Mists, Wrecks, & Mistakes
Andrea Starks-Corbin | Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors

Mistakes are nuanced. They can seem clear at first, but as you slowly examine and pull back the layers, a myriad of possibilities of why or how they occurred begin to present themselves. All the faults appear.

I am often reminded of an exercise my philosophy instructor had us work through. The scenario was a driver speeding down a city road, hits a pothole, and wrecks their car. Was it the driver’s fault they wrecked the car, or was it the city’s fault because of the pothole? As we worked through the exercise arguments included: If the driver was going the speed limit or slower, would the pothole still cause them to wreck? If the driver was going the speed limit or slower, would they see the pothole in time to miss it? Even if they missed it, what if they overcorrected and still wrecked? Did the pothole appear that day, so the city didn’t know about it? Did the city know about the pothole, and they did nothing about it? Is it both their fault (mistake)? Does it matter whose fault (mistake) it was? And, thanks to the student who read too much Descartes, how can we really know anything? Philosophy jokes aside, a mistake isn’t just a mistake.

In context of professional mistakes, some of them are inconsequential while others have considerable effects. I must admit I don’t have research or an article to extrapolate on to give proof to this claim, but I do have my own experiences.

Because of the nature of my role, most of my mistakes are seen by everyone. By everyone, I mean those in the membership who open their emails, read social media posts, read the publications, and so on. They are mainly typos or html errors, but they are incredibly deflating. If I can’t catch the difference between “a band new experience” and “a brand new experience” until after I hit “send to all,” am I even a good professional? If I can’t catch the basics like misspellings, a broken link, or formatting errors, what am I even doing? I know these errors may come across as trivial, but mistakes like these eat away at my self-confidence.

In these cases, I was speeding and did not see the pothole. These mistakes are frustrating, especially when you pride yourself on being a professional and doing a good job. Often, I see the mistake I made right as the readers do. Sure, I have help like spellcheck, test emails, proofreaders, and more, but those safeguards do not catch everything. And, I do not blame them for not catching them. With these mistakes, it is important to reflect, recenter, and refocus on your work. I joked with a colleague that I should have two signs on my desk: “Double Check Everything” and “Are You Sure You Want to Send This?” I admit I can get overly confident in my daily routine, and
these mistakes happen because I went too quickly, I trusted my memory and didn’t write something down, or I did not proof as closely as I should. These instances reminded me to slow down, write all the details out (no matter how small), and check, check, and triple check.

Unfortunately, sometimes I am the pothole. When I first started my professional journey with AFA, my role was in a shared-staff model with AFLV. At my first AFLV conference, AFLV Central, I recorded all the main session voice overs and introductions. The conference was about to start, and the room filled with “Ladies and gentlemen please take your seats.” It is my job to monitor social media, so it wasn’t until I saw a Twitter post calling me out a minute after, did I realize the mistake I had made. I had used binary terms, and I left out many individuals from the experience. At first, my gut reaction was, “It was an honest mistake! That’s what was written. Doesn’t this person know I didn’t mean anything nefarious?” But, after reflection, this was my mistake to own. It does not matter if it was my mistake, it was hurtful. It is my responsibility to learn and grow and offer an apology. I have learned so much since then about inclusivity, and I honor the knowledge and passion of our membership to ensure all feel welcome.

Because mistakes are ubiquitous, there are mistakes that are perceived as mistakes but really might not be. These situations call for a draw between the car and the pothole. I am going to share my next experience not to air my grievances, but to ask for an open mind and consideration. During the awards ceremony at the Annual Meeting last year, a song was mentioned in a speech. To audience members, they may see a handful of people in the audio/visual (A/V) booth. For context, one is on sound, one is on lighting, one is on visuals, one a volunteer who is designing, advancing slides, and communicating with the A/V company, and one (me) is calling the direction, making sure we are all coordinating on cues, monitoring social media and the app, and live tweeting so those not in attendance can follow along. I know it may seem like “Between one of them, can’t they play the song?”

The answer at the time was unfortunately no. Because I see most things in real-time, I knew people were very upset. I felt terrible for causing any semblance of neglecting the award winner’s accomplishments on behalf of the association. I apologized the best I could, yet I still felt I had made a horribly wrong mistake. Between me and our wonderful volunteer, we simply did not have the physical bandwidth to find the song, download it, upload into our music editor, and snip it into a clip. All around, this particular situation was just unfortunate. Again, I am not sharing to have a personal Festivus, but more to illustrate the nuanced and layered intricacies of perception.

Mistakes, like potholes, are going to happen. However, if we miss or wreck is up to us. As individuals, we need to give ourselves the grace to accept our mistakes, learn from them, and
move on in a positive direction. And, as stewards of fraternity/sorority life, maybe we can temper our reaction to fault someone for a mistake by reaching out in a one-to-one conversation, offering advice, and helping them grow.

---

Andrea Starks-Corbin is the director of marketing and communications for the Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors. She earned her bachelor’s in professional writing from Missouri State University where she joined Sigma Kappa Sorority. She currently resides in Eagle, CO with her husband, daughter, and two dogs, but she always roots for her hometown Kansas City Royals and Chiefs. Sorry Broncos fans.