

# Saying sorry not enough when trust, gender roles broken, just ask Clinton and Trump

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Public figures such as United States presidential candidates Hilary Clinton and Donald Trump may have to do a lot more than just say sorry to win back public trust after a misdeed, said a York University researcher whose study on trust was published today.

"Whether it's a boss, co-worker or the public, saying sorry is not always enough to win back broken [trust](#), especially when [gender stereotypes](#) are also broken. Both have happened with Clinton and Trump in the last few months," said Shayna Frawley, PhD candidate in [human resource management](#) at York U who led the study with York U alumna Jennifer Harrison, now at NEOMA Business School in France.

Gender stereotypes continue to be an issue in the workplace and on the campaign trail. Women are still expected to be benevolent and concerned about others, while men are perceived to be confident, competitive and independent. When either gender goes against those preconceived notions and also lose the trust of their colleagues or bosses, they'll experience a double backlash.

"With the Hilary Clinton email scandal, her critics were claiming she put national security at risk for her own convenience, putting her own needs ahead of her responsibility as a public official. This is a clear example of breaking trust and gender expectations," said Frawley.

The research, "A social role perspective on trust repair", published today in the *Journal of Management Development*, looks at how gender

expectations can affect trust and its reparation.

In the workplace, if a woman violates trust while putting her own interests ahead of others, for example by being dishonest or not helping a co-worker, she will find regaining that lost trust much more challenging because she went against gender stereotypes. "Had she not broken gender stereotypes and instead just broke the trust by underperforming, she would have fared better," said Harrison.

A man who fails to put others ahead of himself, however, will only face consequences for a breach of trust. That's because men are not expected to help others. Lying or refusing to help a co-worker doesn't affect those expectations. A man will also face the same double backlash if he performs poorly though. In this case, he will have violated the trust placed in him, but also will have gone against gender expectations that men are good performers.

Trump faced this double backlash when his critics pointed to a string of failed business ventures and his inability to raise campaign funds. "What these claims are trying to get at is that despite Trump's reputation and his connections, he's not performing so well at things that men traditionally are viewed at being good at," said Frawley. "They were saying he can't be trusted to perform well and has in fact misrepresented himself which plays into gender stereotypes."

## **So how do people go about repairing trust?**

The research seems to show that if a man is trying to repair trust he should do it in a way that is consistent with expectations of what men should be. "One way is to apologize and take personal responsibility for what happened and not blame it on external factors," said Harrison.

However, if a woman violates trust in a way that breaks gender

stereotypes, she is better not to apologize, but deny responsibility or blame external factors.

Take Melania Trump's speech at the Republican Convention which plagiarized portions of a 2008 Michelle Obama speech. Trump claimed to have written it with "as little helps as possible", but then a speechwriter took responsibility for accidentally using portion of Obama's speech. "This is a clear case of Trump blaming external factors," said Frawley.

If trust is broken without the breach of gender expectations, both men and women will have an easier time of regaining that trust, said Harrison.

The researchers say gender is something organizations should pay more attention to in their diversity management and conflict training, especially how gender and trust interact because it's an unconscious process. In other words, a women's lack of helping others or a man's low performance shouldn't be treated any more severely than if a woman shows low ability or a man puts his needs ahead of others.

**More information:** Shayna Frawley et al. A social role perspective on trust repair, *Journal of Management Development* (2016). [DOI: 10.1108/JMD-10-2015-0149](https://doi.org/10.1108/JMD-10-2015-0149)

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