, I ended up not only keeping my job, but I also kept my security officer user profile. However, we created a second user profile for me, one that lacked access to production data, which I was to use for testing and development work.

8 Apologize to those affected

Mistakes often cost others in lost time and productivity and hence frustrate them. Consequently, even if you solve the problem, the people who were affected by it might still be upset if you never acknowledge that frustration. I'm not saying you have to be an Oprah or a Dr. Phil, but taking a second to apologize will go a long way toward restoring you to good graces. By doing so, you show you appreciate what they had to go through.

9 Determine whether the mistake can occur elsewhere

This point relates to the "lessons learned" document. Here, however, you should consider other areas of the business, or other applications. To what extent do they have the same conditions, procedures, or people that could cause them to experience the same type of problem? You might want to alert those areas. They may answer that they have more competent staff, but that's a risk you'll have to take.

10 Put the best face possible on what happened

Everyone focuses on the negative effects of a problem. There had to be some; otherwise, it wouldn't have been a problem and wouldn't have received such scrutiny. However, can you find *any* good things, no matter how small, that resulted from this problem? One of the most useful concepts I've learned is that of "reframing" the situation, that is, to change the way a person looks at it. In this case, reframing the problem might take the following form:

- Yes, a problem occurred.
- Yes, the system was unavailable.

BUT the good news is:

- It happened during a slow time.
- It identified issues we need to address elsewhere in other systems.

Of course, in offering these arguments, it's helpful if you can do so with a straight face.

Epilogue


So what happened to Leon Lett? He made two more high-visibility plays, both in Super Bowls and both against Buffalo. One hurt his team, involving a premature celebration of a recovered fumble. It cost Dallas a touchdown, but they still won. The other play, though, helped his team: He stripped a Buffalo player of the ball, and a Dallas teammate recovered it and returned it for a touchdown. Lett was also selected in 1994 and 1998 to play in the Pro Bowl. So you see, a major mistake need not be career fatal.

Happy Thanksgiving.



[Calvin Sun](#) works with organizations in the areas of customer service, communications, and leadership. In addition to writing this column, he contributes to TechRepublic's [Desktop Support Blog](#). You can contact him at csun@calvinsun.com.

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