

CAREERS WORKPLACE

How to Recover from 8 Awkward Work Moments

Natasha Burton / Daily Worth | Sept. 14, 2015

Time to focus on your rebound strategy.

Awkward moments can happen unexpectedly in any area of our lives. But because [work is a setting](#) where we're continually judged by our actions — and our very [livelihoods depend on our performance](#) — embarrassing moments can come with extra consequences. While you can laugh off an uncomfortable situation with a friend or spouse, it's way more challenging to do so with your colleagues or boss.



The following scenarios are all too common, but don't panic: Recovery is possible. Here's how to handle cringe-worthy situations gracefully and professionally.

A Coworker Accidentally Forwards a Personal Email Between You to the Whole Team

Email: The easiest way to ensure that your personal conversations will be read by all. Perhaps you and a coworker were emailing back and forth and then he decided to add other people on the thread to weigh in ... not realizing that your private back-and-forth — including some [not-so-kind comments about another colleague](#) — would end up on the chain.

National etiquette expert [Diane Gottsman](#), owner of The Protocol School of Texas, says it would be most appropriate to go, in person, to anyone your comments may have offended and offer [an apology](#). Say something like: "John passed along an email that was meant solely for his eyes. I was still heated from the meeting earlier and said some things out of frustration. Please accept my apology."

Someone Says Something Inappropriate During a Work Lunch

If you're working through lunch with coworkers and the conversation turns to gossip or

something very personal, deflect and change the subject. “You can say, ‘Can we please stay on task? I have a meeting after our lunch and would like to finalize the details before I have to leave,’” Gottsman suggests. Or, if you’re just having a casual lunch with coworkers, you might try, “I’m uncomfortable with this conversation since John isn’t here to give his side of the story.”

If the comment is bigoted, relationship advice columnist and etiquette expert [April Masini](#) suggests taking a stand to set an example for others. Explain that the comments are unprofessional and that you hope you won’t hear them again, she says, keeping your comments “short and sweet, being firm that there is no place for racism or prejudice of any kind.”

You Walk In on Your Boss in the Bathroom

Okay, yes, he or she should have locked the door. But that’s beside the point once this awkward moment occurs. How to recover? “Say something like, ‘I’m so sorry! I didn’t notice someone was in the stall,’ and then let it go, says Gottsman.

Whatever you do, don’t mention it again. “The more you do, the more you both relive it. Eventually, the numerous attempts end up reflecting poorly on you because they make it impossible to move on,” says Masini.

If your boss brings it up after the incident, which is unlikely but just in case, say, “Again, I apologize for the unintentional intrusion,” Gottsman suggests.

Someone (Maybe You) Lets Loose a Bodily Function During a Meeting

Talk about yikes. The best thing to do when someone, say, lets one rip, is to be gracious and deal with it for a few moments without saying a word or rolling your eyes, knowing that it can happen to anyone.

If you’re the culprit, you have a few options, says etiquette expert [Rosalinda Randall](#), author of *Don’t Burp in the Boardroom*:

- One, you could look intently at the person speaking and pretend that you’re fascinated by her every word.
- Two, you could try looking around with a who-did-it expression. But denying it could make the situation more embarrassing.
- Three, you can quietly whisper, “I’m so sorry” to those around you and hope they say nothing.

No matter what, it’s just going to be embarrassing. But you can move on.

You Overhear a Private Conversation in the Break Room

If you happen to be in a shared space and a group of coworkers starts gabbing, unaware that you’re hearing their every word, you have two choices: You can make your presence known with a cliché throat clearing, or you can just finish what you’re doing and walk away.

“What’s important is that no matter what you overhear, you must keep it to yourself, as though you never heard it. Especially if it’s purely gossip or hearsay,” says Randall. If you feel compelled to share, call someone totally unrelated to work, like your best friend or partner, Randall adds.

Depending on what was said and your relationship with the people who were talking, Gottsman says you might want to let one of them know privately that you couldn't help but overhear. You may even suggest a more secluded meeting area in the future to respect everyone's privacy.

Your Boss Comes Up Behind You When You're Clearly Watching a Cat Video

Everyone needs a little downtime at the office. But it seems like your manager always seems to visit your desk the moment you check Facebook or finally click on that funny link your sister sent you.

Instead of trying to play off your non-work-related activities as "research" or something equally unconvincing, recover by being honest and saying something like, "You caught me red-handed," says [Jacqueline Whitmore](#), founder of The Protocol School of Palm Beach, Inc. After taking responsibility, "quickly bury your head, work like a bandit, and hope that all memory of said transgression is successfully forgiven and erased," adds etiquette expert [Lisa Gache](#).

You Call Someone the Wrong Name

Recover by apologizing right away and correcting yourself, Randall says. Or if the person you're speaking with corrects you first, say something like "Sorry, and thanks for understanding. It's something I'm working on ... happens all too often," to depersonalize the slight.

If someone calls you the wrong name, which can be just as awkward, first evaluate whether it's worth a correction. "For example, if it's a chance encounter with a vendor you may never work with again, you may prefer to just let it slide," Gache says. But if it's an ongoing mistake with a colleague you see often, you want to correct him. There's no need to let the awkwardness continue every time you run into each other in the hallway or during a meeting. You might even make a joke by saying something like, "Actually, my name is Rebecca. It's okay — even my mom forgets sometimes," to ease the situation.

You Accidentally Say "Love You, Bye" to Your Boss at the End of a Phone Call

This is the grown-up equivalent of a middle schooler accidentally calling her teacher "Mom." Hopefully your boss has a sense of humor and won't take your comment to heart. More often than not, if your relationship with your boss is friendly, cracking a joke can be an easy way to get past it. "Playfully say, 'I'll just say bye next time,'" Randall suggests.

If your relationship is more formal, you may consider a brief apology, or you may decide that he or she would prefer to overlook it without discussion or explanation. "If you've worked together long enough, your boss will immediately realize that it was a slip-up," Randall says. "No need to get dramatic or lose sleep over it."

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