

## Lessons Learned from the Fast Lane

As I pulled out of my driveway, I saw the blue lights flashing, and a car stopped in front of the police car.

I drove around the cars. Out of curiosity, I looked to see who was driving the “guilty” car. Instantly, I recognized one of my friends in the driver’s seat.

All he could do was sit there on the side of the road and wait on the officer. While he waited, cars were passing by at a steady pace.

At first, I felt his pain. He was headed to work and got in a hurry. Now he was sitting while a police car and blue lights were advertising to the whole world that he was the one being stopped.

Because this happened on one of the major streets in our city, many people would pass in just a few minutes. I realized that, in a small town, everybody would know about it soon. It wouldn’t take long for the news to spread. A husband would call his wife. A co-worker would tell a friend.

Since I was going to a training event on leadership, I wondered if there were any parallels between being stopped by a policeman and having slip-ups at work. I soon realized there are many comparisons that can be made.

**Leadership mistakes on the side of the road.** Occasionally goof-ups happen in private, but most of the time they are out in open view. You make a bad decision, and everybody knows it. You don’t follow through, and all members of the team see it. There may not be a police car behind you with blue lights shining, but it’s noticed.

**People talk.** When mistakes are made, people tell other people. It is human nature. It is one of the ways we interpret our world and make sense of what is taking place. In organizations, it is known as the “grapevine.”

**Some talk is good, while some is not.** People talk for a myriad of different reasons. They talk to gossip. They talk to explain. They talk to understand. Occasionally, they talk to cause pain.

**Call it anything you want.** We say it a lot of different ways...goof-ups, mess-ups, slip-ups, errors, blunders, boo- boos, and mistakes. Use any word you want. It means the same thing. It isn’t the word that you use but what you decide to do with the errors that you make. You can try to ignore them. You can pretend they don’t exist. You can punish yourself. You can try to go back and place blame on others. Fortunately or unfortunately, you can’t relive or revisit yesterday.

**Rescue Your Mistakes.** One of the best ways of dealing with leadership mistakes at work is to take ownership of them. The more you try to ignore or pretend that something didn't take place, the more you are wasting energy. You are spending energy in a negative direction.

**Admit it to yourself.** You aren't perfect. You say, do, and think things that are simply wrong sometimes. Go back to school. Find out what you can learn from your mistakes. Learn from it. Learn what didn't work. Learn what did work. Learn how you could do things differently if you were doing that very same thing again today.

**Use the grapevine to your advantage.** Since people are going to talk anyway, why don't you give them better information to use? If you take ownership of your mistakes, you have taken big steps toward being a more effective leader. You have set a positive example. Most of the time actions speak louder than words.

**You can't ignore the speed limit.** Some rules are meant to be broken. Some are not. Even leaders have to follow the rules. If you don't, employees notice, and your credibility goes down the drain.

**Always remember, the leadership police are watching you.** In the city, it will be the police officers hired to maintain law and order. It is their job to watch out for those who break the law. There are police at work as well. These are the individuals who monitor the words, behavior, and practices of leaders. They do not hold any particular position or title. They simply report what they see to others.

Later I called my friend just to talk. We discussed his traffic stop. He received a warning. While his speed was above what it needed to be, it did not warrant a ticket. He learned another lesson about driving. I saw an opportunity to talk about leadership. He gained another insight on small town life. I learned another lesson about leadership.