



## Stop saying 'I'm sorry' at work—and use these 3 phrases instead, says Wharton psychologist

By Megan Sauer

There are pros and cons to saying, "I'm sorry."

That's especially true in the workplace, according to Maurice Schweitzer, a chaired professor of management at The Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania: While the phrase expresses care and empathy, it's often not the most effective way to take accountability.

"[Saying sorry] is a very kind thing to do, but it can also put us in what we characterize as a one-down position," Schweitzer tells CNBC Make It. "It's not authoritative, it's not assertive, and sometimes people appear more powerful when they don't apologize."

A 2012 study published in *The European Journal of Social Psychology* found potential psychological benefits to avoiding apologies: 95% of participants who refused to express remorse after offending someone showed signs of "greater self-esteem, increased feelings of power (or control) and integrity."

Of course, not apologizing after a misstep can easily backfire, especially when it rubs the people around you the wrong way. The problem is that the words "I'm sorry" are most useful when you've done something that directly impacts another individual, Schweitzer says — they can "transform people from being in a state of conflict to moving to cooperation" — and workplace mistakes don't usually involve such personal attacks.

Instead, you might find yourself wanting to apologize for missed deadlines, typos or miscalculations. To take responsibility for those kinds of mistakes without coming across as self-deprecating, Schweitzer recommends these three phrases:

Replace I'm sorry with...

Schweitzer says it's important to communicate intentionally when things don't go as planned. For instance:

Replace "I'm sorry for this mistake" with "I'm taking responsibility for this, and here's how I plan to fix it."

It's an apology that still acknowledges a misstep without conveying unnecessary vulnerability. "If you recognize a mistake, it takes assertiveness to say, 'Here's the error. I want you to know about it and I'm going to take these corrective actions,'" Schweitzer says. "Stating your intentions specifically, I think, is a powerful and often constructive thing to do."

In other situations, you might not want to explicitly apologize at all. For example:

Replace "I'm sorry for being late" with "Thanks for your patience"

Replace "I'm sorry you're stressed" with "I noticed you have a lot on your plate. Can I help you? Do you need a break?"

The key, Schweitzer says, is to practice accountability while suggesting solutions that can help you move forward, rather than dwelling on past mistakes. You'll be less likely to get down on yourself after you mess up — which could lead to more errors — and you'll be perceived by others as more confident and dependable.

Doing so can help you alleviate some of the pressure you might feel to be perfect, too — because you'll know how to communicate through the next problem, whenever it inevitably arises.

“We should learn from our mistakes and figure out how to minimize them, but that doesn't mean we're going to stop making them,” Schweitzer says.

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