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Top leaders never apologize; mistakes are part of doing business, they say. Thoughtful, compassionate leadership is the last thing a busy business owner has time for, but it can be a critical social skill to learn. Sometimes the only way out of an awkward corner is to say, sincerely, I'm sorry. At other times, simply pointing out the problem is enough. While wildly successful leaders don't grovel, they do acknowledge their culpability by changing course when mistakes do occur, often owning the mistake without ever apologizing for it.

Is acknowledging a mistake the same as apologizing for it? Although we can't all lead the world's largest corporations, we can learn from those in the hot seat.

Do not apologize for everything. You are sorry you arrived late to the meeting. You are not sorry you cannot take my call. Using apologies casually can create tension and undermine communication. Does Brett Favre apologize to the fans every time he throws an incomplete pass? Save your regrets for Super Bowl situations.

Do apologize for mistakes and missteps of a personal nature, especially if they impact co-workers or clients. You are human, and if you make a serious mistake that affects someone else, admit it.

Do apologize actively. Say those huge words, I'm sorry, earnestly, and then make an effort to correct the situation. Not making amends undermines credibility and makes the next apology suspect.

Do not apologize for making tough decisions. Cutting the budget, laying someone off, ending a business relationship: these situations are unfortunate and uncomfortable, but they are not personal.

Do not apologize for taking the last pen, notepad or printer paper. Do arrange for replacements when you wipe out the supply.

Exception to the rules: There are three beings in the world that everyone should apologize to every time they goof up: your spouse, your dog and God.

Send your career planning questions to julie@insightnews.com .