



# Why You Need To Stop Over-apologizing In The Workplace

By Joelle K. Jay, Ph.D.

- “I’m sorry I’m late!”
- “I’m so sorry to ask you for this.”
- “I’m sorry I’m not as prepared as I would like to be.”



How many times have you started a sentence with an apology?

For some people, it’s multiple times a day – often without even noticing. Unconsciously, those of us who over-apologize can be weakening our power. Becoming more aware of what for many has simply become a habit can help them gain a more influential communication style, a stronger executive presence, and more respect from the people around us.

Now, let’s acknowledge that a sincere apology holds a special place in our relationships. And even the off-handed “so sorry” (“Sorry to interrupt – I know you’re busy!”) is often merely intended to be polite and kind. But it doesn’t always work in a business setting.

Often I will hear a leader says something like this to a team member:

“I am so sorry to ask you this, but we really need someone to take on this project, and it’s a big one. It might be kind of a challenge, but we really need to impress this client.”

The intent of the leader here may be to connect personally. The leader means, “I know you weren’t expecting this, but I trust you, and you’re the best person for this job.” But the impact may not be what s/he wanted professionally. The team member hears, “She’s apologizing; she doesn’t feel strongly about this and in fact may feel guilty. I’m going to push back on this.” In a business setting, apologizing as a form of communication can come across differently than it may between friends.

Believe it or not, through no intention of your own, starting an ask with an apology may sound insecure, not very convincing, and even a little whiny, and ultimately you’re not going to get the “yes” you’re looking for.

There are three elements of that communication style that are a problem.



1. **The apology itself.** In a business setting, “I’m sorry” can immediately put you into a smaller role, suggesting you have done something wrong that you have to apologize for. More often than not, you do *not* have anything to apologize for, so choose another approach. Raise your awareness of the overuse of the phrase even for one day and you’ll feel the difference!
2. **The explanation.** Whatever follows an unnecessary apology invariably is diminished by the apology itself. “I’m sorry, I really would have liked to get this into better shape for you before sharing it” emphasizes that what you’re delivering isn’t very good. Try owning the deliverable just as it is, knowing that it – and you – are fine and valuable as is.
3. **The implication.** Between the apology and the explanation lies one more problem: the emotional tone. When you apologize unnecessarily, others get the sense that you think they feel bad, and/or that you feel bad, and so the feeling is...bad.

Let’s see what happens if we rephrase the apology above, ridding ourselves of this apologetic baggage. How about if instead of saying this:

“I am so sorry to ask you this, but we really need someone to take on this project, and it’s a big one. It might be kind of a challenge, but we really need to impress this client.”

...our team leader instead said this?

“Would you please lead our next project? We really need to impress our client, and you have the right skills and talent to do is.”

Now s/he is asking directly, with courage and self-confidence, for something of importance from someone she respects. The apology is gone, the explanation is clear, and the implication is that the leader expects the best – a delivery that leaves the leader and the team member feeling powerful and ready to succeed.

Again, please don’t misunderstand me – many a sincere apology has healed a relationship and righted a wrong, and it should be a valuable communication tool in the right setting. Just save those apologies for when you need them.

In the meantime, without the *unconscious* or *unnecessary* apologies...you’ll be communicating like the leader you are. *For more ways to improve your power as a leader, and create new advantages for yourself and your company, see Joelle’s book: [The New Advantage](#).*



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