

Sorry seems to be the hardest word

In September 2012, Nick Clegg broadcast an apology for ditching the Lib Dems' opposition to increasing university tuition fees. He was hoping for forgiveness, of course.

Instead, he was met with reignited anger over the policy U-turn and scorn - [a hilarious Auto-Tuned remix of the speech on YouTube](#) has been viewed more than 2.5 million times. Not to be outdone, David Cameron followed suit by apologising for February's extreme flooding.



No doubt it seemed a good idea at the time to Clegg: a frank, straight-to-camera mea culpa filmed in his home, then move on quickly with the issue put to bed. So why didn't it work?

Criticisms ranged from his performance ('third-rate thespian') to his insincerity: he seemed to be regretting not breaking a promise but making a commitment. Others had not forgotten his pre-election spiel about it being time to say goodbye to broken promises.

So what can businesses learn from these antics? While 'I'm sorry' may be a short and deceptively simple phrase, scientific research shows an authentic and well-timed apology can motivate staff and build confidence and trust. (Clegg's video was both inauthentic and tardy.)

'Apologies are an essential part of a mature workplace,' says occupational psychologist Dr Phil Bardzil from Impact Consulting. 'They create a culture of innovation and improvement.'

At trend management company Kjaer Global, chief executive Anne Lise Kjaer didn't get mad when one of her staff misinterpreted a brief. Instead, in a move that might surprise more authoritarian leaders, she put up her own hand and (whisper it) said sorry.

One of the new breed of 'betapreneurs' - collaborative business leaders who innovate through trial and error - Kjaer recognised her customary method for briefing staff, often verbally and on the hoof, might have played a part in the misunderstanding. So instead of berating the hapless employee, she defused any discomfort by apologising herself and rebriefing more clearly.

'I often say sorry to employees. I flag up when something isn't working and tell them not to worry because it has shown us how not to do things. Then we look at how we can do it better,' she says. 'Feeling comfortable with apologies and admitting things aren't working, especially if you are the CEO, is vital if you want a culture where staff aren't afraid to fail and can look for ways to improve the business.'

Now her team make notes at briefings and confirm details back and staff check in with each other at a Wednesday express meeting. To boost communication, anybody can call for an ad hoc, 10-minute 'uncomfortable meeting', a one-to-one slot for airing a grievance, a mistake or an apology - a business confessional of sorts.

A study from Harvard Business School reveals that a well-timed apology can also increase your influence and likeability. Scientists found apologising for situations outside your control, such as bad weather or a late train, can make people see you as more trustworthy.

The study found 47% of people offered to lend their phone when asked after a superfluous apology compared with just 9% without the apology. 'Across our studies, we identify significant benefits to apologising,' the researchers conclude. 'Superfluous apologies represent a powerful and easy-to-use tool for social influence. Even in the absence of culpability, individuals can increase trust and liking by saying "I'm sorry" - even if they are merely "sorry" about the rain.'

Even an exceptional manager can screw up. A smart apology, delivered well, can make a bad situation better (see tips box, below). If it isn't done right, it can make

matters worse, a la Abercrombie & Fitch chief executive Mike Jeffries who left it seven years before issuing a half-baked apology for his incendiary comments on why the unthin, the unyoung and the unbeautiful don't belong in A&F clothes.

Each situation requires a different approach and a judgement call. If you're apologising to staff, do you take the particular offender to one side and say a quiet 'sorry' or do you make like AOL boss Tim Armstrong?

After firing an employee during a conference call, he issued a company-wide memo: 'I acted too quickly and I learned a tremendous lesson, and I wanted you to hear that directly from me.' Consider the degree of damage and remember that an apology from a business leader isn't just personal, it's political.

'Nobody is perfect,' says Paul Sweetman, director of Fishburn Hedges, named as one of the UK's best workplaces. 'You need to be open and honest, and not afraid to admit that you don't get everything right. When somebody, including the manager, gets it wrong, the whole team can learn from it.'

The s-word remains off-limits in many workplaces. For the majority of business leaders, sorry really is the hardest word. A recent study by learning provider The Forum Corporation found that 71% of managers avoided saying sorry because they feared appearing incompetent.

'There's a misconception among some managers that you should avoid ever making an apology to staff because it will reduce your authority,' says Dr Bardzil. 'Those managers tend to be inauthentic. They have low self-esteem and resort to pulling rank.' Almost half of staff reported feeling as if their bosses rarely or never apologise.

Another reason individuals and organisations feel reluctant to apologise is the potential for an 'I'm sorry' to be acted on as a legal admission of liability - a *mea culpa*.

In an increasingly litigious society, the last thing you want to do is open yourself up to potentially costly legal action. And this does not simply apply when you have a shunt in your car on the high street.

Apologising for treating somebody badly at work could later be held against you and be used as evidence in an employment tribunal. However, according to Michael Burd, joint head of employment at Lewis Silkin, this is fortunately relatively rare. 'My experience is that a substantial majority of issues in the workplace can be traced, at

least in part, to bad or poor communication, so if you have a practice of never saying sorry, you are probably creating significantly more liability than you prevent,' he says.

So, saying sorry shouldn't mean your authority ebbing away. If you've done something wrong, just man up and admit it, and make sure people know that you've learnt something, and they'll be likely to forgive you - unless you're Nick Clegg, of course.

THE ART OF THE APOLOGY

- Don't hide behind an email.

Apologies are best made face to face or at least by phone, rather than by email, voicemail or in note form

- Be sincere.

An insincere apology won't do much to restore your image after a mistake. Convey sincerity through body language and tone of voice as well as the words you use. Apologies that accept fault are more effective than merely expressing sympathy. Avoid the 'I'm sorry you feel that way' type of non-apology, which infuriates people.

- Do it fast.

The quicker you apologise after doing wrong, the better.

- Be specific.

Staff are less likely to doubt you if you provide a sufficient and believable explanation for your error.

- Throw away the script.

A personalised and apparently spontaneous 'sorry' rather than a generic, scripted or pre-prepared apology will be better received.

- Don't do it again.

Describe how you will change your behaviour to prevent a similar incident happening again.

- Ask for feedback.

Bosses who solicit staff and peer opinions, thoughts and feelings tend to be seen as more sincere in their apology than those who don't.

- Don't be prompted by others.

Staff will respond more positively if you initiate an apology of your own accord and convey that it is motivated out of true remorse and concern.

- Get a gift.

Accompany your apology with a gift. It's not the gift itself, but what it represents that counts; it could be a complimentary lunch or a bunch of flowers.

- Don't overdo it.

Repeatedly apologising for your own behaviour when it's not merited (for example throwaway apologies such as 'sorry, I'm not sure' or 'sorry, I can't find it') doesn't cut it, especially in meetings and presentations.



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