

performances. Some of us manage to recover from ineffective impression management quite quickly; others suffer an extended devaluation of their identities. What happens when impression management is unsuccessful? What do we do to regain identities and restore social order?

Embarrassment

A common emotional reaction to impression mismanagement is **embarrassment**, the spontaneous feeling we experience when the identity we are presenting is suddenly and unexpectedly discredited in front of others (E. Gross & Stone, 1964). An adolescent boy trying to look “cool” in front of his friends may have his tough image shattered by the unexpected arrival of his mother in the family minivan. We can see his embarrassment in the fixed smile, the nervous hollow laugh, the busy hands, and the downward glance that hides his eyes from the gaze of others (E. Goffman, 1967). Embarrassment can come from a multitude of sources: lack of poise (e.g., stumbling, saying something stupid, spilling a drink, inappropriately exposing body parts), intrusion into the private settings of others (a man walking into a women’s restroom), improper dress for a particular social occasion (wearing shorts and flip flops to a formal dinner party), and so on.

Embarrassment is sociologically important because it has the potential to destroy the orderliness of a social situation. Imagine being at your high school graduation. As the class valedictorian is giving the commencement address, a gust of wind blows her note cards off the podium. As she reaches down to collect them, she hits her head on the microphone and tears her gown. In front of hundreds of people she stands there, flustered, not knowing what to say or do. The situation would be uncomfortable and embarrassing not only for her but for you and the rest of the audience as well.

Because embarrassment is disruptive for all concerned, it is in everyone’s best interest to cooperate in reducing or eliminating it. To call attention to such an act may be as embarrassing as the original episode itself, so we may pretend not to notice the faux pas (Lindesmith, Strauss, & Denzin, 1991). By suppressing signs of recognition, we make it easier for the person to regain composure (E. Goffman, 1967). A mutual commitment to supporting others’ social identities, even when those identities are in danger, is a fundamental norm of social interaction.

At times, however, embarrassment is used strategically to disrupt another person’s impression management. Practical jokes, for instance, are intentional attempts to rein in conceit or overconfidence and cause someone to lose identity. More seriously, groups and organizations may use embarrassment or the threat of embarrassment (e.g., hazing) to encourage a preferred activity or discourage behavior that may be damaging to the group. In that sense, embarrassment reasserts the power structure of the group, because only certain people can legitimately embarrass others. A low-status employee, for instance, has much less freedom to embarrass a superior or make him or her the target of a joke than vice versa (Coser, 1960).

Organizations themselves may also experience embarrassment from time to time:

- In 2012, McDonald’s launched two Twitter hashtags, #McDStories and #MeettheFarmers, which were intended to solicit adoring tweets from loyal McDonald’s customers. Instead, it had the opposite embarrassing effect as thousands of people chimed in to complain about the restaurant and its food with tweets like, “I once got food poisoning from eating a Big Mac” and “McDonalds is where dreams of being healthy and fit go to die” (Kuperinsky, 2012).
- In a collectivist culture like Japan, organizational misdeeds or mistakes can create considerable public humiliation, shame, and embarrassment for top officials. In

2010, Toyota faced worldwide condemnation and was forced to recall some 8 million vehicles when it could no longer deny published reports of fatal accidents in which accelerator pedals had gotten stuck at high speeds. A year later, some officials in Japanese government agencies were forced to resign for trying to downplay the public health crisis that occurred after a nuclear reactor sustained major damage from the earthquake and tsunami.

- Sony Corporation faced a massive public relations disaster in 2014 when a group calling itself “Guardians of Peace” (#GOP) hacked into its computer system and posted highly sensitive documents and internal correspondences between executives that revealed disturbing examples of casual racism, star bashing, and a multitude of other embarrassing secrets (Richards, 2014).

When events challenge an organization’s public image, leaders are often compelled to engage in activities that protect, repair, and enhance that image (Ginzel et al., 2004). For example, every year, *U.S. News & World Report* publishes its rankings of the top American universities. Schools that receive high rankings boast of that fact in their recruitment materials and on their websites. When a university falls in its ranking from one year to the next, though, officials face the unenviable task of scrambling to mend the school’s reputation so that alumni continue to donate money and prospective students still consider applying. Typically, schools that have dropped in the rankings opt to downplay the survey’s relevance and criticize the magazine’s methodology and ranking criteria, which only a year earlier (when they were ranked higher) were considered sound and trustworthy.

Most government agencies and large corporations like McDonald’s, Toyota, and Sony have massive public relations departments or crisis management teams that carefully oversee the organization’s image by controlling negative publicity. For instance, Southwest Airlines has a full-time employee, called Senior Manager of Proactive Customer Communications, whose sole responsibility is to write apology letters to customers who are annoyed about flight delays, cancellations, or shoddy plane conditions. He writes about 20,000 such letters a year (J. Bailey, 2007).

Remedies for Spoiled Identities

Organizations and governments can enlist the aid of experts to overcome the debilitating effects of negative images, but individuals are usually left to their own devices. Fixing a spoiled identity is not easy. The mere knowledge that we are being evaluated negatively can impede our thoughts, speech, and action. Nevertheless, the major responsibility for restoring order lies with the person whose actions disrupted things in the first place.

To restore social order and overcome a spoiled identity, the transgressor will use an **aligning action** (Stokes & Hewitt, 1976). Sometimes aligning can be done easily and quickly. If you step on a person’s foot while standing in line at a cafeteria, a simple apology may be all that’s needed to avoid the impression that you’re a clumsy oaf.

By apologizing, you acknowledge that such an act is wrong and send the message that you are not ordinarily a breaker of such social norms. Other situations, however, call for more detailed repair:

- An **account** is a verbal statement designed to explain unanticipated, embarrassing, or unacceptable behavior (C. W. Mills, 1940; M. Scott & Lyman, 1968). For example, an individual may cite events beyond her or his control (“I was late for the wedding because there was a lot of traffic on the highway”) or blame others (“I spilled my milk because somebody pushed me”). An alternative is to define the offending behavior