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If I Could Turn Back Time: Facing Mistakes Head-On

Picture this: A 21-year-old fresh out of University, late to her first Board meeting because there was a construction roadblock en route. That was before GPS devices were widely available, and her phone had no internet available to dictate new directions. Hands clammy, looking at the crumpled MapQuest printout, realizing how horrible her sense of direction is, she finally makes it to the small townhouse condominium. She flies into the door, sweaty and frazzled. She sits down, heartbeat slowing, ready to call the meeting to order. Everyone stares at their manager expectantly. After the moment of confusion passes, she remembers. She remembers that she forgot the meeting packages, on top of being late. Copies were emailed in advance, but this board specifically wanted paper-versions to review during the meeting. Not the direst of mistakes, but one, nonetheless.

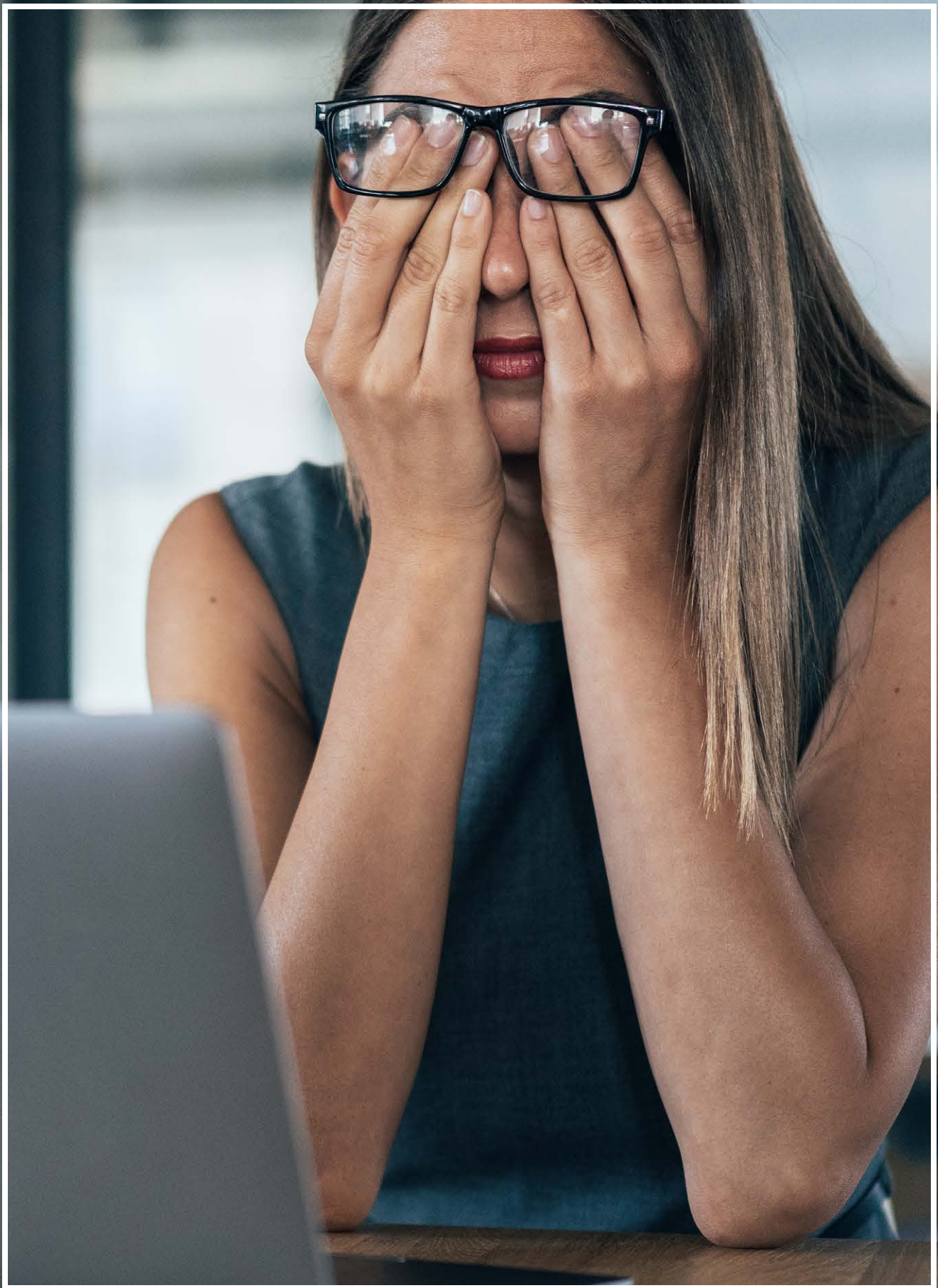
If you have not guessed it yet, that manager was me, and it was not my first nor my last mistake as a condominium manager. However, it felt like a big one at the time, and the squinted eyes of judgment still haunt me to this day (I was just starting out, and this seemed like a very big deal). Mistakes happen in every job, and I try to tell myself that most decisions we make are not life and death scenarios, comparable to someone who works in health care. I have not yet told the owner screaming on the phone about 'brown grass' that no one's life is on the line, but I am sure we have all thought it.

Admitting Mistakes

So, how do we swallow the uncomfortable pill of our own mistake? Admitting it, of course! It sounds pretty easy, and I must admit, it was very simple to type that sentence. Even so, confessing to a mistake just gets stuck in our throat

sometimes, and it is way easier to swallow it and smile instead. Is that the best way to handle it, though? Probably not. I have been in many scenarios where I try my hardest to project total confidence and am pretty sure I can answer most questions – most of them. Sometimes we try so hard to be poised that our mistake is trying to sound right all the time. Some of us are so worried about saying "I do not know" that we start talking about something that teeters on the edge of being wrong. There should be less stigma about confessing because we do not know absolutely everything. How could we?

Property managers have a lot to balance, as the job dabbles in building knowledge, human relations, law, and some boards expect you to be a superintendent with a background in horticulture and engineering to boot! Property management honestly seems like a job that you can work at for fifty years and still be surprised





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about what comes across your desk. Some issues are not black and white, and it can be challenging to know when to put your foot down and when to bend. Mistakes will inevitably be made along the way. Most errors may be overlooked, as long as they do not happen repeatedly. After you admit to your mistake, the biggest take-away is to learn from it. However, if you keep forgetting to send a chargeback to that one owner, it is going to be a lot tougher to smooth things over and regain trust.

It's OK to Not Know Everything

Telling clients "I do not know" significantly more than once can feel stressful. You wonder if they will question you or your skills, which is especially tough on new managers who want to prove themselves. However, following it up with "... but I will be sure to look into it, and get back to you" and then actually giving them an answer to their question is usually satisfactory to them. When I first started this career, I felt like I had to have a financial statement nearly memorized before an Annual General Meeting. Ridiculous, I know, but I was anxious about the woman in the front row with her binder of questions, pen furiously jotting down what I was saying like a stenographer, who liked to quiz the manager on the budget. I wanted to be able to rhyme off numbers, offer a large self-assured smile, and not hear from her for the rest of the meeting because she was just so impressed. That was totally unrealistic because: 1) that woman is never impressed; 2) It is impossible to remember everything, especially when you have multiple condominiums in your portfolio.

One of the most satisfying aspects of being in the condo management world for the last decade is learning from my mistakes and passing that knowledge on to others. Gaining experience increases confidence, and it is amazing to share that with clients as well as newer managers. I, personally, think it is very humbling when someone admits to a fumble but uses it as a teachable moment. They could say, "there was a computer glitch," "there was a blunder on our admin end," but trust is built when people say, "I made a mistake, I apologize, and these are the next steps." The responsibility is not passed along, you are not belittling the error (especially if it is a costly one), and you are also offering a solution.

You may be wondering if that board

from my townhome complex continued judging me after we had to go through the meeting, sharing one paper meeting package. I am happy to tell you that they moved on from it quickly, as I believe they saw I was trying my best and was sincere in my apology. At that moment, it felt like something that would tarnish our relationship, but it really was just a misstep. Errors larger than this one will potentially come down the pipe, and while some of them are hard to avoid, the most important thing is how you deal with them. ■

Sara Hicks, RCM, joined the MF Property Management team as a Property Manager in 2011 and obtained her RCM designation in 2013. In 2018, Sara was promoted to Vice-President with a focus on staff-mentoring and leading monthly Pod groups with her fellow colleague. She has been a part of the CCI-Grand River Communications Committee for eight years and enjoys contributing articles to condominium publications.
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