

1 JUNE 2018



NTA News

No.1
For all your
Training needs

The Case Against "I'm Sorry!"

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The Case Against “I’m Sorry”

On Handling Difficult People and Bullying and Harassment Prevention workshops we explore the communication issues which can exacerbate or diffuse a conflict situation.

One of the statements which cause a lot of debate is the overuse of “I’m sorry” in Australia. For example:

- “I’m sorry sir but the guidelines say you can’t build a two storey house on that block!”
- “I’m sorry, I know you are angry, but my Boss won’t allow it”.
- “I’m sorry to butt in here”
- “I’m sorry but you might not like what I’m about to say.”

Now I know we struggled for years to get our Prime Minister to say “I’m sorry” to the stolen generation, but that was an issue where for most Australians, an apology was warranted.

But if the guidelines say “You can’t build a two storey house on that block” why are we apologising for it?

If the “Boss won’t allow it” why are we apologising for him or her?

If you need to butt into a conversation, why are you apologising for it?

If you need to say something that the other person might not like, why apologise when it needs to be said?

Some say that they are trying to avoid conflict. Others say it’s a way of softening the blow. Others debate that by saying sorry we are looking weak.

Some company executives and legal departments ban “I’m sorry”, because legally it might put the company at a disadvantage.

Interestingly, in Japan when CEO’s have said “I’m sorry” the accepted tradition has been that they not only apologise, but also resign. For example, after Toshiba was found to have overstated profits by about \$1.2 billion, CEO Hisao Tanaka resigned, along with eight board members (source: The Japan Times 7 February 2016).

Let’s try to use “I’m sorry” in a different way without it seeming to be avoiding, or a sign of weakness, or without it placing your organisation in a legalistic nightmare.

Try these communication examples:

- “I’m sorry you feel that way sir. Let me see if I can assist you with that problem.”
- “Yes, I would be unhappy about that too if it happened to me. Let’s try to fix the problem.”
- If you say “I’m sorry but the guidelines say you can’t ... ” then you are saying to the client that you don’t agree with the guidelines either. Say “I can see that you are upset about those guidelines ... I will try to help you understand them better.”



The Case Against "I'm Sorry!" continued ...

- Instead of "I'm sorry to butt in" say "Can I add that"
- "What I'm about to say is problematic ..." is better than apologising for saying something that needs to be said.
- When you are late for a meeting don't apologise if it wasn't your fault. Say "There was an enormous traffic jam on the bridge which caused the delay. Now, let's get on with the meeting Agenda."



That's not to say that you shouldn't apologise when it is your fault. You should and that's a sign of strength.

But don't apologise just to diffuse a situation ... that's a sign of weakness.

If you need "Handling Difficult People" or "Bullying and Harassment Prevention" training, coaching, or our mediation service, call us to discuss it.

Inspirational Messages from the Famous

The fire in Thomas Edison

I read a story In "Growing the Distance: Timeless Principles for Personal, Career, and Family Success", by Jim Clemmer.

It was about the great inventor Thomas Edison. In his later years, Edison's so called fireproof factory went up in flames, and many years of his work were destroyed. Edison watched the fire with his distraught son. The next morning, Edison looked at the ruins and said, "There is great value in disaster. All our mistakes are burned up. Thank God we can start anew."

Three weeks after the fire, Edison managed to deliver the first phonograph.

We all need to develop that positive fire in adversity!



Two Heads are Better than One

Here's evidence of how two heads are better than one. George Johnston, author of one of Australia's most famous novels was stumped about what to call it. By chance he was having lunch with the great musician and poet, the late Leonard Cohen.

He told his book title dilemma to Cohen who asked "What's the book about?"

The author said "It's about my brother Jack". Cohen replied "Well there's your answer ... My brother Jack!"

The Efficient and the Dignified

In the excellent Netflix series “The Crown”, there is a scene in Episode 7 where Queen Elizabeth calls the ageing Prime Minister, Sir Winston Churchill in for a serious discussion.

In previous weeks Sir Winston had succumbed to a heart attack, but had not informed the Queen, and indeed, had colluded with one of his senior Ministers to keep the news from her.

As a child, Elizabeth had been coached annually by a Cambridge University professor in how the UK Constitution works. Much of what she was taught was based on the work of author and political commentator Walter Bagehot. In 1867 he wrote “The English Constitution”, a book that explores the nature of the constitution of the United Kingdom. By the time she was crowned, even though Elizabeth was poorly educated in other educational pursuits, she was basically an expert in the UK constitution.

So, it was with this knowledge that she called Winston Churchill in to dress him down about his action in hiding his serious health issues from her.

Elizabeth stated that according to Bagehot, there are two elements of the UK Constitution – **The Efficient and The Dignified**. She explained that the Government is The Efficient, and that the Monarch is The Dignified. She says that “*The two institutions only work when they support each other ... when they trust each other.*”

Sir Winston, so powerfully played by American actor John Lithgow, was suitably chastened and left the meeting with a bowed head in shame.

Even though it is a TV series, this was a powerful message for me as I observe local government in Australia. In effect, the CEO or General Manager of a local council represents “The Efficient”, and the Mayor represents “The Dignified”. What happens when the trust between them is lost? There is inactivity, loss of productivity, petty point scoring, and undignified chaos.

The Mayor should be The Dignified, listening to the community and ensuring proper democratic processes are upheld. The GM/CEO should be The Efficient, ensuring that council’s services are capably managed and productive.



I have worked with many dysfunctional local governments in past years where that trust has broken down. Through mediation, training, coaching and counselling we can re-instate that trust. But wouldn’t it be better if The Efficient and The Dignified worked together in harmony from the very first step, and didn’t denigrate into an undignified mess of hurtful comments and unproductive and undemocratic activities.

In the words of English/American political activist Thomas Paine (1737-1809) “Government, even in its best state, is but a necessary evil; in its worst state, an intolerable one”. Let’s pull away from seeing local government as “evil” or “intolerable”, and make local government the heart of dignified and efficient democracy that it should be.

About norman turkington and associates



norman turkington and associates is a psychology and management training consultancy specialising in helping clients with leadership, change management, team development, handling difficult people, and other soft skills training.

We also offer related services such as one on one corporate coaching, mediation and workplace investigations.

Contact us now for a free quote to facilitate a customised training intervention in your organisation.



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