

'I'm Sorry' Can Undermine Your Career. Here's What to Say Instead

We all make mistakes. From minor ones like mispronouncing someone's name to major ones like making an expensive misguided hire. For those of us with a conscience and a degree of emotional intelligence, saying "I'm sorry" after the fact may not be easy, but it usually isn't agonizing. It's can also be deeply meaningful.

Amy Ebesu Hubbard suggests that apologies can serve as "a launching pad" for deeper and more important conversations that need to happen. Hubbard contends, "If you apologize too frequently to someone, it becomes background noise." Background noise gets tuned out. And getting tuned out at work -- especially when you're trying to right a wrong -- isn't a smart career strategy.

Women, in particular, tend to say "I'm sorry" more than men do, and it can start to erode their leadership impact over time. And leaders from some cultures are quick to apologize, while others are loathe to do so. Virtually every culture has its own rules about what "I'm sorry" means. American leaders tend to see apologies as a way to admit wrongdoing, while Japanese leaders view it as expressing their genuine intent to repair a relationship.

So, assuming you have made a mistake (or that you will), and you don't want saying "I'm sorry" to become a habit, undermine your impact, or get tuned out, here are 10 additional ways to acknowledge your error without denying culpability:

1. I made a mistake. Would you like me to share what I think happened, or just take steps to fix it?
2. What I intended was _____, and I now see that the impact was _____.
3. I wish I had _____ instead. Next time I will _____.
4. I see that I did _____, and that you're feeling _____. How can I clean this up with you?
5. Thank you for pointing that out/showing this to me/bringing this to my attention. Here's what I think I need to do to correct it.
6. I did _____, and I don't want to make this error again. For the future, what should I know/do differently?
7. I feel badly about what I did, and I appreciate the opportunity to correct it.
8. I won't do this again, and here's what I'll do to make sure that I don't repeat this.
9. I didn't think about/consider/foresee/plan this correctly. Here's what I missed, and here's what I have learned for the future.
10. I see what happened, and I fully own my contribution to what went wrong.

Saying "I'm sorry" works until it becomes expected or overused. Conveying that you're sorry in other ways -- and then backing up your apology with immediate and appropriate action -- can go a long way to repairing relationships, getting a process back on track, and to growing your professional credibility.