

Strategy: The Power of “I’m Sorry”

I think we spend about \$4 trillion a year, maybe it’s even more than that, on healthcare in the United States. And some actually conservative estimates have said that maybe as much as \$600 to \$800 billion of that is spent on unnecessary tests. And the majority of the unnecessary tests come from docs and hospital administrators who are terrified of malpractice claims if they don’t do every test known to humankind.

Some hospital organizations are dealing with that rather effectively these days, and bizarrely enough their weapon of choice is—whenever there’s a screw-up or a problem—they say, “I’m sorry.” And still people are going to make claims for the awful stuff like taking the wrong kidney out and so on, but the simple, “I’m sorry,” literally reduces claims sometimes by 50, 60, or 70 percent.

Now, human beings being human beings, it’s even better than that. And I know I shouldn’t be laughing about this sort of thing. A friend of mine is the head of a giant ER in northern Virginia. And the “trick” that he came across or designed, whatever you want to call it, is when somebody had a problem in the ER—and particularly not killer stuff but sometimes incredibly long and annoying waits and so on—he would give them a gift certificate of a dinner for two at the local Outback Steakhouse.

Now, what in the hell does that have to do with being in an emergency room with gunshot wounds? What it has to do with it is give them the Outback Steakhouse certificate and 90 percent of them go away happy. Human beings want to be acknowledged. They want you to acknowledge the problem. They want you to say “Thank you” when they’ve gone out of their way. But, you know, I’m not making light of this, but if you’ve got malpractice claims in your hospital, why don’t you hand out a few free Big Mac slips to the people with the problems? And you may win the battle. It’s incredible. Little stuff. It’s always the little stuff. Strategic stuff is little stuff. How many times? Nine cases out of approximately 9.1. Remember to say, “I’m sorry,” remember to say, “Thank you.” And don’t worry whether your ocean is blue, brown, yellow or any other color.