

The Social Capital Economics of Over-Apologizing

Acting in the world requires a tolerance for failure, which requires a tolerance for what for some people is the most difficult form of failure: disappointing or pissing other people off.

You are going to burn social capital with other people, no matter what. There's a reason a fast-growing company like Facebook had the motto "move fast and break things." Moving fast *does* break things, including (temporarily) the tranquility of your relationships. How you handle that disruption and burnt social capital really matters. So it also matters how you think about burning social capital. There are some economics at play here.

Many nice people over-apologize when they burn social capital. Have you ever met an over-apologizer?*. They say "I'm sorry" for every possible perceived slight. They apologize for the social friction they generate through basic initiative. While they may be very sensitive to and more aware of ways in which they are burning social capital, their way of protecting it (over-apologizing) doesn't really work.

There are a lot of reasons for this, but there's one that I want to point out.

Over-apologizing reflects an obsessive focus on clawing back the specific social capital or reputation that was lost. That's a fair intuitive response, but trying to cling to past credit is a conservative, loss-avoidant mentality. It's inherently focused on failure to keep social capital rather than the opportunity to create it.

Clawing back credit is costly and difficult. It focuses you and the person you may have pissed off on failure and loss, rather than opportunity. That tends to actually make it harder to move back to a positive working relationship.

Conservative, loss-avoidant mentalities also don't tend to be the ones that create most of the world's wealth, and they don't tend to generate the most social capital, either. It's the companies that create new wealth through risk-taking and a focus on opportunities and strengths (rather than weaknesses) which succeed. They don't over-apologize for their failures - they win through leapfrogging failure to a new success.

The same is true for people creating new social capital wealth. A focus on apologies as a way to regain past social capital just means that you spend less time creating new social capital. Don't try to reverse your social capital losses. Instead, try to win new victories. If you do, people will soon enough forget your failures.

** I have been this person and can be this person from time to time. It's what makes me qualified to right this post.*