



The Envelope Please

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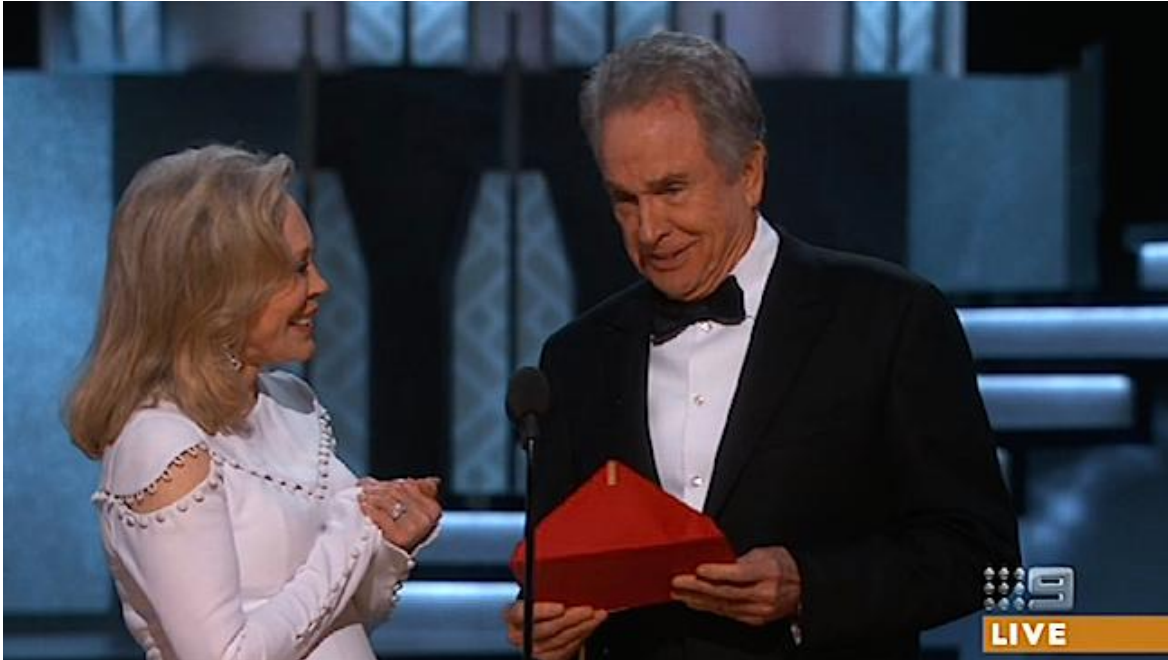
There has been a lot written about the mix-up with the Best Picture envelope at the end of the Oscars ceremony. I actually didn't think that *La La Land* deserved to win anyway, but that's not the point. I thought *Hidden Figures* was the best picture, but that's not the point either. I liked [a piece in Forbes](#) that used the incident as a way to talk about responsibility and "a brave approach to agency."

No doubt it all could have been avoided if Price Waterhouse Coopers had given Warren Beatty the correct envelope. PWC initially tried to avoid responsibility by claiming that Beatty "took the wrong envelope." That was lame. But Beatty "knew he had the wrong envelope. He emphasized that the award was for best picture, looked to the wings, hoping that someone would save the moment. But he did not stop. He was not explicit with his concern. And things went very badly." I'm not



really blaming Warren Beatty or Faye Dunaway.

But why didn't Beatty call a timeout and ask someone to confirm that he had the right envelope? When presented with knowledge of a problem and an opportunity to fix it, in other words, what sometimes prevents us from doing the right thing?



Warren Beatty and Faye Dunaway

Lots of reasons. We assume that the authority figure (PWC in this case) could never make this kind of a mistake, and so we don't want to embarrass ourselves by being wrong. Especially in front of millions of people on live TV, and on a show where there is pressure to keep things moving (even though it has no apparent impact on the length of the show). We lack confidence in our own judgment. We don't think it is our responsibility. We are afraid. Whatever the reason, we sometimes take the path of least resistance and don't do anything—even though we know something is wrong.

Why am I writing about this ultimately minor event at the Oscars? Nobody died and everything worked out in the end—well, maybe except for PWC. **Because if you see something wrong at the School of Government, even if you are not positive, I want you to say something about it.** Trust your instincts and don't let it pass. Even if it means telling me that I've forgotten something or done something wrong (hard to believe, but use your imagination), I want you to raise your hand and question me. The School will be better if we practice “a brave approach to agency.” More than just avoiding our own mistakes, it will mean that people feel some responsibility for what happens everywhere at the School. That attitude will help us to have the greatest possible impact in advancing our mission.



And if you haven't seen the movie *Hidden Figures*, I highly recommend it.

