

Before "Sorry," Think

We as women have to stop saying "I'm sorry" for things out of our control. When we apologize for things we are not responsible for, we take a step backwards in the advancement of women in the workplace.

I am a cardiac anesthesiologist, which means I care for patients who are undergoing open-heart surgery. I work in an academic medical center and train doctors to become anesthesiologists. The operating room (OR) can be a high-stress environment, not to mention costly. As members of the OR team, we try to be extremely efficient with our time.

The very nature of what we do presents challenges, as our patients are critically ill and often times our plans do not go as anticipated. Difficulty in placing lines in our patients that allow us to give medicine and transfusions, challenges in airway procedures, or patients who are unstable under anesthesia are all equal opportunity tests that present themselves to both men and women resident physicians under my supervision.

However, there is something interesting that I have observed when watching residents. Male resident physicians, when faced with challenging procedures, rarely apologize for things outside of their control, appropriately so. While nurses and surgeons are standing in the OR waiting for our team to finish so we can start the surgery, you won't hear a male resident say "I'm sorry." Why? Because it is not his fault.

This scenario often plays out differently for female residents. While placing difficult lines or breathing for a sick patient, it is not uncommon to hear female resident physicians look at everyone in the room and say "*I'm sorry.*"

Every time this happens, I cringe.

Why? Because just as the male residents are not at fault for the challenge that caused a delay or extra help, neither are the female residents. And yet in their attempt to apologize for the *situation*, what they are saying to everyone in the room is “*This is my fault.*”

And whether they mean to or not, with their apology, they are saying this: “*I am not as competent, I am causing this delay, and I am sorry for this fact.*”

Why is there a difference in the way males and females react to workplace challenges? Maybe it is because of differences in how we see ourselves. Perhaps unconscious biases by our teams and our own selves are also present. In the 2016 McKinsey Study on Women in the Workplace, differences were found between the top personality strengths of successful female and male leaders. While male and female leaders shared several top attributes, male leaders had ‘achievement’ as their top strength, while the female leaders scored highest for ‘responsibility.’ This suggests female leaders tend to take more self-responsibility for actions in the workplace. Is this why we are constantly apologizing, even for things outside of our control?

Perhaps.

What can we change? *Our responses as individuals.*

Recently I was working with a female resident on a very sick patient in an acute situation in the operating room. She was doing everything carefully, precisely, and with extreme caution, just as directed. The procedure was difficult and taking longer than it should have due to some things beyond her control. I knew that she was doing the safest thing for the patient, and I wanted her to achieve success in a stressful situation. So I remained silent, giving her nods of encouragement. Knowing someday she would have to do these procedures on her own in a similar high-pressure situation, I wanted her to feel success and gain confidence in her decision-making.

About half-way into the procedure, she glanced at the clock and everyone in the OR watching her, and started to apologize for the length of time it was taking her.

"I'm sorry," she said.

I smiled at her and told her to keep going. I assured her she was doing a great job.

Finally, after her third apology, I stepped in and finished the procedure.

After the patient was stable and the procedure was finished, I pulled her aside. I explained to her that I wanted her to succeed in medicine, and I wanted her to be the leader that I knew she was capable of becoming. I recommended that she stop apologizing, immediately, for situations outside of her control. I described to her how her apologies made everyone in the room place blame on one person – her. I encouraged her that her approach to the patient and her clinical care was great. That was not the issue. It was her constant apologies, and her destruction of her own self-confidence, that required change.

She thanked me.

We have to recognize this in our colleagues and ourselves. As men and women we are very different, and this is good thing. We have different strengths, talents, and ideas to offer. Diverse organizations are successful organizations. Diversity in organizational leadership equates to positive financial, cultural and customer satisfaction outcomes. We need women leaders, and as women, we must stop apologizing for doing our jobs.

Before you say "I'm sorry", I challenge you to think.

If you hear a woman in your workplace apologize for something not her fault, maybe you should speak to her privately and encourage her to change this behavior.

Let's help one another create diverse, successful, and forward-thinking organizations.

That is something we should never be sorry about.