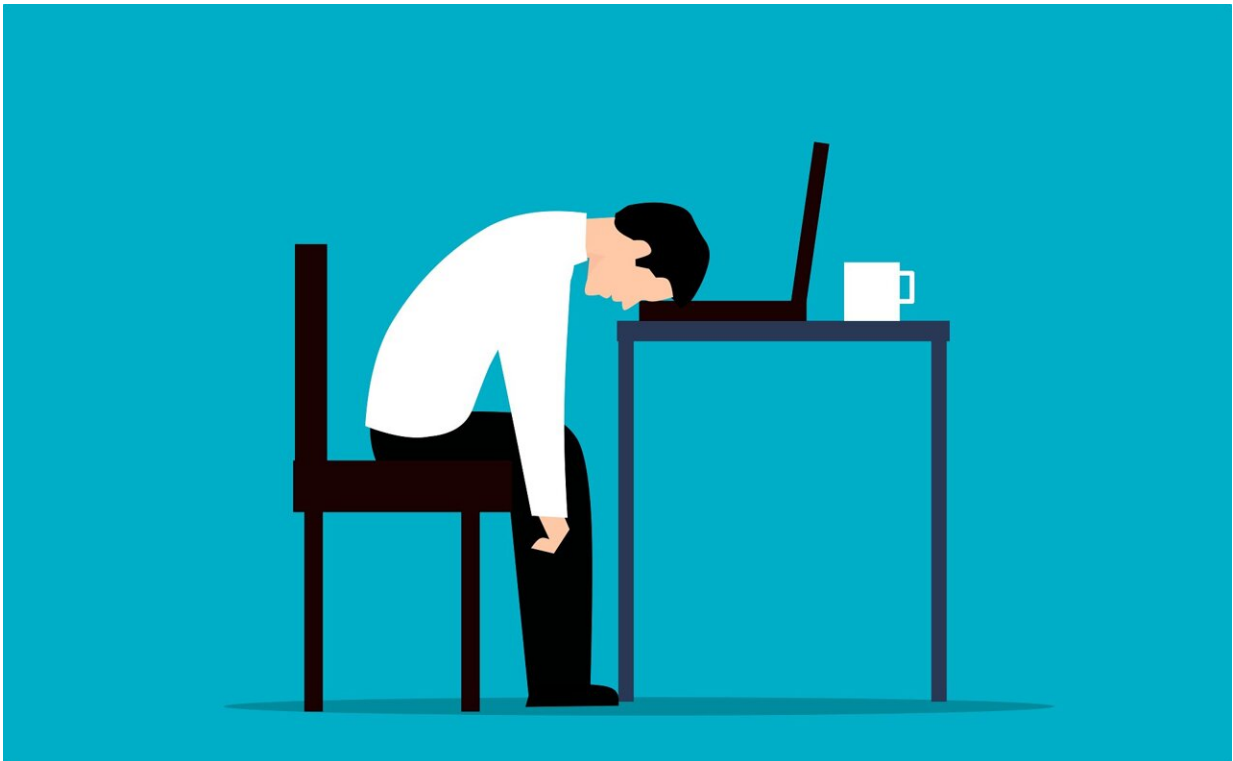


# How to repair work relationships after making a social blunder

February 25 2022, by Benjamin Kessler

---



Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

If you feel your social skills have gone downhill, you're not alone. After nearly two years of working from home, and much less social activity outside of work, we're likely to commit more unintentional lapses in etiquette, or social gaffes. This is true whether your organization is

trickling back to the office or still mostly remote.

Distilling decades of previous research on [human emotions](#), Heather Vough, associate professor of management at George Mason University, recently published "Oops, I did it (again)! The [emotional experience](#), personal responses and relational consequences of social gaffes in the workplace" in the Journal of Organizational Behavior, presenting frameworks for predicting the consequences of a gaffe.

Vough said gaffes are a complex issue and not to be taken lightly. Even minor social gaffes like forgetting to greet someone in a Zoom meeting or not waving at someone that you don't recognize because they're wearing a mask can have consequences.

"Even relatively minor gaffes can become what my [Mason] colleague Kevin Rockmann calls "anchoring events"—decisive moments that change a relationship's trajectory for better or worse," she said.

Vough theorizes that if both parties are on the same page and the gaffe-maker acts appropriately, initial awkwardness could result in a stronger emotional bond.

So the next time you goof up in front of your colleagues, don't kick yourself. Also, don't make things worse by acting on impulse or allowing awkwardness to overwhelm you. Instead, take Vough's research-backed advice on how to turn a faux pas into a fast friendship.

- If you commit a gaffe, don't be ashamed. "Shame-driven interpretations lead us to believe the situation is irreparable because it stems from flaws in our deepest self," Vough said. "So instead of reaching out, we withdraw from the colleague we may have offended. If our feelings of shame are especially strong, we may also withdraw in a more general sense, disengaging from the

organization as a whole."

- Ask yourself whether the gaffe was likely to have hurt someone else, or if it only wounded your ego. This is important because ego- or embarrassment-based reactions can lead to compensatory showing-off. If those around you don't realize that you're trying to rehabilitate your reputation because of the gaffe you just committed, they may be put off by your behavior. "This won't be good for the long-term working relationship," said Vough. So if you make an embarrassing social error, your best bet is to just let it go. People will likely forget about it very quickly, if they noticed it at all.
- Most of the time, gaffes are minor enough that a direct apology, promptly delivered, is good enough to re-establish rapport. But some gaffes are much more delicate. Imagine asking a woman when she is due to give birth, and she responds that she isn't pregnant. Fortunately, Vough's research suggests that extending emotional support—e.g. by inviting the person to lunch or offering to pick up a shift—can be a serviceable substitute for an apology. "[In most cases] the kind gesture will be appreciated. The relationship between the two people will probably blossom as a result."
- Don't forget to be kind to yourself, as well as the person or people affected by your gaffe. In these extraordinary times, Vough believes everyone deserves the benefit of the doubt and a good deal of understanding.
- However, what feels like a mere social gaffe to one person could be more serious for another. "The key thing to remember is that gaffes are unintentional by nature. Managers should be able to distinguish between incivility and honest mistakes," Vough said. When in doubt, focus on the experience of the victim.

**More information:** Harshad Puranik et al, Oops, I did it (again)! The emotional experience, interpersonal responses, and relational

consequences of social gaffes in the workplace, *Journal of Organizational Behavior* (2021). [DOI: 10.1002/job.2546](https://doi.org/10.1002/job.2546)

Provided by George Mason University

Citation: How to repair work relationships after making a social blunder (2022, February 25)  
retrieved 26 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2022-02-relationships-social-blunder.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.