



How to's, HR profession and best practice

Apologising at work: when and how HR can help

By **Samantha Smith**

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Experts explain in what circumstances HR needs to manage workplace apologies and how to do so effectively.

Let's get one thing out of the way, apologies don't *always* need to be managed by HR. A lot of issues can be handled privately.

If co-workers have a minor disagreement about something – whether it be questions about the use of the office fridge or arguments about messy desks – calling for HR is overkill. Even if there are more divisive spats that can't be resolved between the people arguing, often the appropriate mediator is the relevant manager.

But there are serious incidents, particularly those that come up in a workplace investigation into misconduct, where an apology might have to be managed by HR to mitigate any chance of further trauma or of backlash.

How HR fits in

For some people apologising is a difficult thing to do. There are countless examples of movies, books and shows where a protagonist stutters out the phrase "I'm sor... I'm sorry!"

So whether you believe art imitates life or vice versa – it's clear some people need a helping hand when it comes to apologising. HR can be that hand, revealing to the wrong-doer why what they did was wrong and why they need to be [held accountable](#) and how they can make peace with the offended party.

According to partner at Hall and Wilcox Fay Calderone, an apology is crucial in any dispute.

"Employees and employers should be proactive about raising and addressing issues at an early stage," she says. "Lost time will only escalate the issue."

When HR is proactive they can not only support employers and employees but also foster a better workplace culture.

"[Managing apologies] also suggests that the organisation takes seriously its employees' commitment to the Code of Conduct and there's an expectation that employees will take responsibility for their behaviour towards one another," says Calderone.

A bad apology

Founder of HR consultancy firm Corporate Dojo Karen Gately says she has consulted on many workplace investigations which have resulted in solutions that require apologies. She told *HRM* about two instances that involved bullying. Both perpetrators apologised, but one apology failed.

"The individual in this situation was incredibly hard-headed and felt they hadn't done anything wrong. But they wanted to keep their job so they took a compliant attitude and approach."

So when Gately and the accused sat down with the bullying victim neither Gately nor the victim were impressed.

"My honest observation was that they did not mean a single word of their apology – they still came across aggressive and intimidating," she says. "It's because they hadn't yet emotionally accepted they were responsible for the harm that was caused."

She decided to end the meeting and sat down with the bully and explained to them that not only was their [behaviour unacceptable](#) but if they didn't amend the situation, their career was on the line. Thanks to that talk Gately saw some positive change but only for a short time.

"It's not sustainable if someone doesn't accept responsibility – inevitably they revert back to their poor behaviour," says Gately.

When it comes to managing an apology that has backfired, Gately recommends that HR takes a respectful and sensitive but 'brutally honest' approach with people.

"Don't hold back from these conversations because people deserve to have them," she says. "If they're on thin ice in their career then HR needs to be honest and help them."

Of course, even if a person is remorseful for their actions an apology can still fall short. For example, it could be too non-specific or lack true accountability (i.e. the classic: "I'm sorry if what I did upset you.")

"In other words it may be lost on the person you're apologising to," says Julie Sweet, a psychotherapist from Seaway Counselling and Psychotherapy, who has worked with implementing EAPs in both vocational and corporate settings.

If the apology is lost on the wronged person, Sweet says the wrong-doer may need to reflect on their apology and possibly reframe it.

"If they don't show any ease or don't appear comforted by your apology then these are indicators telling you to slow down the process," says Sweet. "This is a chance to check in and ask how they feel and what they need. Then keep the lines of communication open and go forward from there."

A good apology

In Gately's second example, the perpetrator held a senior position and was prone to outbursts. Naturally many people felt intimidated and picked on by him. So a workplace investigation took place – and the outcome went really well.

“He was an unconscious bully – he struggled with emotional intelligence,” she says. “He was completely oblivious and sincerely meant no harm and felt genuine remorse. He was devastated that he hurt someone.”

Gately says once that self awareness is obtained people can let down their defences and genuinely apologise.

When it comes to good apologies Calderone recommends using author Dr Aaron Lazare’s methodology (from his book *On Apology*). It has four parts:

- Acknowledgment – Calderone says this helps to rebuild trust and re-establish the relationship. It also gives HR and the person affected a chance to discuss what is and isn’t acceptable.
- Affect – this is to show that the perpetrator’s own actions has caused them to feel remorse.
- Vulnerability – in order for someone to accept full responsibility, they need to offer an apology without defence nor the expectation that they will be forgiven.
- Restitution/repairation – make amends and make steps towards ensuring it never happens again.

It’s important to note that the feelings of the person doing the apologising still matter. Gately says HR can help manage an apology by ensuring the apologiser’s self-esteem isn’t damaged during the process. “It’s important to show people that they can be forgiven if they demonstrate their remorse and commit to doing better.”

Have you ever managed an apology in the workplace? Tell us what you did in the comments below.

TAGS : communication, HR best practice, misconduct, workplace apologies, workplace investigations



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