

How Sorry Are You?

By: Amber D. Nelson

Every career woman knows it's polite to apologize for transgressions, such as those times when we're thoughtless, made a mistake, or overlooked an issue. But many women apologize reflexively the same way they automatically repeat, "please," and "thank you." They replace "Excuse me," with "I'm sorry" and often use "I'm sorry" as a way to acknowledge that something bad has happened. Pantene has created and circulated an interesting advertisement about this very phenomenon you can see here.

Why all the attention on apologies? Because studies show that women apologize much more frequently than men do and they often apologize for things that aren't their fault or for things over which they have no control. For example, when women hear someone say the copier at work is jammed, they often say, "I'm sorry," as though they personally fed paper in the wrong way – even if they haven't been in the copy room for days!

Take a moment and consider: When was the last time you apologized at work for something that had nothing to do with you? What about something that didn't really warrant an apology? Did you apologize for the heat in a room? Did you apologize when someone found a typo in an email that you didn't write? Did you apologize as you scooted your conference room chair a little closer to the table so that someone could get by? Stop it.

When you apologize for situations unrelated to you, you inadvertently take responsibility for things beyond your control. What happens when you take responsibility, even just verbally, for things beyond your control? You contribute to one of two stories about yourself: either you're a truly sorry character because you mess things up so often or you have delusions of grandeur and think you are in charge of everything. Not good. Not powerful. Not true.

Try replacing "sorry" with "thank you." For example, instead of apologizing for being late to a meeting, thank your colleagues for waiting. Rather than apologize for missing a cue, thank your co-worker for getting you back on track. Not only does a "thank you" dilute any defensiveness, but it recognizes others for their contributions. When you're in a position of expressing gratitude for the ways in which others have supported your work and efforts, you exude the perception of power.

Of course apologies have their place. When you miss a deadline or make a mistake, apologize. Name the transgression, take responsibility, and fix it. That's it. Don't provide excuses, dodge responsibility, or make others listen to the long, rambling story of what went wrong. Clearly state what happened, "I'm sorry I missed the meeting. I'll get notes from Sharon and make sure my assignments are all completed before the team meets again." If your manager wants to know what happened, she'll ask. Providing her with an unsolicited drama about how you overslept because your sister's cat died just makes you sound flaky and unreliable. Stick to the facts, deliver a sincere apology, and a clear course of resolution.

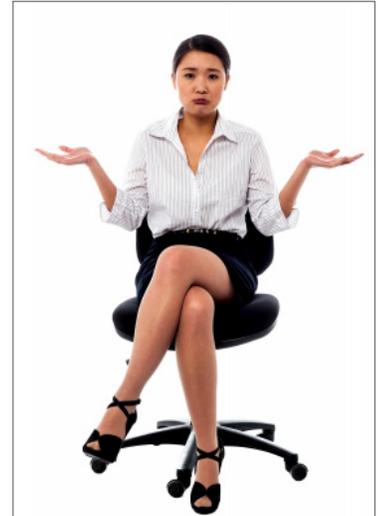


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