

WOMEN

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How—and When—to Apologize as a Woman in Higher Ed

By Katie Rose Guest Pryal

Working in higher ed, we often get pulled in many directions. We're asked to serve on committees, to join projects and to take on extra work. And we agree to do these things, which can lead to us overextending ourselves. Sometimes, emergencies arise. When the unexpected happens, we have to ask for extra time to complete our work or we have to back out completely. And when we do those things, we have to apologize.

Writing a professional apology is not a skill that comes naturally. But it is a skill you can learn. When you fail to meet a commitment, what should you say to ensure you will maintain your good standing in your work community? How do you write a professional apology? And even more specifically, how do you do so as a woman?

Accept Responsibility

Accepting responsibility is the hardest part of an apology, and the easiest part to get wrong. Some of us accept responsibility poorly because we have been advised—by lawyers or public relations people—to avoid doing so. But if you don't have a legal team, or if your team has not advised you to keep your mouth shut, then you need to accept responsibility—blame—as the primary part of your apology. "I'm sorry you feel bad" is not an apology; it is an expression of sympathy. "I'm sorry I caused you to feel bad"—that's getting closer.

But there's still a problem with "I caused you to feel bad": It's not specific enough. When you accept blame, you must be specific. You must say specifically what you did wrong—and why it was wrong. Furthermore, while accepting blame, you do not get to make excuses or explain why something bad happened. You don't even get to explain how you will prevent the bad thing in the future. Future plans are great, but those come later, after the apology.

You might have heard talk of what are called "non-apologies." As language expert Stan Carey writes in *Slate*, "non-apologies tend to ring conspicuously false, being variously couched in ifs, buts, hedges, deflection, qualification, self-absorption, euphemism, defensiveness,

obfuscation, and the agentless passive voice ('Mistakes were made')." To be sure, listeners can spot non-apologies, and they do not like them. In fact, non-apologies have the opposite effect of authentic apologies: The recipients of non-apologies end up angrier after receiving them rather than less angry. This is because, often, a non-apology shifts blame onto the person who is hurt. A non-apology implies that if the injured person were less sensitive, then the apology would not be necessary in the first place.

Don't Overdo It

Sometimes, when we have made a mistake, we might fret about the consequences of our mistake. Will what we have done cause us to lose opportunities in the future? What if we have made someone angry, and that someone won't want to work with us anymore? We might be tempted to apologize to the point of self-flagellation.

We might be tempted to overdo an apology.

An overdone apology can do more harm than good, because it puts a burden on the person you are apologizing to. If someone is legitimately aggravated by your behavior and you apologize, you have to give her time to accept your apology and forgive.

Here's an example: I was working with a colleague on a conference proposal. Shortly before the proposal was due, they disappeared, and I had to pick up the slack. Finally, I submitted the proposal alone. Weeks later, I received an apology email from the colleague. The email contained an

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overdone apology rife with exaggerated, unprofessional language. Furthermore, the colleague launched into detail about how complicated their life had become and begged me to forgive them instantly.

When I received this email, I felt burdened. I was justifiably annoyed at my colleague. They had screwed up. I deserved some time to be angry.

Furthermore, my colleague shared personal information that forced me to manage my colleague's emotions. They were overwhelmed by their feelings of remorse, sadness and regret. With this overdone apology, they forced me to feel overwhelmed too. My colleague's apology had become an emotional dump—on me.

Here's what my colleague should have written: "I sincerely apologize for deserting you at the last minute with our conference proposal. It must have been very hard for you to pick up all of the slack and finish on your own. My behavior was unacceptable. It will never happen again. I hope you can forgive me."

This better apology describes specifically what my colleague put me through. It shows that they understand what I suffered and notes that their behavior was wrong. And it asks for forgiveness, no strings attached.

Know When Not to Apologize

All you have to do is type the words "woman" and "apologize" into a search engine to be overwhelmed by information trying to convince you that women apologize too much. But is that true? According to a 2010 study, women don't apologize more than men for perceived wrongdoing. The twist is that women perceive that they are doing more things wrong in the first place.

Men don't perceive as much of their behavior to be offensive. Women do. So, who is right? What, exactly, are women apologizing for—and do all of those things deserve apologies at all? Likely, no.

Executive coach Nicolette Amarillas, writing for *Entrepreneur*, suggests that women change mindsets: "Try trading remorse for gratitude." Amarillas' words echo the

study: "Mentally categorizing missteps as 'offenses' is a dangerous practice, and it disproportionately affects young women." Try reframing missteps as small things rather than large things that require apology.


If you have kept a colleague waiting a few minutes for lunch, don't apologize. Instead, say, "Thank you for waiting for me."

If you took 48 hours to reply to an email (a reasonable amount of time, but one that many women still apologize for), write, "Thank you for your patience," instead of "I'm sorry it took me so long to get back to you." (Better still, simply write your email.)

If you are leading a meeting and someone asks you a question you don't know the answer to, do not apologize. You are an expert. You would not be leading the meeting if you weren't. But this particular moment, this reveal of a gap in knowledge, frequently garners an apology from women, where it doesn't from men.

Resist the urge to apologize. You have nothing to apologize for. Instead, say this: "Thank you for bringing such an interesting article to my attention. I'll be sure to take time to read it in the future." Better still: "What a fascinating question. Can you research the topic and get back to me with an answer?" That last one works particularly well with folks who are trying to catch you with an insincere "gotcha" question.

Knowing how to craft a simple, sincere apology is a strength you must develop, and one that will serve you well. Knowing when to use gratitude ("thank you") instead of an apology is a habit you must build, day by day, to untrain yourself from the statistical likelihood that you, as a woman, are trained to see your small mistakes as massive offenses that require apologies.

But once you know how to apologize for things that deserve it, and how to gracefully express gratitude for things that do not, you will be well-equipped to live in a world that is full of both unexpected challenges and opportunities. 

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