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The Art of Not Saying Sorry

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At the beginning of this year, a new email tool launched to help women stop apologising in emails. The 'Just not sorry' Gmail plug in, scans emails and highlights words such as 'sorry' and 'I think'. But what is the point? Looking at recent research it is clear to see that there is a phenomenon among women in business that needs to be rectified: the tendency to apologise in an array of professional and personal situations. But why do women feel the need to qualify their message with an apology?

Studies have shown that the way women and men address colleagues when in a position of power differs. Men in a professional environment naturally adopt an authoritative language, whereas women tend not to portray the same confidence. A recent study shows that women do in fact apologise more than men, and the reason for this could be down to women having a lower threshold for what constitutes offensive behavior. When comparing women to their male counterparts, men feel they don't have to apologise for many of their actions, where as women do, whether they are aware of it or not.

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Pantene has recently brought the issue into the mainstream through its latest advert, titled 'Sorry, not sorry'. In it women are shown in everyday situations apologising, for example, asking a question at work. The scenes are then regenerated without the use of the word 'sorry'. Bringing the issue to the forefront ultimately will help women to address confidence issues, both in their personal life and professionally.

Recent research from Aston University shows that out of all the leaders chairing board meetings in UK FTSE companies, there was little to no differences in linguistic skills. Both genders used authoritative, decisive and goal driven language. This data shows that language is the key element in helping women progress to the top and succeed there.

The question is then, how can women change their language to convey confidence? Firstly, using words such as 'I think' and 'I feel' are seen as weak words, they instantly reduce authority. Ellen Petry Leanse, a former executive at Google and Apple recently wrote that the use of 'permission' words such as 'just' convey a subtle message of subordination, she thinks "striking it from a phrase almost always clarifies and strengthens the message".

In a similar way, body language has been proven to impact on how authoritative a woman is perceived to be in the workplace or in a boardroom. Deborah Gruenfield, from Stanford University believes that women struggle with an inner conflict; likability vs. competency. Gruenfield believes that women can overcome this through their body language. There are a number of traits leaders, and people in high status jobs have in common. One is the ability to own any given space, they take up room and spreading themselves out. Simple adjustments such as reaching your hand out further when you go for the handshake, standing taller or sitting forward with your arms on the table in a meeting can make all the difference when making first impressions and conveying confidence in a professional setting.

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The issue of women's confidence in the work place is a pressing one. With less than 10% of executive directors at FTSE 100 companies being women there are areas that need improvement to reach gender equality; one of these areas is women's ability to assert themselves and confidence. Changes to how we speak and how we hold ourselves to confront these subtle, yet important behaviors will begin to make a big difference.

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