

Never Say, “Never Say Sorry.”



By Delia Jones

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The Nonprofit Risk Management Center is excited to introduce a guest writer to you for today's eNews! Delia Jones provides practical tips and a thought-provoking way of looking at the art of an apology.

It's a punchline, right? Certain people can't get through a sentence without including "sorry." I'm half Brit, and I know the tendency very well. We're sorry for calling early, for calling late, for calling at all, for bothering a busy person, for asking for help, for not living up to what we think is expected of us. An apology is an art form. You must decipher not only when the words "I'm sorry" are necessary, but you must also know how often it's acceptable to say them. Uttering the phrase too often depreciates its meaning and often evokes, "What do you have to be sorry for?" Fail to offer it often enough and risk being labeled as antipathetic. There are two types of apologizers: those who never do it and those who are sorry for everything.

We all know those who never say sorry—even for major, life-changing (or multiple lives-changing) mistakes and for every kind of crime and insult to humanity. Still, they won't or can't apologize. Perhaps they're the type of person that offers a "non-apology," one that comes with the addition of blame: "I'm sorry, **but** you *understood* my words/actions the wrong way."

But what about that always-sorry person? Their speech is peppered with a constant flow of "sorries" — these apologies can become pause fillers much like "ums... uhs... ahs... and likes." It can be annoying, reduces confidence, and is often self-deprecating.

Once your attention has been called to the nuances of apologizing, it's easy to be hyper-attentive to how we apologize. That's good! Like any area of growth, we must listen and learn. In this case, we strive to learn to listen for and hear genuine remorse to evolve our apologies.

When You've Done Something Wrong

There are good reasons to apologize, to do it sincerely, and to craft it well. In professional life, it's not a question of IF you will need to apologize, but WHEN an apology will be necessary. Mistakes are made, and you (or a team you are responsible for) will make them. The simpler the apology, the better and the more readily you can return to normal. For apologies that are an admission of an error or a mistake, use a three-step framework to help make sure your apologies are succinct without diminishing the tone.

Step 1: Admit YOUR error. State, "I made a mistake," or "I'm sorry." Don't drag in anyone else; apologize

only for you.

Step 2: Briefly explain what you learned. “Here’s what I learned from the mistake…” Keep your explanation short and to the point.

Step 3: Offer solutions as part of the apology. Ask, “How can I make it right?” or offer information for a restitution plan, “Here’s how it won’t happen again” or “Here’s how I can make it right.” If the solution involves other colleagues, meet with them separately, coordinate the details, and follow up with the person you apologized to so they can be aware of the plan.

When SOMETHING Has Gone Wrong

There is another kind of “I’m sorry” that is also important in the professional world: “I’m sorry,” said empathetically. For everyone—and especially leaders—empathy is a critical skill and cannot be done with a thrown-away, singular “sorry.” For employees and colleagues to feel you are engaged, you need to listen well and respond in kind.

Here’s an example:

Employee: “My mother passed away.”

Supervisor: “I’m so sorry. This must be a difficult and painful time for you. How can we support you? Do you need time off or for someone to step in on a project? Don’t worry. We’ll handle the work stuff. Family is more important.”

An important point to consider: the very nature of empathy requires you to follow the lead of others. A couple of years ago, my dog died. I wasn’t expecting to feel so much pain about it. When I talked to my supervisor, her response was, “It’s just a dog.” I was aghast she actually said that! Truly empathetic leaders put aside their personal feelings about the gravity of situations. In that moment of emotional pain, I needed someone to hear me and acknowledge my feelings and struggle. At that moment, how *you* feel about animal companions—whether you love or feel neutral about them—is irrelevant. The response given was precisely the wrong one. She didn’t know or care about my dog, and I didn’t expect her to. What I expected of her was to understand I was having a difficult time. An empathetic apology would have validated my feelings and given me confidence that I was a valued team member.

Crafting an Artful Apology

A man I worked for once blurted out: “Stop saying sorry!” Initially, the reprimand felt harsh; however, calling attention to the practice made me pause, think, and pay attention to when I said it. As a result, I consciously trimmed out some of my compulsory responses. Instead, I became more mindful of when I offered an apology. I decided never to give up on saying sorry, but I resolved to get better at it.

Here are the tips I formulated for myself:

1. **Be specific about the two types of apology.** Are you accepting responsibility for your mistake or empathizing about something that happened to someone else?
2. **Be direct and to the point for either responsibility or empathy.** Lots of flowery, repetitive chatting around the apology muffles the way the other person hears it.
3. **Ask what you can do to remedy the situation, and when offering solutions, be specific.** During an emotional situation, a person doesn’t always know *what* restitution will suffice, but can often choose from several options. It’s ok if you don’t offer a perfectly crafted solution. By providing options you indicate your desire to make the error right and you open a discussion with the other party.
4. **Listen.** It might feel uncomfortable but listen anyway and say little; that’s OK! If you need to interject, ask questions before making statements. Make eye contact. Moderate your tone; keep it low and even—even if you’ve really screwed up and you’re feeling panicked—breathe. Active listening skills take time to master, practice before you’re required to perform.
5. **Do NOT apologize for apologizing.** It’s fine. You’re fine. Acknowledge your unique communication style. If you find your apologies are excessive become more conscious about it—look at how and when you’re saying, “I’m sorry.” Think about how you’d like to be treated and consider how others want to be treated. Personality tests (e.g., [Myers-Briggs](#), [CliftonStrengths](#), [DiSC Assessment](#), or [Gretchen Rubin’s The](#)

[Four Tendencies](#)) you participated in during teamwork exercises may have felt useless at the time, but they can offer real clues to the needs of others! Use them now. Each person needs a tailored response and your job includes how to understand them and how to be understood.

Nonprofit team members and leaders can benefit from examining when, why and how often they apologize. Don't strive to eliminate the apology. Rather, be mindful about the execution of your apologies and use the words "I'm sorry" when they are necessary and genuine.

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