

What sort of apology was that?

by Katherine Graham

I was talking with my 12 year old daughter about the kinds of bullying and harassment allegations we investigate and the type of issues that come up. I gave her the (real) example of a young man who worked for a large retail chain, who rang us in a panic because he was being disciplined for sexual harassment, and he wanted advice and help. He had gone with a female colleague into a stock cupboard, and asked her if she fancied 'getting jiggy' with him. All in jest, naturally. He was highly confused therefore as to why he was being accused of sexual harassment, because, as he put it, 'I never laid a hand on her', as his understanding was that sexual harassment must involve touching. It became clear to me during our phone call that he was urgently, desperately sorry for his stupidity, and he was mortified to discover the level of his ignorance and insensitivity; and that what he wanted was to apologise.

He asked if he could "try out" his apology on me. That's when it became clear that he had no idea how apologise, however genuinely he may have wanted to: 'I'm sorry if what I said was rude'; 'I'm sorry you felt upset by what I said'. Limited in empathy, limited in responsibility, limited in depth, he could almost have been apologising for a delay to someone's onward journey caused by the late arrival of a train.

I explained to my daughter how surprised I had been by this man's inability to apologise. "But Mum", she said, "they don't teach us how to apologise at school. We spent three English lessons last term on how to write a complaint letter, but we've never done apologising."

This man should have known better and deserved to be strongly admonished for his crass and inappropriate behaviour. But the way I see it, we are all going to offend and upset our colleagues at work at some time or another, whether from stupidity, laziness, or poor communication skills, and we need to be able to articulate our regret and to take responsibility for our actions in order to allow everyone to honour their emotional life, and then get back to business.



SORRY?

Until we all know when and how to apologise, and are encouraged by our employers to do so, organisations will continue to pay the cost of unnecessary formal actions.



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CMP Resolutions work to Close, Manage and Prevent disputes at work through skills development, mediation and investigation services.

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