

up beat

Come clean,
avoid a mess

If you make a mistake in front of your staff, be honest, writes **Rebecca Martin**.

The recent release from prison of HIH bad boys Rodney Adler and Ray Williams is a timely reminder about the golden rules of workplace behaviour. Don't break the law and, if you make a mistake, face up to it. By refusing to accept blame for the HIH downfall, the already tattered reputations of Adler and Williams took another hammering. An apology might have helped.

"If you are out of order and you know it, and the other person does, bluffing your way through and not saying anything, not apologising, is going to lose you respect," says coaching expert Cherry Birch of Birch Consulting. "We all know we trust someone more if they admit their mistakes."

Reputation, along with skills, is a manager's currency and, just as in any money market, its value will take the odd hit or two. It may be getting the facts of an argument wrong, making what turns out to be a very poor decision, committing a personal indiscretion or just momentarily

losing the plot. But, while most people are likely to slip up in some way throughout their careers, the good news is that the egg on your face can be washed off.

"The bottom line is that it's not about making the mistake but about how we respond," says John Martin, principal consultant at Olivier Retention Solutions. He says high achievers with a tendency to perfectionism can find it hard to live with the mistakes they make. "Middle management think they got [where they are] because they are excellent at the job, so to stay there they need to continue to be excellent," he says. "But if you stuff up, admit it. People respond well to that. They like a little bit of vulnerability in a manager."

Caught between the top and bottom levels of a company, middle management also faces greater scrutiny.

"Boards develop business plans that often focus on change," says Peter Wilson, CEO of the Australian Human Resources



It's about how you respond ... former high-flying businessman Rodney Adler broke a golden rule. Photo: Andrew Quilty

Institute. "The delivery of that tends to flow on to middle managers who are faced with enormous resistance, plus pressure from the top levels who may not have thought about the detail."

Analyst KPMG predicts a busy year for mergers and acquisitions so there will be added pressure on managers over the next 12 months. Inevitably, mistakes will happen, tempers will be lost and appeasement necessary. "You can tough it out, deny it and try to rewrite reality, or you can acknowledge the mistake and move on," Martin says. "The second

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option is healthier. Face to face is always the best way [to apologise]. People won't backstab and connive against you if it is face to face. Email is passive. You can't hear the tone of voice or read the body language and you don't want to leave any footprints as you don't know where email will end up."

Birch once coached a manager who, in a fit of anger, fired off a midnight email to clients which "clearly indicated his unhappiness with things, with very politically incorrect things said," she says. "The next morning there was a reaction. When he realised what he had done, he picked up the phone and talked to everyone concerned and apologised."

Birch says an insincere apology will backfire. "If you don't mean it, don't say it," she says. "Don't tell someone they are wonderful if you don't mean it."

A skilled nose for politics might help you climb up with ladder but Wilson says it won't help when the proverbial hits the fan.

"You have to try and focus attention on the substance, as in what went wrong and what went right," he says.

"You have to show yourself as a positive person who learns from experience, not a negative character in denial."

Wilson says keeping your "wins" ledger full will help offset larger disasters. "Part of a good defence for failure is to have plenty of credits for smaller wins, so when big issues come along you have a thicker armour of respect."

Any manager also has to deal with errant employees. A tight job market has made retention a high priority. Humiliating someone may not be the best way to keep them.

Lisa Halloran of Retention Partners says younger employees, especially, do not take well to a public ticking off. "You need to coach them through it and focus on the positives and learning," she says. "And that has to be a private conversation."

Ultimately, when your underlings get it wrong, you have to take the fall.

"As manager, the buck stops with you," Birch says. Most important, Wilson says, is that time heals all. Once you've said sorry, get over it and do better next time.

learn how to get things done

Psychologist Robert Cialdini, author of *Influence: The Psychology Of Persuasion*, says there are six "weapons of influence" to help you get what you want from your staff:

Reciprocation People tend to return favours, so the more you give, the more you are able to get back.

Commitment and consistency Get it in writing. If someone agrees to do something on paper, chances are they will do it.

Social proof People will do things they see other people doing, so lead by action.

Authority People tend to obey authority figures, so keeping respect levels high could help here.

Liking If they like you, they may be persuaded to do it. Saying good morning is a good start.

Scarcity The less there is, the more people want it. Exclusivity is desirable.