The Fastest Way Forward

Idea In Short

Ambitious professionals who move fast, take initiative and challenge the status quo will inevitably make mistakes that require an apology. The instinct to explain, justify or minimize the mistake before apologizing usually backfires. A direct, unqualified apology, delivered quickly and without excessive self-punishment, repairs trust faster than any amount of careful explanation, and it lets everyone involved get back to doing good work sooner.

Mistakes are the cost of moving fast

Doing important, fast-moving work that challenges an existing process inevitably produces friction. An overly curt email, a missed deadline, showing up late to a meeting, or overstepping an informal boundary in how a decision gets made are all common byproducts of people trying to get real work done rather than simply maintaining the status quo. None of these are cause for alarm on their own, but each deserves a genuine, direct acknowledgment once it happens.

Say the words directly

The simplest, most effective response to a small mistake is a direct apology, stated plainly rather than buried inside a longer explanation. Saying the words clearly, rather than offering context first and an apology second, signals immediate accountability. People generally respond far better to a short, sincere acknowledgment than to an extended justification that sounds like an attempt to avoid responsibility.

Proportion matters as much as sincerity

An apology should match the actual scale of the mistake. A minor slip, a late arrival, a terse message sent while distracted, deserves a quick, direct acknowledgment rather than prolonged self-criticism. Treating every small misstep as a major failure creates its own

problem: colleagues start managing the apologizer's guilt rather than simply accepting the acknowledgment and moving forward together.

Apologizing is the fastest way to move on

A frequently repeated piece of advice on this point holds up well under scrutiny:

> Take your work seriously, do not take yourself too seriously.

Mistakes are, in a sense, guaranteed for anyone doing consequential work. The professionals who recover fastest from small missteps are the ones who acknowledge them plainly, without spiraling into extended rumination, and then simply continue doing the work that matters.1

Trust recovers faster than expected

Genuine trust between colleagues tends to recover remarkably quickly after a direct, honest apology, provided the apology is not followed by a repeat of the same behavior. Psychological research on interpersonal repair consistently finds that acknowledgment and genuine remorse, expressed promptly, restore trust considerably faster than avoidance or delayed explanation.2

Building the habit into daily work

Making direct apology a habit, rather than an occasional, uncomfortable event, changes how a team operates over time. Colleagues who know that mistakes get acknowledged plainly and quickly tend to take more initiative themselves, since the cost of a small misstep feels genuinely manageable rather than something to avoid at all costs.3 A culture built around honest, proportionate accountability consistently outperforms one where mistakes get hidden, minimized, or excessively litigated.

The discipline behind a simple habit

None of this requires elaborate frameworks or formal processes. It requires the discipline to say the words plainly, mean them, and then let the matter go rather than carrying it forward as unresolved tension. That small discipline, practiced consistently, does more for a team's trust and pace than almost any formal policy could.

- 1Accountability
- 2Interpersonal Trust
- 3Team Dynamics

Summary

Apologizing directly and quickly, without burying the words in justification, is the fastest way to repair trust and move on. Making mistakes is inevitable for anyone doing ambitious, fast-moving work, and treating an apology as a simple, honest reset rather than a prolonged act of self-punishment keeps both the relationship and the work moving forward.