

DON'T SAY UM

*HOW TO COMMUNICATE EFFECTIVELY
TO LIVE A BETTER LIFE*

**MICHAEL CHAD
HOEPPNER**



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CHAPTER 18

RECOVERING FROM MISTAKES

How to Embrace Transparency (and Avoid Hiding)

One of the core sources of nerves for people is, to quote Franklin Delano Roosevelt, fear itself. People are terrorized by the thought “What if I mess up?” The fear of messing up often makes the likelihood of messing up higher because it amps communicators’ nerves so much that it makes it harder for them to think of the words they’re striving to say. How can you disarm the mistakes yet to come? Think of all the “mistakes” we make when speaking; verbal stumbles; misapplied metaphors; errors or typos on a presentation slide; outdated facts or statistics; incorrect information. We all say lots and lots of wrong, poorly executed, or unintended stuff.

I suggest for all these situations and more that you unlock the power of a tool you already use but forget when you become self-focused: Transparency. Transparency can mean a lot of different things in different situations, but for our purposes I mean acknowledging, naming, and owning what’s happening in a given moment in fully transparent language. In the next few paragraphs, I would like to convince you of the following mantra: “A Mistake Is Not a Mistake.”

When humans are tremendously other-focused, they live this mantra without even thinking about it. If your best friend were going through

a crisis and you mistakenly gave them the wrong contact information for a lawyer, would you feel any awkwardness about correcting it? No! If you were helping a lost tourist and you mistakenly gave them the wrong street name, would you feel any awkwardness about correcting it? No! Yet when “presenting,” people feel obligated to be entirely mistake free. And that rigid focus on being flawless derails them. The goal I invite you to embrace is flexibility, not flawlessness.

What does this look like in practice? I once coached a gentleman from Germany who speaks five languages. At times, his English was difficult to understand. He was stuck in a vicious cycle in which he would make a mistake in grammar or pronunciation and then try to hide that mistake with two unhelpful behaviors. First, he would physically contract—literally try to shrink. This was his attempt to prevent people from noticing him. Second, he would talk faster. This was his attempt to prevent people from noticing his mistake.

Do you think either attempt worked?

No. Those two behaviors made his mistakes more noticeable, not less. So instead of trying to hide or disguise his mistakes, I coached him to use transparency unabashedly by creating and integrating transparency phrases. I coached him to say things like the following when he made a pronunciation “mistake”: “Pardon me—I speak five languages. Sometimes English pronunciation is difficult. How do you pronounce that word?”

By employing that tool, he accomplished three things in one fell swoop. First, he subtly but unmistakably educated his audience about his multilingual abilities (“He speaks five languages!”). Second, he reflected the energy of the interaction back to his audience. We all want to feel intelligent and capable of pronouncing words. So when his audience was given the opportunity to display intelligence and accurate pronunciation, they felt valuable. And third, he relieved himself of any obligation to hide. His relief was so profound that very soon he discovered he didn’t even need the transparency phrase. Why? Because his big and powerful brain—now relieved of the burden of avoiding every mistake in the future and camouflaging every one in the past—was liberated to actually think about what he wanted to say in the first place! He had a tool. And because

of that tool, he actually thought of words more accurately and speedily. His mistakes didn't happen as frequently.

Let's consider another example—a universal one that's relevant regardless of the number of languages you speak. If you're drawing on a flip chart in front of a room and the marker doesn't work, is it better to hide the marker behind your back and pretend you weren't writing, or is it better to say, "This marker doesn't work, I'll try another one"? If you pick up a second marker and it doesn't work either, is it better to hide the marker behind your back and pretend you weren't writing, or is it better to say, "This marker doesn't work either. Apparently, we need a new marker budget"? (You can probably surmise my answer from my leading questions.)

The marker is a piece of technology. It has a filament, the filament is soaked in ink, and when you press the filament to a piece of paper, the ink gets expelled. It's a fairly primitive piece of technology, but a piece of technology nonetheless. PowerPoint is also technology—some might say equally as primitive as the marker. In that hypothetical moment, you were failed by technology. Who else has ever been failed by technology at some point in their life? Any person you will ever speak to in any audience anywhere.

When you are transparent, you do two powerful things. One, you let your audience know that you are alive in the present moment—no small feat in our modern smart-device-riddled world! And, two, you engage your audience's empathy. And if you have engaged an audience's empathy, as a presenter you are halfway home.

To get very specific, I'd like to teach you the Three Fs of Transparency. You're probably familiar with three other Fs that pervade mistake moments in presentation situations (and that I mentioned briefly in Chapter 9): fight, flight, or freeze. Those, of course, are the three typical crisis responses humans resort to when under threat. Those tactics might work well for fleeing a saber-toothed tiger; they are less effective when behind a podium. So I invite you to replace those three Fs with these: Fake it, Fix it, and Feature it. Those are the Three Fs of Transparency.

You might be wondering how on earth the first F can be Fake it, given that I've just spent two pages proving to you that you don't have to Fake it when you make mistakes. I'm not suggesting that every time you make any

type of mistake or error you must bring it to your audience’s attention. If no one will notice, if you can proceed without it throwing you off—Fake it! But if the “mistake” is threatening to undermine you in the least—if you are going to spend the next ten minutes obsessing about your “mistake” while simultaneously trying to continue speaking—you have two great options.

One, you can Fix it. That might sound something like, “The PowerPoint clicker isn’t working at the moment, so I’ll just sit with my laptop and advance the slides manually.” Or you can Feature it, which means that you position the moment as a positive thing. That might sound something like, “The PowerPoint clicker isn’t working, which is actually a great reminder to talk about updating our infrastructure and technology.”

Now you get to draft your own transparency phrase, just as I coached the German gentleman to do. Please write down a statement that you could use to course correct when (not if) you make a “mistake.” That might be something like any of the following:

- LET ME GO BACK FOR A MOMENT ...
- LET ME CLARIFY THAT ...
- HERE’S A BETTER WAY TO PUT IT ...
- ACTUALLY, WHAT I MEAN IS ...
- LET’S START AGAIN ...
- TAKING A STEP BACK ...
- ON SECOND THOUGHT ...

WRITE YOURS HERE:

NOW WRITE ANOTHER TWO (BECAUSE LIFE HAS PLENTY OF MISTAKES IN STORE FOR YOU):

* * *

Hopefully, just the act of choosing a phrase and writing it down feels delicious and liberating, as you envision how using this phrase like a Get Out of Jail Free card might transform your performance as well as your perception of pressure. But writing it down is just the beginning. It's time to make some visual aids.

You wrote three transparency phrases; following, you'll see six others. In a second you can turn the page and check them out, but first let me explain what they are. They look roughly like playing cards. I use these cards with my clients to help desensitize them to mistakes. If you feel emboldened to use this book like the how-to manual that it is, cut them out! In a moment, rip out the pages, and tear or cut along the dotted lines to give yourself six cards with six different transparency phrases. If you don't want to further deface your already tatter-torn copy of *Don't Say Um*, you can also just write those phrases on sticky notes or scraps of paper. Or you can get your own set. These six cards are one set in a larger card game tool we designed for our clients called Conversation. If you want to get the full game—or just the six transparency cards—you can do so at dontsayum.com.

Note that none of the cards features the words *I'm sorry*. An apology is for when you have done something wrong. Mistakes often simply require a correction, not an apology.

Perhaps just glancing at those cards (or the sticky notes you scrawled) has already inspired you to navigate challenges, mishaps, and course corrections unabashedly.

But you know me: at this point, we have to make this kinesthetic so your body remembers it, not just your brain.

What comes next requires balance and dexterity. If I were coaching you in person, I would have you talk while standing on one leg. Then I would repeatedly and randomly push you (ever so gently) so that you would have to put your elevated foot back on the floor to avoid falling over. As you placed your foot down to keep your balance, I would ask you to say the mantra, "A Mistake Is Not a Mistake." Then you would lift your foot again to reassume a one-legged stance and continue speaking.



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Then we would go further, and instead of saying the A Mistake Is Not a Mistake mantra, I would require you to say the six specific transparency phrases on the cards in random order as I pushed you over repeatedly. I created this exercise for my clients because it physicalizes the ostensibly perilous moment of making a mistake: “Oh no! I’m off balance! I’m about to fall/fail!” But in the instant of recovery that follows—when the speaker has both feet on the ground—they get the relief of safety. Their body gets the experience that not only is a mistake not a crisis—it’s not even a mistake.

In essence, it’s desensitization training. I desensitize my clients to the act of making a “mistake.”

I used this exercise once with a senior partner at a venerable financial firm. This gentleman fit all the cliché stereotypes of the Wall Street Master of the Universe archetype. Yet this gentleman got choked up in this activity and was moved to tears. I gave him a moment to live through the experience. Then I asked him gently about his reaction. “I wasn’t crying because I was scared or upset,” he said. “For the first time, I just felt self-forgiveness.” He forgave himself for the “mistakes”; he gave himself license to be imperfect.

Now: let’s manage expectations for a moment. This drill may not be a cathartic life-changer for you. Let’s not saddle it with undoing years of perfectionism. But... for those perfectionists out there, don’t be shocked if this modest exercise creates some major epiphanies.

Because I’m not sharing the same space with you, we must adjust the drill so that even without my arbitrarily timed shoves we can create an essential element: randomness. We must create a situation in which you are not in control of when you have to adapt or course correct because, although you can certainly predict that mistakes will happen, you rarely can predict when. To create that random, unpredictable timing, we’re going to enlist the help of an unlikely partner: water. You will need two things—a working sink you can stand near and a tiny container that can be filled with water. I do mean tiny. A thimble, bottle cap, contact lens case, or something similar will do the trick. I’ll explain the drill, and then you can navigate to a sink and try it.

When you are ready to begin the exercise, place the container under the faucet in a stable position so it can fill with water without tipping.

Once the container is positioned, turn the faucet on at a miniscule drip so that the container gradually fills with water. Begin speaking on professional content and use something extensive enough that you can speak for five to ten minutes. You will see the gradual drip-drip-drip of water fill up the container; at some point, the surface tension is no longer sufficient to contain the water, and some portion of it will spill over. That is the moment you are watching for because that is your cue to use a transparency phrase.

For the first incarnation of the drill, when those spillover moments happen I want you to: (1) say “A Mistake Is Not a Mistake” out loud; (2) pour out the water in the container and return it to position; and (3) continue speaking from wherever you left off (or shift to a different portion of your content). Do the exercise long enough that you have six to eight instances of saying that mantra.

The next version incorporates the cards. When doing the drill, you'll spread them out face side up next to the sink so that you can see the text of each card. Do the drill again, but this time instead of saying the Mistake Is Not a Mistake mantra when the spillover moment happens, choose one of the six cards and say whatever phrase is on that card. Then do the same steps as before: empty the water, reposition the cup, and continue speaking. Do this series until you have used all six cards (each card can be used only once).

Then you'll be ready for the last version. It's the same exercise, but with an added level of difficulty because you'll be saying a randomly chosen transparency phrase. In this version, shuffle up the six cards and place them face down near the sink. Do the water droplet activity again, but this time at each spillover moment draw a card from the top of the pile and say whatever transparency phrase you have just randomly selected. Here it is step-by-step one final time: (1) talk, and when the spillover happens, pick up the top card and say its phrase; (2) empty the container and return it to its place; and (3) keep talking.

Ready to try? I thought so! Go find a container and sink and try each of the versions of this activity. I'll see you back here shortly...

* * *

What did you discover? If you're like many of the people around the world to whom I've taught this exercise, as you got accustomed to the drill not only were you able to continue speaking, but also your speaking may have

improved through the arc of the exercise! Embracing the inevitable bumps and bruises that come along may have freed you up to use more vocal variety, more gestural freedom, more enunciation, more, more, more.

I like the water version of this activity because the sensory experience makes it very memorable, but there are other tools. If you have an old-fashioned handheld kitchen timer, you can use that. Whenever the timer rings, instead of adjusting the flow of the sink, quickly and randomly turn the dial somewhere in the one- to three-minute range. Or use the timer app on your smartphone. Select the timer function, set it to forty-five seconds to start. Then each time you say the mantra or use a card, reset the time—quickly and sloppily spin the number of seconds so that you're adapting to different intervals of time. (You can also get the minutes column involved, but you will get more payoff from this drill by doing many course corrections and adjustments, so condensed intervals are preferred.)

PRACTICE OR PERFORMANCE?

This drill is both a practice and a performance one. The practice version utilizes the cards and some device to create randomness. But the performance one is simply this: use transparency to navigate the inevitable mistakes that inhabit all of our communication lives. As you do this, you will begin to see these principles everywhere. And you may even want to institute them beyond your communication. After all, navigating mistakes with grace and transparency isn't just good in communication; it's good in life. And it's not just good for your audience; it's good for you, as our titan of Wall Street realized.

WHAT ABOUT VIRTUAL?

Using transparency when communicating virtually is even more powerful. Why? Because it can not only help you navigate mistakes but also help you demonstrate your attentiveness. When we're communicating on video calls, it's all too tempting to multitask and let our eyes stray to all the other urgent or unnecessary items on our desktop crying out for our attention—all the pop-up notifications, social media posts, important

email tasks, and so forth. A great way to show your audience you are not distracted is by transparently telling them what your eyes are looking at when they stray around the landscape of your screen. That can sound something like, “If you’re seeing my eyes roam about, that’s because I’m just pulling up the document right now.” No one likes to think they’re a lower priority than all your other to-do items. Transparency in this context is a great way to show they aren’t.

That’s an example of what not to hide on virtual calls: don’t hide the fact that your eyes are straying to find something for your audience. But what should you hide? Using the cards; you can take advantage of the Cloak of Invisibility to practice with them imperceptibly. This can take some mindshare, of course, so I recommend using them on low-consequence calls to start.

PRO TIP

The most frequent misstep (no pun intended) people make in the Mistake Is Not a Mistake drill is not giving the mantra or transparency phrase enough weight. Maybe they skip it entirely. Maybe they mutter it under their breath. Maybe they abbreviate it into a tepid “well” or “also.” So be a stickler about the phrase, and discipline yourself to use this mantra and transparency phrases with conviction.

By the way, “A Mistake Is Not a Mistake” is a six-word story. Regardless of whether Hemingway was the father of six-word stories, they are a powerful tool to synthesize big ideas in few words. And I want you to practice synthesis right now, because—congratulations!—you have just completed all the skill-building chapters of *Don't Say Um*.

So I want you to write a six-word story about: (1) what you have learned in this book; or (2) what you will do differently because of it. I’ll give you a few examples to get the juices flowing:

- ✦ This book taught me the “how.”
- ✦ Use my body more; brain less.
- ✦ Stop trying to stop being nervous.

PLEASE WRITE IN YOUR OWN HERE:

I hope that's the first of many six-word stories this book inspires you to write. In fact, if you like what you just wrote, turn it into a mantra. You might even choose to post it somewhere where you see it frequently. Where is such a place? Lots of people I coach use the wallpaper screen-saver on their smart device as a kind of recurrent visual cue. That's just one way to keep these skills top of mind.

What are some other ones? That's the subject of Chapter 19. Let's get to building your daily communication regimen.

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