

51 Searching for a Van

As a novice trainer, I was running a residential training course for a senior management group. It was

a wet, grey, drizzly day, and they had an outdoor task. They had been tasked to work in separate teams, and eventually find a van to take them back to the hotel.



We are all
human.
We all make
mistakes.

I waited for their arrival. And waited... and waited. After quite a while, I decided I'd better check where they were, and went to where I'd parked the van. No sign of the group. I decided to check the map reference I'd given them...

... it was the wrong reference!

I'd accidentally marked an electric cable as the site, rather than a road!!

In a panic, and with mounting fear as to the consequences

of my mistake, I set off across the fields to check the reference I'd given them....

And there they were. Sitting down, thoroughly wet, thoroughly miserable, and really, REALLY annoyed...!

I apologised, explained my error, and in silence we worked our way back to the van, and back to the hotel, where I asked them to get dry, and meet for a 'debrief' in half an hour...

This was one of the longest

and most painful half hours of my life so far...what would I say? How could I rectify the mistake? How could I ever look them in the face again? How could I justify ever running a training programme again...for anyone, let alone this group...?

As I entered the debrief room, there they all sat, in stony silence, with a range of facial expressions, none of them good. I took a deep breath....

“I’m truly sorry”, I began. “It was a simple mistake, and one I should not have made. It’s a big lesson for me, to check more thoroughly. I don’t know what else to say—so let’s move on....”

...and we did. And it got better....

Afterwards, the Director came up to me in the bar, and offered to buy me a drink. He said:

“We were all furious, and wanting your scalp. But you

said exactly the right thing. You apologised, explained why it had happened, how you felt, and how you would learn from it. That was all that was needed. If you'd tried to avoid responsibility, or find an excuse, I would have walked out, the rest would have followed, and you wouldn't be asked back. As it is, we've all accepted your apology, delivered with due humility, and are happy to move on to the rest of the programme."

There were several key learning points:

- We're all human and make mistakes
- It's not the mistake that's important, it's how you deal with it, and what you learn from it
- Sometimes our fears are exaggerated. What I feared never materialised – in fact, quite the reverse
- Often a failure is a great opportunity to turn things around

- People are, or can be, very generous – if you provide them with the opportunity to be so
- Later that evening someone told me: “when I saw you standing there, clearly upset and nervous, I put myself in your shoes, and it reminded me of my own fallibility too. I knew how you felt, and how I had felt, and how I wished someone had been kinder to me – so this was my chance to pay it back”. What a great person –

and a great lesson!

“If history were taught in the form of stories, it would never be forgotten” (R. Kipling)

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