

Apology rejected: Why it's time for HR to stop saying I'm sorry

Human resources professionals need to stop apologizing if we ever want to drive progress.

By: Ben Brooks | November 11, 2020 | HRExecutive.com



"I'm sorry..."

The words would come out so quickly, so automatically that I wasn't even aware that I was doing it. It just became routine in my way of communicating—particularly over email—that I'd never even been aware of it, nor explored what was driving me to say it. It simply leaped onto the screen from the dancing fingers on my keyboard—or out of my mouth—so effortlessly that I genuinely believed what I was saying.

During a conversation I had this summer with a very trusted advisor, I was recounting a situation I had been struggling to address at work. I explained the particulars and then shared what I had written in an email to the person I was attempting to persuade. The email had opened with the phrase "I'm sorry." As soon as I repeated those words, my advisor cut me off with a powerful question: "Are you actually sorry?" The answer was immediate and uncomfortable; no, I wasn't sorry at all.

Over the course of the next hour, my advisor helped me to reflect and realize that I was saying I was "sorry" very often and that, most of the time, I actually wasn't sorry! My insincerity had a sense of utility to it, as I'd lead with an apology when I had to deliver a direct message, fearing that someone was upset with me, or otherwise predicting that what I had to say would be rejected. It was an anticipatory tactic to assuage and de-escalate the negative response I feared, but seldom did I have any data that there even was an issue at hand. And this "sorry shield" said a lot about my fear of dealing with someone else's potential disappointment or the resulting conflict that could ensue.

Now don't get me wrong: Accepting responsibility and acknowledging the impact of our behaviors is a key life skill, and I greatly admire people who are able to make genuine apologies that acknowledge the impact, apologize, try and make it right, as well as recommit to a different way of behaving in the future. I've been able to repair damaged relationships, complete things for myself and for others, and deepen my connections by offering heartfelt, effective apologies.

But when we use an apology as a shield to stave off conflict, that is the equivalent of negotiating against ourselves. To others, we come off as lacking in confidence and signal that we are not to be taken seriously—while to ourselves, we can hypnotize our brains into thinking that we've

actually been messing up and not doing our jobs well! This repetitive signaling evokes a deep sense of shame within us, leading us to think that we've not only let down others but that we are also generally inadequate. This was certainly my experience. Talk about fake news!

In the months since my “Aha!” moment, though, I really began noticing just how many of my colleagues in the Human Resources field seemingly shared that same bad habit of leading with an apology when one wasn’t even warranted. It happens in meetings when we’re bringing up ideas or asking questions, in emails when we need confirmation of status, when we need to give difficult feedback, and in countless other circumstances when we are just trying to do our damn jobs.

Today, though, I’m here to assert that we are cheapening the HR function, holding back our own careers and severely limiting our impact with our insincere apologies. Imagine if colleagues from IT, finance or legal led with “I’m sorry” all the time. We’d start to take them less seriously, too. Conversely, if we’re able to effectively jettison this impulse, then our credibility as professionals and as a function will soar. This is all part of the broader transformation of HR from a reactive service provider into a function that successfully architects and achieves real, meaningful change. Plus, we’ll also stop incorrectly programming ourselves with false data that says we aren’t succeeding in our roles.

Melanie Altarescu, a marketing executive and former coaching client of mine, taught me a brilliant phrase that she uses when she is given an undue apology at work—in her case, with a particular focus on women doing this. She simply gives them a beaming smile and loudly says, “Apology rejected!” She even did this with me a few times (ample evidence that my apologist impulses are longstanding), and it was incredibly useful and eye-opening to have that reflected back in real-time. It stopped me in my tracks.

I know this resonates with many of us—and I received confirmation of that feeling when I shared Dani Donovan’s *Email Like a Boss* tips on LinkedIn and the post quickly became my most re-shared post ever. One of her tips is for when you’ve taken a while to get back to someone: Don’t start by saying “sorry for the delay.” Instead, lead with “thanks for your patience.”

Pow!

What a tremendous difference it has made to tee up a conversation with confidence, clarity and sincerity, instead of the same tired old “sorries.”

So let’s all make a pact as professionals, to check our impulses to apologize when we don’t really mean it and to reject the unnecessary “sorry” statements from our colleagues.