

SPEAKER

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Quit While You're Behind

As professional speakers, we sometimes forget that we can just admit we made a mistake instead of trying to backpedal. This happened to me when I could barely speak at all because my foot was taking up all the room in my mouth.

To celebrate my 39th birthday, I invited over a hundred people to a potluck picnic in the park, knowing that many would have other plans. Sure enough, about 45 people came and went at different times on a glorious June day in San Diego.

At one point, my friend Janie waved me over and pointed to an enormous woman walking

a teeny Chihuahua in the park. The woman, like Janie, had delicate facial features, alabaster skin and long brown hair. More notably, however, she was squeezed into a bright yellow sun dress with a bold red and orange floral design. The dress might have looked all right if it weren't three sizes too small.

Because of their hair and facial similarities, Janie laughed and said, "I think I've just seen myself in 30 years."

I quickly responded, "Oh, Janie, I don't expect you'll fit into a dress *that* size."

What I meant to say was, "Oh, Janie, I don't foresee you trying to fit into a dress that's too small for you." This would have made sense because Janie has good taste and buys flattering clothing.

Instantly, I realized what I had said, but I couldn't remember what I originally tried to say in order to correct myself.

I might as well have said, "Well, Janie, some day you're going to blow up like a balloon and you'll be lucky if you can drape your body in tablecloths." She looked so hurt and I knew I had to say something. Unfortunately, professional speakers or improvisers, like me, aren't always as quick on the draw when they're offstage.

Since I couldn't remember what I tried to say, I had to think of something completely different to make up for my blunder.

If this idea ever occurs to you, just run away. Put food in your mouth or stick a pin in your eye because,

at this point, trying to backpedal is just asking for trouble.

"Oh, I didn't mean it like that. I meant that a dress that looks like that is not going to come in *your* size."

Even now, I don't know what that was supposed to mean. They don't make yellow dresses in Janie's size? Or perhaps they don't make tight-fitting dresses in Janie's size?

"What?" she replied, hoping that she misunderstood me the first time, yet having no idea what I meant the second time.

"You know," I said, not knowing at all. "A

dress. Like *that*? On *you*?" I was praying that she'd fill in the blank somehow so that I wouldn't have to.

She looked me in the eye and said, "I think you should stop. You're not making this any better."

I responded, rather sheepishly, "I know. Sorry."

After a brief pause, Janie mercifully changed the topic.

Moral: Before you inadvertently do more damage by running off at the mouth, zip your lip and quit while you're behind.

I might as well have said, "Well, Janie, some day you're going to blow up like a balloon and you'll be lucky if you can drape your body in tablecloths."



Known as "The Improv Guy," Milo Shapiro is a motivational speaker, speaking coach and trainer, and the author of

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