

Too Late To Apologize - Unless You Have an Excuse

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When you arrive late to a staff meeting, you may have better luck quelling ire from your colleagues by making excuses than by simply apologizing.

A recent psychological study suggests that your coworkers are apt to act more favorably toward you if you make an excuse for being tardy rather than simply apologizing or offering no explanation at all. Apologies appear to work best when you also blame your lateness on, say, a traffic jam or a malfunctioning alarm clock.

Previous research has shown mixed results on the power of apologies to mollify a victim. University of Pittsburgh psychological scientist Karina Schumann has found, [as she reported in Current Directions in Psychological Science](#), that apologies help victims feel validated and less aggressive toward the person who wronged them. But [an experiment reported several years ago in Psychological Science](#) suggested that people feel less appeased by an apology than they predict.

Psychological scientists Joseph E. Mroz and Joseph A. Allen of the University of Nebraska recently set out to examine the effects of apologies in the workplace, at least when it comes to punctuality. They were specifically interested in how workers react to a colleague who arrives late to a meeting—a relatively benign transgression. The researchers wondered how coworkers would respond if they received an excuse, an apology, an excuse and an apology, or no explanation.

The scientists recruited nearly 560 working adults to participate in an online study and showed each

respondent one of 12 video vignettes depicting a workplace meeting. In the videos, meeting attendees arrived at a scheduled time, then waited for a colleague who hadn't yet arrived. After 8 minutes, the attendees began discussing the latecomer (the discussion varied across versions of the video), who arrived 10 minutes after the scheduled start time. In some versions of the fictional meeting, attendees complained about the latecomer, while in others they did not. In some versions, they remarked that the person's tardiness was unusual, while in others they griped that it was habitual.

Also, the vignettes showed the tardy attendee either apologizing to the group upon arrival, offering an excuse for being late, or offering no explanation whatsoever.

Afterward, the researchers asked the participants to rate how the latecomer would perform at work in a variety of ways compared with other employees, and how likely they would be to help that individual (by, for example, showing them meeting notes to help them see what they missed).

The excuse-providers in the video received higher ratings on expected work performance compared with apologizers. Additionally, study participants who watched meeting attendees make no complaints about the late arrival rated that individual as a better employee than those who saw complaint-filled meetings.

Participants rated the individuals who were habitually tardy as worse employees, and less deserving of help. But they viewed excuse-providers as more worthy of assistance than apologizers and those who offered no explanation.

To see whether these attitudes generalized to real-life settings, Mroz and Allen conducted a second online survey, asking hundreds of employed adults to recall their last workplace meeting and whether anyone arrived late. Participants favored coworkers who provided both an excuse and apology for being late over those who provided just an excuse or said nothing at all. But again, an apology alone had a noticeable effect on the participants' sentiments about the late arrival.

Importantly, about 70% of participants who said someone arrived late to the meeting reported the individual had both apologized and offered an excuse, indicating that the original experiment may not have fully captured how people handle themselves when they leave people waiting.

Mzor and Allen say future research could explore other types of transgressions, as well as various explanations that best minimize negative responses to tardiness. But their results, they say, suggest that you're better off blaming your tardiness on forces beyond your control rather than simply saying, "Sorry I'm late."

References

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