

APOLOGIZING IN THE WORKPLACE? REALLY?

WHEN WE TALK TO CLIENTS and friends in the business world about the idea of apologizing in the workplace, we get mixed reactions. Some are interested and supportive: “Really? That is so needed.” Others aren’t sure what to think: “Wow. I would have never of thought of trying to ‘go there’ at work.”) And the final group thinks we’re crazy: “Are you kidding? That’s not even a consideration in the places where I’ve worked.”

We understand. Apologizing and workplace relationships don’t go together for a lot of people, but for others they are a natural combination. Why do we receive such mixed reactions? Let’s start with those who just don’t, or won’t, apologize in a work setting.

WHY PEOPLE DON'T APOLOGIZE

What are the barriers to apologizing at work? First, *the process of apologizing is based on the belief that you may have done something wrong or inappropriate*. For some people, this doesn't fit with their worldview or possibly their view of themselves. Some people have a relativistic approach to behavior: what is "right" (or wrong) for you may not apply to me. We are different people, from different backgrounds, with different personality styles and values. So what is right or appropriate varies from person to person.

Others hold a similar but slightly distinct point of view—that behavior is really situation-specific. So whether an action is right or wrong largely depends on the circumstances surrounding the situation (thus, the name that is given to this viewpoint is "situational ethics").

Unfortunately, sometimes people are motivated to apologize out of external pressure from others. *They* don't necessarily believe they've done something wrong but they have been shamed by others. "I can't believe you did that! You need to go apologize to them *right now!*" Obviously, this impetus for apologizing often does not lead to the best results, since the action can be viewed as insincere, prompted only by guilt or embarrassment.

A different, but related, reason why some people don't see the need to apologize in work settings is because they believe they have never done anything wrong. That is, their reluctance is related to their view of themselves—that they are the brightest, most knowledgeable person on the team and their opinion (or way of doing things) is always right. (And if it isn't, it is either because you misunderstood them or someone erred by not providing them with all of the information to make an accurate judgment!) Anything that goes wrong cannot be their fault (by definition).

ADMITTING YOU'RE WRONG

A second barrier for some is the concern about *admitting* that they have done something wrong. This can come from a desire not to lose face in front of others (hurting their reputation) or feeling that owning up to a mistake will undermine their influence (or possibly their authority if they are in a position of leadership).

Such people may agree that what they did “wasn’t the best” or that they should have acted differently. But acknowledging this fact to others (and worse, in public) is not an option for them. They typically see little benefit of doing so, and a lot of potential downside to admitting mistakes.

DISPLAYING WEAKNESS

Apologizing, for some, is an indication of weakness. In their view, to admit that they acted inappropriately and are seeking to rectify the situation with a colleague is taking a position that opens them up to all kinds of negative fallout. For many in the corporate world, any sign of weakness displayed makes you vulnerable to being ignored, set aside, stepped on, passed over, open to ridicule, and mocked. Essentially, your pathway to career advancement has been derailed. As a result, they have no interest in pursuing bringing resolution to a conflict by apologizing.