

#sorrynotsorry

By Eleanor Beaton



I attended an event recently that featured both men and women speakers. Two-thirds of the women speakers started their talks with apologies. None of the men did.

The women apologized for not being as prepared as they could have been, for having a cough and therefore a scratchy voice, for being a last minute addition to the program and for the fact that their content might not apply specifically to every last person in the room. Then, with the introductory apologies behind them, they each launched into varying versions of thoughtful and inspiring presentations.

Unfortunately, they lost half the room at “sorry.”

Women: we need to stop apologizing unless we really, truly mean it. For instance, the other day I inadvertently cut off an elderly man at the grocery store with my shopping cart. He smiled, shook his head and said, “Lady drivers.”

“Are the best,” I replied before apologizing for cutting him off.

Daily life offers myriad opportunities for men and women alike to submit warranted apologies: bumping into people, inadvertently offending someone, cancelling an appointment last minute due to unforeseen circumstances. There are also many situations where we as women have a disturbing tendency to offer apologies that are not only unwarranted, but also self-undermining. Here are some common situations in which apologies simply will not do:

Any time you speak in public.

There’s something about speaking in front of groups of five or more people that seems to overstimulate our tendency to immediately apologize. When you step up to a podium, or walk up to a microphone, or stand up in front of a classroom or use your voice in the boardroom, refrain from apologizing unless you really, truly mean to apologize. Even in situations where you have gathered people to offer a public apology...do not let the apology be the very first thing you say.

For offering your opinion.

The comedian Amy Schumer once reflected in an interview on the biggest lesson she learned while working with director Judd Appatow on her breakout movie *Trainwreck* was that she apologized every time she shared her opinion with him. “Sorry, but I think...” she’d say, before launching into her feedback. Once she recognized the pattern, she stopped apologizing for sharing her opinions and felt immediately empowered.

For talking about yourself.

I will often hear from women who tell me they are great at talking about issues or vocally lending their support to others, but shrink away from talking about themselves. Underselling yourself is a subtle form of apology: I’m sorry for taking up valuable air time talking about myself. This type of unwitting apology can seriously undermine career growth in a world where it’s not only about what you know, but about who knows what you know.

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Apologizing for a legitimate infraction clears the air, and shows a willingness to take accountability for our imperfect actions. It’s a cornerstone of a healthy, functioning society. But apologizing out of a sense of insecurity or awkwardness is both demeaning and undermining. When we apologize for being present, using our voice, or being seen in front of a group of people, it’s akin to holding a giant, flashing sign that announces to the world, “I’m not important, don’t pay attention to me!” As women, we have enough external and historic forces that undermine our authority. Gender bias doesn’t need any more help from us.

The next time you’re in a situation where you feel tempted to apologize simply for being a woman with a voice, take a deep breath. Then say what you were going to say right after you apologized. And remember ladies: it’s hard to have a voice at the table when you apologize for using it.

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FEEDBACK

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