Admitting Errors

BY MICHAEL JOSEPHSON

As several listeners pointed out, I once made a broadcast mistake when I attributed the Army's slogan: "Be all that you can be," to the Marine Corps. I apologized to all concerned. It was a foolish error.

It's a lot easier now for me to admit when I'm wrong than it was earlier in my career. A turning point occurred during my third year of teaching law while I was still the youngest professor at my law school. During one of my classes, after I explained a particular statute, a student suggested that I had misinterpreted the law. In fact, he said, it meant the opposite of what I said. I read the provision again and it was immediately apparent that he was right. More crucially, I was wrong.

My immediate reaction was to confuse the issue and bluff my way through. But I realized that if I failed to fess up, I'd be sending more than 100 soon-to-be lawyers into the world with dangerous misinformation. I remember the sinking feeling that my academic career was about to be nipped in the bud. Though I thought the earth would open up and swallow me, I was surprised that my disclosure simply produced some murmurs and frantic note-taking.

Still, I was mortified and as soon as the class ended I darted for the exit. To my horror, the student who corrected me cut off my escape. I was ready for the worst when he said, "Professor Josephson, I want to thank you. This was the first time I ever saw a teacher admit he was wrong. It was great."

Thanks to this gracious student, I not only survived my first public error (there were many more to follow), but I learned that admitting a mistake can actually build credibility. I think of this every time I see someone squirming shamefully to cover up rather than confess an error.

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