

You're the Boss and...You Blew It!

How to Apologize Without Looking Stupid, Silly or Weak

“Ralph really blew his cool in the meeting! He needs to apologize or he's going to have a staff mutiny on his hands.” You're the boss and you just blew it big time. Now what?

BY KAY CANNON

Do you...

- Pretend it never happened?
- Bulldoze past the hurt feelings and broken trust with intimidation?
- Grovel and beg for forgiveness?
- Blame the situation on someone or something else?
- Arrogantly declare you were right and everyone else was wrong?
- Justify, explain, defend or rationalize your behavior?
- Toss a half-hearted “I'm sorry” as you flick lint off your shirt?
- Hide in the safety of your office until the storm blows over?

Or... do you offer a sincere expression of regret and apologize for your behavior? Be honest. Time and time again, I see leaders destroying their credibility because they refuse or don't know how to apologize for a mistake. Offering a sincere apology is harder than it sounds.

No one enjoys admitting she has made a mistake or offended someone. The last thing you want to do is admit you were



stupid, spiteful, insensitive, imperfect or blindly unaware. This is especially true when you are the boss.

But bosses are just people. Bosses make silly mistakes, say stupid things and miss the boat on big decisions just like everyone else. If you want the respect and trust of your co-workers, you must know how to gracefully and sincerely apologize for your blunders.

Apologizing Takes Courage

Sincerely apologizing can be as difficult as walking barefoot across hot coals. Feelings of shame, fear and pride can stand in the way of offering a heartfelt apology. You

may believe apologizing makes you look weak or incompetent. You may worry admitting you were wrong undermines your authority and respect. You may even tell yourself that refusing to apologize makes you more powerful, in control and “right.”

Refusing to apologize is a short-sighted, cowardly way to deal with the situation. When you refuse to apologize, you are refusing to own accountability for your actions, words and decisions. By example, you are telling your staff it is not important for them to be personally accountable for what they do or don't do at work. Is that the message you really want to send as a leader?

Don't be tempted to toss a quick “I'm sorry” instead of offering a heartfelt apology; your apology will come across as insincere and disrespectful. Instead of repairing the damage you originally caused, an insincere apology increases the damage. Likewise, if you are endlessly apologizing for insignificant things, your apology becomes meaningless. Your staff will simply ignore your apology like mere background noise.

Offering a heartfelt apology takes courage and skill. Truly great leaders know how to use the power of apology to build strong teams and inspire amazing business results.

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power in the workplace

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Steps to Offering a Heartfelt Apology

1. Apologize as soon as possible. If feelings are really intense, you may want to give yourself and the other person a little time and space to calm down. But don't wait too long. Bad feelings fester and build up over time.
2. If at all possible, offer your apology in person. Look the other person in the eye when speaking to him. If you can't apologize in person, then do it by phone. If you can't do it in person or by phone, then write a handwritten letter. Avoid using e-mail to apologize, which can be perceived as cold and impersonal.
3. Specifically identify what you did that hurt or offended the other person. Don't be vague or sidestep the real issues. Don't

defend, make excuses or justify your actions. Don't blame the situation on someone or something else. Accept accountability for your actions. "My tirade during the staff meeting was uncalled for and was disrespectful to you."

4. Express your own feelings of regret about the situation. Be specific and be sincere. "I am embarrassed and ashamed I acted so badly and said those hurtful things to you."

5. Identify what you will do to repair the damage caused by your hurtful actions or

words. If you broke someone's window with a wild baseball pitch, you would apologize and offer to replace the window. The same principle applies when your behavior offends or hurts someone at work. "I will apologize to the rest of the staff for my behavior and tell them I unfairly took my frustration out on you. You didn't deserve to be treated that way."

6. Let it go and move on. Don't hold a grudge or stew on the situation. Learn the lesson you need to learn and put the unfortunate situation in the past. ■



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