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The “Hardest Words to Say” Can Build Relationships

Deborah Tannen, a professor of Linguistics at Georgetown University, has written many books on how we as Americans communicate with one another. She claims that by far, the most difficult words to say are “I’m sorry” because in our culture, “to apologize indicates weakness.” But in reality, the opposite is true – “to acknowledge error in fact suggests strength, self-confidence and the ability to learn and grow.”

No doubt, all of us can recall a workplace act, behavior or statement that we truly regret. Most of us just try to not think about it and hope that the passage of time will simply erase it from memory. But perhaps our first ennobling act of the New Year might be to step up to the plate and apologize to someone whose reputation or feelings we may have mistakenly damaged. But Dr. Tannen reminds us that a true apology has four parts: admitting fault, showing remorse, acknowledging damage and indicating what we are willing to do to rectify the situation.

Let’s examine how this would play out in the real world: Employee Sam Smith (a fictitious name) hears some “break room gossip” indicating that his direct supervisor had been seen drinking to excess in a local bar. Several days later, Sam casually passes on this rumor to a co-worker as a *fact*. The story spreads for the next few days until the original source indicates that it was unfounded. Sam’s first reaction is to just “let it slide” since after all, he had not been the actual source of the rumor – he merely passed it on. But as the weeks pass, Sam is truly bothered by his behavior and decides to offer his supervisor a true four-part apology. He 1) requests a private moment with his supervisor and admits making the derogatory statement; 2) sincerely expresses his remorse; 3) acknowledges that his statement may have damaged her reputation and 4) promises to approach all four co-workers with whom he had shared the story to admit that it was not true.

It took real courage for Sam to adopt this course of action; but as a result of his decision, his supervisor was impressed with the strength of his ethical response to a moment of bad judgment. In his national bestseller, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey writes that “It takes a great deal of character strength to apologize...People with little internal security can’t do it. It makes them too vulnerable.”

If you feel the need for some guidance in redressing an injustice that you may have caused, either in your workplace or elsewhere in your life, we invite you to contact your EAP for professional, confidential guidance.