

# Apology psychology: Breaking gender stereotypes leads to more effective communication, says study

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Saying "I'm sorry," especially in the workplace, can be tricky terrain. Delivering an effective apology can help resolve conflicts, restore trust and promote collaboration among coworkers.

But what works best?

A research team including a University of Arizona faculty member says that to make your next [apology](#) more effective, use language that goes against gender stereotypes.

Sarah Doyle, associate professor in the Department of Management and Organizations in the Eller College of Management, said the team wanted to find out what constitutes an effective apology in the workplace—and whether the content of a successful apology looks different depending on the gender of the apologizer. The research was published in the [Journal of Applied Psychology](#).

The team used past research to define "masculine" and "feminine" language, including a [study from 2003](#) that defined masculine language as having more agency and being more assertive, confident and self-assured, and feminine language as warm, communal and nurturing.

The team labeled apologies with more masculine language as "agentic," and those with more feminine language as "communal." Overall, Doyle's team found that those who "violated" gender stereotypes were seen as delivering more effective apologies.

"We found that women delivering masculine-style apologies benefited because they were seen as displaying higher levels of assertiveness and enhancing their perceived competence," Doyle said. "The men delivering apologies with more stereotypically feminine language were seen as having greater interpersonal sensitivity that enhanced their perceived benevolence or warmth."

## **Starting with celebrities**

The team began its series of four studies by searching through a platform that is a well-known hotspot for celebrity apologies: X, formerly known as Twitter. They ultimately examined 87 apology tweets from celebrities,

including rapper and singer Lizzo, comedian Kevin Hart, actor Tyler Posey and television personality Kendra Wilkinson. Public reaction to those tweets supported the idea of apologizers benefiting by violating [gender stereotypes](#), especially for the women in the sample, Doyle said.

"The female celebrities who delivered apologies that were higher in these masculine qualities were especially likely to receive these benefits," Doyle said. "There were higher 'like' counts and the sentiments in response to those apology tweets were much more positive."

For women delivering an apology on the platform, a one-point increase in agentic language, as measured on a five-point scale, returned an average of more than 17,000 additional likes, Doyle said.

## **Everyday apologies**

In the second study, 366 working adults participated in a scenario in which their accountant sends them an email apologizing for making a mistake on their taxes.

Individuals were randomly assigned to one of four groups classified by a male or female accountant delivering a stereotypically masculine or feminine apology. Participants then rated different components of the apology and determined whether they would like to continue using the accountant. The data lined up with the results from the first study, showing, for both male and female apologizers, that the counter-stereotypical apology was more effective.

The third study involved 441 individuals participating in the same accounting scenario but asked them to respond to the accountant's apology and determine whether they wanted to keep working with them.

The fourth study was similar to the third, but used a scenario involving a paperwork error by a nurse to see if using a more traditionally female occupation would change the results. The data from each study showed counter-stereotypical apologies were seen as more effective, especially for female apologizers.

Across the studies using the accounting or nursing scenarios, researchers found that, for women, delivering a counter-stereotypical apology increased the apology's perceived effectiveness by an average of 9.7%. For men, using a counter-stereotypical apology increased perceived effectiveness by an average of 8.2%.

"It's important to mention that we did not find that men and women are penalized for giving a stereotypical apology," Doyle said, "Rather, they benefit from giving a counter-stereotypical one. Thus, any apology is likely to be better than no apology at all."

## **Sorry to ask, but what did we learn?**

Put simply, there are a lot of different ways to apologize, and it can help to think it through, Doyle said.

"I think people assume that 'I'm sorry' is a consistent and effective way to apologize, but there are a lot of different ways to say that," Doyle explained. "Not all apologies are the same, and it can help to be a little bit more deliberate about the [language](#) that you're using and the content that is included in your apology."

The research team is hoping the results can lead people to think beyond how often we apologize, and to put more focus on how we communicate.

"Much of the literature suggests women apologize too much and men don't apologize enough," Doyle said. "But I think the frequency

conversation is a bit oversimplified. It's not just about whether people should apologize more or less, but how we can construct apologies differently. It's what you include in that apology that's really going to matter."

The research team also included Beth Polin from Eastern Kentucky University; Sijun Kim from Texas A&M University; Roy Lewicki from The Ohio State University; and Nitya Chawla from the University of Minnesota.

**More information:** Beth Polin et al, Sorry to ask but ... how is apology effectiveness dependent on apology content and gender?, *Journal of Applied Psychology* (2023). DOI: [10.1037/apl0001128](https://doi.org/10.1037/apl0001128)

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