



The Power of Apologising

At a glance:



Maintain healthy relationships at work: Understand the importance of apologising in order to foster positive workplace relationships.



Understand what might be considered over-apologising: Recognise the impact of apologising too much and how it may affect your professional presence and career progression.



Determine whether an apology is necessary: Discover three key questions to help you assess the need for an apology in any situation.



Implement practical steps for behavioural change: Explore strategies to train your mind and change your behaviour, reducing the need for future apologies.



Become a compassionate and unapologetic professional: Gain insights on how to balance compassion with confidence, becoming a professional who apologises thoughtfully and effectively.

The power of apologising at work (and when not to)

There is great power in apologising at work. At a minimum, an apology restores a kind of moral equilibrium between the offender and the offended person. At best, an apology has the power to transform a fractured relationship. Given that healthy relationships underpin healthy workplaces, it is vital that we find the courage to apologise when we have done something that has caused harm to others.

At the same time, many of us apologise at work when we have not done anything wrong; we say a reflexive “sorry” for delegating work that needs to be delegated or for simply asking a question. Research indicates that women, as the gender with a higher tendency to “over-apologise”, may be held back in their careers by doing so. Excessive apologising can be perceived as a sign of weakness, diminishing one’s presence and potentially jeopardising promotion prospects. However, the tendency to over-apologize is not always linked to gender.

Why might you apologise unnecessarily?

- **You’re compassionate:** People describe you as kind and empathetic. You care about others, and you carry a moral compass that consistently points towards not hurting people. The mere possibility that your actions have harmed someone triggers an automatic “I’m sorry” to repair the damage.
- **You’re polite:** There is always a place for good old-fashioned manners – and saying a simple “I’m sorry” is a social skill that stems from a desire to be courteous and show respect.
- **You’re conscientious:** Getting things right matters to you and it’s equally important for you to right any wrongs if they occur. You are quick to take responsibility for your actions – even when you’ve done no wrong.
- **You’re seeking to placate:** To avoid conflict, usually with a person in a position of power, you apologise for something that didn’t cause harm. This usually happens when you’re interacting with someone who over-expresses anger. An apology in this instance can serve as a form of self protection.
- **You’re seeking approval:** Not the kind of approval you need from a senior stakeholder or a board member, but the kind of approval you crave to validate yourself, otherwise known as “people pleasing.” Others’ opinions of us in the workplace do matter – these opinions determine our reputation and ultimately our career advancement. The problem arises when we over-identify with others’ opinions and when our desire for their approval results in a total eclipse of the self.

In summary, the tendency to apologise unnecessarily arises mostly in people who are “others-focussed”. While apologies that stem from compassion, genuine politeness are conscientiousness are always a good thing, apologies offered at the expense of the truth or at a cost to your sense of self are not. Over-apologising in hope of being validated usually backfires (people respect strength) and may lead to you feeling resentful.

To apologise or not to apologise?

Whether to apologise or not in any situation depends on the facts. Consider asking yourself **three questions** before deciding whether an apology is necessary:

1. Have I in fact done something wrong or offended someone?
2. Am I apologising to take responsibility or to seek validation?
3. Am I apologising to repair or to placate?

If an apology is in order, what should it look like?

There is plenty of literature available on what makes a good apology – some suggestions are to:

- Make it **sincere** – a false apology equals manipulation.
- Make it **precise** – apologise for the offending action rather than for a peripheral, lesser offence (sorry I lashed out vs sorry I interjected).
- **Take responsibility** for the action – no caveats allowed, as tempting as they are.
- Make it **about your actions and not the other person’s feelings** – “I’m sorry you feel that way” is not an apology as it evades taking responsibility and may cause the offended to question their perception of reality (commonly referred to as ‘gaslighting’).

Most of us have experienced first-hand how quickly unpleasant feelings about someone can alchemise into pleasant ones following a sincere apology. But is there something even better for workplace relationships than apologising?

“THE BEST APOLOGY IS TO CHANGE BEHAVIOUR”

Organisational psychologist Adam Grant put it this way: “the best apology is to change behaviour”. What if we could reduce the need to apologise at work by simply treating ourselves and others better?

While nobody is immune to the occasional behavioural slip or the odd typo, there is a method to reduce our slip-rate. We can change behaviour by **training our minds** and **cultivating our emotional intelligence**.

Below are some practical steps you can take in the present to reduce the need to apologise in the future:

Tame your anger

- Recognise and name anger when it arises (note that frustration is a sign that anger is percolating).
- Give yourself permission to feel anger and find healthy outlets to express it (exercise, journaling, etc.).
- When triggered, pause and take a few breaths so you can be responsive instead of reactive.

Manage your anxiety

- Prioritise self-care: sleep, exercise, relaxation techniques (breathwork + meditation) and time with friends and family (‘co-regulation’ calms the nervous system).
- Set aside time the end of each day to prioritise ‘urgent and important’ tasks for the next day.
- Make time for deep work – turn on ‘do not disturb’ and turn off your phone.

Let go of micromanaging

- Recognise that your team can still deliver excellence if you release control.
- Delegate tasks and trust your team to handle them focussing on outcomes rather than every detail.
- Set clear expectations, provide guidance, and then step back – diarise regular meetings to assess outcomes.

Reclaim your motivation

- Take breaks and holidays to manage energy and recharge.
- Understand that procrastination can be a self-protection mechanism: break big tasks into smaller, manageable steps and set deadlines for yourself.
- Strive for mastery to experience more flow throughout your day.

By offering heartfelt apologies when appropriate and training our minds consistently, we can become both **compassionate** and **unapologetic** professionals.

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To find out more about how to train your mind and cultivate emotional intelligence, check out Stephanie’s WIN webinar on the *Power of the mind: Mastering emotions at work* or contact win@dlapiper.com or stephanie@haladner.com to arrange a session.