

Sorry, Not Sorry: How Superficial Apologies Cost You Credibility and Trust.

A manual for sharpening your contrition skills.

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Why is, “I’m sorry” so hard to say? We love to receive apologies from others when they are wrong, but reciprocating is akin to receiving a root canal. The honest admission of wrongdoing and failure flies in the face of our ego. It momentarily forces us to put our pride on a shelf, which is why so many people apologize without really meaning it. They think the words alone are enough to calm the recipient when in fact it erodes the situation further. Even worse are apologies loaded with excuses or blame, which aren’t even apologies at all. They’re really a diversionary tactic to avoid accountability.

Sincere apologies hold power. They build relationships and bridge gaps in hurt feelings. Despite the fact we all know this, time and again I witness professional leaders and executives who fail to take ownership of their own mistakes and struggle to admit when they are wrong. And that’s because the admission of mistakes demonstrates vulnerability, and they think apologies will cause others to question their decisions. Yet, the opposite is true. When leaders create a culture of transparency, trust grows. Others feel free to take risks and make mistakes while trying to achieve great ideas. Even the most experienced professional errs. Why pretend otherwise? No

one is perfect, but the sooner we admit our missteps, the sooner we can move past them.

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Ultimately, taking ownership of mistakes requires courage and saying, “I’m not afraid to own it.” The intent of the decision is irrelevant. Whether the leader was directly or indirectly responsible doesn’t matter. Employees trust, and are influenced by, leaders who own and accept responsibility. You can’t expect to take credit for success and point the finger at others.

If you need help with your apology skills, consider these six guidelines:

1. Is it necessary?

Studies show that men and women have different ideas about when to apologize. Women have been found to apologize more frequently, but only because they perceive wrongdoing differently. Women are more likely to apologize even when an offense hasn’t occurred. Men, however, are less likely to admit wrongdoing if they don’t believe they did anything wrong.

To know if, “I’m sorry” is in order, consider the listener over your perception. Take the time to consider if an injustice occurred. Determine how the recipient interpreted the action and whether it caused offense.

2. Admit wrongdoing.

Coming clean is the most significant step. Timing is everything, so don’t wait for other guilty parties to acknowledge wrongdoing. Make the mistake public and apologize. If you wait for someone to demand an apology, you’ve waited too long. Even if you believe a more senior professional

should apologize first, don't wait. By stepping up and owning the mistake, you pave the way for other participants to follow. Set the example, be the bigger person and take ownership.

3. Keep it personal.

How you apologize is as important as the apology itself. Know when a mistake warrants a face-to-face apology. Don't hide behind technology and let an email or text do the work. Acknowledge your error in person and look people in the eye when you apologize. If this isn't possible, pick up the phone and let the offended party hear your voice and sincerity.

4. Be specific.

An apology for the sake of an apology is meaningless. Gather your facts first. The affected individuals need to know you are fully aware of your mistake. Vague apologies are powerless, so be prepared to articulate why you are sorry and how you plan to correct the situation

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5. Think before speaking.

Before you apologize, consider how your listeners will perceive your words. Think about what you will say and how your audience will hear them. Admitting wrongdoing deepens trust and grows your influence over others. If we don't consider our words first, we can hinder relationships by adding insult to injury.

6. Avoid the blame game.

No one wins the blame game, and yet people continue to play. Pointing fingers, projecting blame and defending actions will

only cost you trust and further insult those affected. Acknowledge what went wrong, as well as how you plan to correct the situation, and make a commitment to follow through.

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