

Pink Slips *of the* Tongue

THE **TOP 5** ONE-SENTENCE CAREER *Killers* & How to Recover When You Commit One

By Joseph Grenny,
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Marianne C. thought she was in a “safe” staff meeting where open discussion was encouraged so she spoke up and shared her opinions. After the meeting, she found herself in and out of the discipline process and shortly thereafter demoted. Ultimately, she lost her chance for advancement at the hospital.

Pam S. witnessed a coworker sabotage his own career when he slandered their workplace on his personal Facebook account. Another colleague he was “friends” with turned him in to HR and he was immediately terminated.

And then there’s Sarah D., who was hired as a sales lead in a retail store. Within a month of being hired, both store managers quit. Sarah and one other colleague were left to run the store with zero training or management support during the busy holiday season. Exasperated, she finally sent a formal e-mail to the regional manager asking for help and letting her know they were “understaffed and overworked” and that “the situation needed to be dealt with immediately.” The next day, Sarah received a phone call from the regional manager who reprimanded her for her “hostile” tone and “gross insubordination.” Most damaging to the business, was being told that the possibility of any support was “out the window.”

Our latest research shows nearly every employee has either seen or suffered from a catastrophic comment like Marianne, Pam, and Sarah did. Specifically, **83 percent have witnessed their colleagues say something that has had catastrophic results on their careers, reputations, and businesses. And 69 percent admit to personally making a catastrophic comment.**

No one is immune to verbal blunders. Just look at some of the more public examples from the last year.

While attempting to rally women voters in the 2016 presidential election, Madeleine Albright, the first female secretary of state, rebuked women for not supporting the female candidate saying, “There’s a special place in hell for women who don’t help each other!” Albright endured great backlash from young, female voters and the media. One woman’s response stated, “Shame on . . . Madeleine Albright for implying that we as women should be voting for a candidate based solely on gender. I can tell you that shaming me and essentially calling me misinformed and stupid is NOT the way to win my vote.” Albright’s reputation took a major blow and her comments shed a negative light on the female candidate’s campaign.

Or, consider Brian Williams who lost his job as anchor and managing editor of NBC Nightly News after stretching the truth about his experiences during the Iraq War. After Williams’ initial suspension, more incidents of “inaccurate statements” were uncovered and his ten-year career on the Nightly News came to an end. Not only did he lose his job, he lost the trust of his viewers and his credibility as a news reporter.

The truth is, putting your foot in your mouth—whether consciously or accidentally—is easy to do, and as a result we get to observe the ugly aftermath of catastrophic conversations all around us. But can just any slip of the tongue be fatal to your career, or are there some comments that are far more damaging than others?

The Top Five One-Sentence Career *Killers*

We asked the 780 respondents of our survey to tell the story of the catastrophic comment they either committed or observed. We combed through each story to uncover the top five career-killing comments people made. Here’s what we found:

1) *Suicide* BY FEEDBACK: You thought others could handle the truth—but they didn’t.

*How common?
Experienced by 23 percent of respondents.*

What it looks like:

“A new coworker made suggestions to a technical process in a department meeting. Although he was more than qualified and his comments had merit, the manager took the suggestion as a personal insult. He verbally attacked this coworker and put him in his place in front of everyone—effectively shutting down all other constructive comments from then on. My coworker spent the next year trying to dig himself out of a hole. Everyone was afraid to associate or collaborate too closely with him in case of retribution. He was eventually pillaged by another firm that recognized his technical skills.”

“Our supervisor did not provide us with important details involved in the reorganization of the company. My team was broadsided with issues that significantly impacted our work. I and others voiced concerns about the impending reorganization and we were completely shut down. Two of us were passed over for promotion. We both definitely felt it was retaliation for raising important issues for our unit. The person who got the promotion did not have the qualifications but he does schmooze the management.”

"In a meeting I challenged a colleague's credibility. I spoke out of frustration because she would not accept coaching or advice. While I was right in that she lacked the credibility to make the statements she made, she never recovered and eventually left the company. This incident negatively affected me and I realized I was wrong for doing it. I feel that I lost the trust of others as they feared I might do the same to them. I also paid a price for this comment in subsequent performance reviews."

2) GOSSIP *Karma*: You talked about someone or something in confidence with a colleague only to have your damning comments made public.

*How common?
Experienced by 21 percent of respondents.*

What it looks like:

"I had recently found out my husband was cheating. At work, the company was circling the drain financially and morally. My department was one of the few in the green and was under pressure to perform even better. Fed up and frustrated with my current married boss flirting with peers (and triggering my own heartache), I blurted out to one of my staff—who turned out to be a friend of the boss—that the boss was sleeping with one of her married direct reports. My boss blamed me for that rumor and probably was jealous of my department's performance versus the dearth in her other areas of responsibility. It took two years for her to find something to use to force me out of my job. In those two years, I received death threats, my car tires were slashed, and well-meaning peers even suggested I leave the state. I took that option, living happily ever after, remarried."

"A friend and school teacher thought she was 'talking' in private on Facebook and made an insensitive (presumably funny) comment about all kids being germ bags, meaning they bring their germs to school. As luck had it, her social media privacy filters had been turned off without her knowing it. Parents of her students saw the comment and were outraged. They went to the school administration and she was asked to resign her position. Her confidence was shattered. It has been very hard for her to find another position in a school system."

"A colleague made derogatory remarks in an e-mail to her 'friend.' When that friend responded, she either accidentally or purposely CC'd the colleague who was being torn down. The person making the remarks was counseled but the relationship never recovered. The friend now 'hates' her colleague who made the remarks and makes it miserable for her at work. And the colleague who was torn down is considering leaving the 'hostile' work environment."

3) *Taboo* TOPICS: What it looks like: You said something about race, sex, politics, or religion that others distorted, misunderstood, took wrong, used against you, etc.

*How common?
Experienced by 20 percent of respondents.*

What it looks like:

"During an exchange with a much younger, less experienced nurse, an older nurse became exasperated after repeating the same instruction multiple times. She finally said, 'Am I not speaking English?' The younger nurse who was of Laotian heritage, but born and raised in the US, used this statement to claim racial profiling. As a result, the older nurse was treated like a social pariah, even though she apologized to the young nurse. Although the older nurse had extensive experience, all the other younger nurses no longer listened to anything she had to say and additionally excluded her from all conversation and social events—even whispering when she came into the department."

"A male coworker made an inappropriate sexual comment about an older female coworker. He said it too loud so more people heard it than he intended. He was the first to go in layoffs that happened a few months later."

"A Fortune 100 company clearly stated and communicated corporate values of inclusion. Therefore, the company intranet site promoted various activities associated with LGBTQ groups including a pride and inclusion week. An employee posted a comment on the site which was inconsistent with the stated company values of inclusion and which was critical of the LGBTQ lifestyle. The moderator of the site asked our IT department to identify who posted the comment. The manager and HR were notified and the employee was fired that same day—no questions asked and without discussion—for violating the company values of inclusion and civility."

4) WORD *Rage*: You lost your temper and used profanity or obscenities to make your point.

*How common?
Experienced by 20 percent of respondents.*

What it looks like:

"I watched a colleague tell his manager that he didn't know what he was talking about while in a technical meeting with other team members. After he verbally assaulted his manager he got up and stormed out of the room. He was asked to leave that afternoon."

“Someone was frustrated by the project partner’s lack of response and decided to verbally confront this person in the heat of his frustration. He raised his voice and others around the interaction heard it. It was a very aggressive and unprofessional way to approach the situation. As this person’s leader, I had to administer disciplinary action which unfortunately has contributed to a year-end performance evaluation that will cost him his incentive.”

“One of my subordinate managers resigned verbally in a rage of anger, then proceeded to announce his resignation to all of his staff and our client only to try and retract it a day later. No luck, we accepted his resignation.”

5) “REPLY ALL” *Blunders*. You accidentally shared something harmful via technology (e-mail, text, virtual meeting tools, etc).

*How common?
Experienced by 10 percent of respondents.*

What it looks like:

“I am the manager of 114 team members. I have one supervisor who reports to me. She had been struggling and I started the uncomfortable process of documenting her. She felt picked on and unfairly judged so she went directly to our Director and spouted off a laundry list of ‘unfair!’ and ‘why me?’ complaints. The Director listened and said he would look into it and involve HR. The policy is that HR has to look into any complaint—whether valid or false. The supervisor felt so vindicated in the Director’s response that she wanted to share the news with her boyfriend, so she texted him. She called him a slang name, included cuss words, and went on to tell him how the Director and HR were going to talk to me after the holidays. She did not look, nor double check, that she used her work cell instead of her personal phone to text her boyfriend. She ended up texting the entire 114 members of the staff. As you can imagine, the entire group lost it. They were frustrated with her before and then after this incident, it was all-out cold war. She apologized but her ability to advance and take over any part of this group is completely gone.”

“About six or seven people were in an in-person meeting and one person was remote. At one point, we did a Lync screen share with the remote person so she could show something to the group. After a while, she evidently forgot she was sharing her screen. She started a separate messaging conversation with her boss. I (Scott) was the official leader of the meeting, but was still new to the organization and this was one of my first times leading this meeting. She chatted her boss, ‘Do you think it is possible Scott could be more incompetent than the previous person in this role?’ To which her boss responded, ‘Ha ha! Doubtful, but we’ll see.’ My predecessor in this role was in the meeting too. Finally, someone said, ‘Emily, did you know you are still screen sharing?’ She quickly took it down and tried to offer a quick, subtle apology. Apparently there were other issues with Emily’s boss and this was the straw

that put him over the edge. Within two weeks of this incident, he was terminated.”

“Two employees were discussing the sexuality of our Director in a disparaging way in e-mail and one of them accidentally hit ‘reply all’ and all of the administrators saw the comments. The two employees were terminated the same day.”

The *Damage*

While these stories vividly document the ugly consequences, the research also confirms the results of a slip of the tongue or momentary lapse of judgment are never good. In fact, only 5 percent reported getting away with a nasty comment with little to no repercussions. The other 95 percent experienced the following aftermath:

31 percent said it cost them a pay increase, a promotion, or their job.

27 percent said it undercut or destroyed the working relationship.

11 percent said it destroyed their reputation.

6 percent said it resulted in a poor performance review.

1 percent said it cost them a client or partner.

These results are why we have come to call these verbal blunders catastrophic. You can literally ruin your career with just a few words. In some cases, these comments do reveal people’s incompetence to perform their job, their unsavory moral compass, or their true colors which may be ill-suited for the team dynamics or corporate culture. And when it comes to discrimination, racism, or violence, there are clearly comments that should never be tolerated in the workplace—or any place.

Yet so many of these comments are uttered by well-meaning and talented employees who maybe just had a bad day. According to the data, every one of us is bound to make an unintentional slip of the tongue or misjudge a situation at some point during our career. And when you introduce the X factor of technology into the communication equation, all sorts of things are bound to go wrong despite our best intentions. So when, not if, we put our foot in our mouth, **what can we do to ensure the results of our verbal blunder aren’t catastrophic, but rather recoverable?**

Committing a verbal blunder takes no skill. Recovering from one does.

When it comes to recovering from a poorly-made comment, the data isn't very encouraging. In fact, the results show that more than one in four people (27 percent) lack the skills to smooth things over and only one in five are extremely confident in their ability to fix mistakes.

And we get it. Apologizing when you've said something hurtful is hard. Recognizing your role in an ugly situation isn't fun. Finding the right words to smooth over the words you just said that were very wrong takes true skill. Yet all of these are completely possible. You can make reparations to your mistakes in a way that can save a compromised reputation or a damaged relationship.

We've spent the last thirty years researching the nuances of communication and the skills used by the best of the best. We wrote an entire book about this research called *Crucial Conversations*. What we found is that the most influential leaders, when in the midst of a crucial conversation (high stakes, opposing opinions, and strong emotions), know how to communicate their real intentions in a way that is both honest and respectful. And what could have higher stakes and stronger emotions than finding yourself at the tail-end of an unintentional catastrophic comment? It's time more of us learned how to return to dialogue when what you may have said just shut it down completely.

The Art of the Apology

6 Ways to Say "I'm Sorry"

The consummate skill in recovering from a catastrophic comment is to apologize. But we're not talking about a simple "I'm sorry." Rather, there is a right and a wrong way to demonstrate your sincere regret. Below are six common scenarios you may find yourself in after committing a verbal blunder and tips for apologizing appropriately.

1) The *blunder*: You said something that was just wrong, rude or completely inappropriate.

The apology: The only thing that will work in this situation is a clear, unvarnished, unrestrained apology. The bandage needs to be as large as the wound. If you aired your colorful resentment for your boss, a simple "I'm sorry" won't cut it. Others need to hear an apology as intense as their disgust for you at the moment.

2) The *blunder*: You said something that was right, but it came across wrong.

The apology: The apology in this situation is more complex but must still match the fervor of the upset. You have three tasks: 1) Acknowledge that the message people heard from you sounded as offensive as they've taken it to be. And don't move to step two until they're satisfied. 2) Say what you *really* think on the topic in the way you *should* have said it. 3) Repeat step one.

3) The *blunder*: You said something you believe, but that you shouldn't have said in your position.

The apology: Your apology must right the real wrong—your irresponsible lapse of judgment in realizing you should have weighed the potential consequences before voicing all your opinions. For example, if you stated an opinion that is not the opinion of your company and as a result, lost the good faith of your client, then you must apologize and let the client know you regret making the comments you did or take complete personal responsibility for the misunderstanding and therefore the heat off your company. This could sound disingenuous, but it's not. It isn't "you" that's apologizing, it's your position. So your apology is righting the real wrong—your acknowledgement to the client that you don't get to represent your company in any way you see fit.

4) The *blunder*: You lost your temper and said something you regret or said it with a tone of voice and words you regret using.

The apology: The only hope for recovering from an angry outburst is to apologize. The sooner the better. Time allows others to integrate the offense more deeply into their view of you. If you have a reasonably good relationship with people, a sincere apology can act as a reset button. The instant you regain control of your brain—begin by simply acknowledging your lack of control. It might sound something like: "I just lost my temper. I am sorry." Next describe what you did from their point of view—not yours. You'll be tempted to lace it with self-justification. Don't. Think how the outburst came across to *them*: "I insisted on my decision and even bullied you—raising my voice and behaving more like a dictator than a teammate. I'm very sorry; I shouldn't have treated you that way." Full stop. Do not allow any attempt to explain yourself to creep in—no one will care that you dropped your toast butter-side down that morning. Apologies restore trust because they show your ego is worth less to you than the victim's trust. Explanations or half-apologies demonstrate ego comes first placing the value of the apology at zero. After you apologize for the inappropriateness of your outburst, then set a clear expectation that you will never react so harshly in the future. This promise will offer others hope that this was a one-time incident rather than something that will happen again—accelerating a return to trust.

5) The *blunder*: Your transgression is in the past but it has damaged a valued relationship—things have never been the same since.

The apology: To rebuild a strained relationship, you must acknowledge and apologize for the past incident specifically—even if it feels like raising the dead. Don't assume others have forgotten about what happened—likely they remember it every time they see your face. So, apologize like it happened that day. Ask for forgiveness and then ask what you can do to make it right. Emphasize that you recognize the strain your actions put on the relationship and you'd like to know how you can regain trust or good will. Then, over-respond to their requests. For example, if they say they need you to listen rather than criticizing their views, do so deeply. Reiterate what they say before moving on with your ideas. Point out the merits of what they say—pause to confirm you understand. And only then, engage with your own ideas. You can also accelerate the return of trust by asking for periodic feedback about how you are doing in keeping the new commitment.

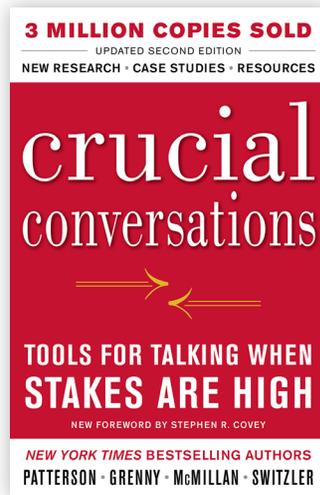
6) The *blunder*: You accidentally sent someone a message that you shouldn't have sent via email, text, or other technology.

The apology: While you made the mistake electronically, don't apologize electronically. When at all possible, express your sincere regret face-to-face. Apologize both for the content of the message and for the means in which it was communicated. You must own up to both errors. If you can't meet face-to-face, then find a reasonable substitute like the phone or video-chat software. It's important you see the disgust on the other person's face, or hear it in his or her voice, in order to apologize to the degree with which he or she feels hurt or violated. Then, if appropriate, go public with the apology in electronic view of all who may have been affected. For example, if you accidentally sent a private comment to a large group, send a brief acknowledgement of the error to that same group with a brief admission of your thoughtlessness. The goal—as in #4—is to demonstrate to the offended party your willingness to sacrifice your ego in order to regain their trust. They are more likely to believe your apology is more than words if offering it costs you more than simple typing time.

When you learn how to apologize with honesty and respect, you can take control of any catastrophic situation and right the wrong. These skills put the power back in your hands to exemplify the kind of person you really are—underneath the comments. Don't let a momentary slip of the tongue define you as anything other than someone who is honest, kind, and competent.

TO LEARN MORE

Whenever you're not getting results, it's likely a crucial conversation is keeping you stuck. Learn how to speak up and reach dialogue in high stakes, emotional, or politically risky situations with the *New York*



Times bestselling book, *Crucial Conversations* (available everywhere books are sold). VitalSmarts also offers classroom and virtual training on these skills. Learn more at www.vital-smarts.com/crucialconversationstraining.

To receive more tips and skills like these from Joseph and David on how to improve your communication and increase your personal influence, subscribe to the award-winning *Crucial Skills Newsletter*. Each week, the authors share advice on how to navigate

tricky, high-stakes situations at work and at home.

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David Maxfield is a three-time *New York Times* bestselling author, keynote speaker, and Vice President of Research at VitalSmarts. For the past thirty years, David has conducted social science research to help Fortune 500 leaders and organizations achieve new levels of performance. Specifically, he has focused on human behavior—the underlying written and unwritten rules that shape what employees do every day. Articles resulting from David's research have been published in many notable and peer-reviewed journals including the *MIT Sloan Management Review* where his article, "How to Have Influence" was named the Change Management Article of the Year.

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