The Fine Art of Apology: When, Why, and How to Say 'I'm Sorry'

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Knowing when, how, and why to apologize isn't easy. As with the practice of medicine, proficiency requires not only knowledge, but also skill in the art of apology. We are all human—and, as such, fallible. Whether we can admit it or not, we would love to be infallible. A few folks may believe they are infallible—but we all know that everyone makes mistakes that may result in some emotional or physical injury to others. A sincere apology for those mistakes can go a long way in promoting and maintaining positive relationships with those who have experienced emotional or physical injury because of our errors.

What Is an Apology?

Some persons and some organizations are better than others at dealing with interpersonal or organizational conflict. Conflict is pervasive in human relationships. Although some persons appear to be predisposed to act as "peacemakers," this is certainly not the norm. In the face of this fact, some organizations, including a growing number of academic health centers (AHCs), offer conflict management training to their faculty and staff. As a result (hopefully) conflicts are more readily resolved or managed.

Even with conflict management training, sooner or later, we will find ourselves in the uncomfortable position of having been wrong. At this time it is important to remember the even the best of us make mistakes. When we make mistakes, most of us will agree that acknowledging our error(s) and/or wrongdoing and offering a sincere apology is a reasonable response. The psychologist, marriage and family therapist, and pastoral counselor Carl Schneider defines apology as follows:

> Apology involves the acknowledgement of injury with the acceptance of responsibility, affect (felt regret or shame—the person must mean it), and vulnerability—the risking of an acknowledgement without excuses.[1]

Knowing the definition of apology doesn't make apologizing any less difficult. Clearly, it is easier said than done. Acknowledging our human frailty is sobering, to say the least, and most persons are uncomfortable with making sincere apologies. Most of us have not had training in how and when to say "I'm sorry" other than being admonished by adults to "Say you're sorry!" when we were children. Understanding the "when, why, and how" of apology is a useful skill.

Types of Apology

As children, we learned to admit when we were wrong within interpersonal relationships. Different approaches may be necessary depending upon the nature of the situation. In short, there are types of apology. Deborah Levi offers a "typology of apology":

- *Tactical apology*—when a person accused of wrongdoing offers an apology that is rhetorical and strategic—and not necessary heartfelt.
- *Explanation apology*—when a person accused of wrongdoing offers an apology that is merely a gesture that is meant to counter an accusation of wrongdoing. In fact, it may be used to defend the actions of the accused.
- *Formalistic apology*—when a person accused of wrongdoing offers an apology after being admonished to do so by an authority figure—who may also be the individual who suffered the wrongdoing.
- *Happy ending apology*—when a person accused of wrongdoing fully acknowledges responsibility for the wrongdoing and is genuinely remorseful.[2]

One might question if any of the first three types are really apologies at all. In fact, they are, but they don't measure up qualitatively nor are they as effective as the "happy ending" apology. Rather than dwelling on the first three types, this article focuses on making ethically sound apologies designed to improve our relationships with others—happy endings.

When Is Apology Warranted?

Barbara Kellerman makes the point: "When we wrong someone we know, even unintentionally, we are generally expected to apologize."[3] I think most of us agree and have this expectation of others. But do we really have this expectation of ourselves? Do we really know when an apology is warranted and when it is not? To complicate matters, social roles may require different behaviors. For example, an apology to an individual family member is markedly different than the CEO of an AHC publicly apologizing for a mistake made in the AHC that resulted in the death of a patient. The complexity of AHCs requires sincere apology that transcends interpersonal relationships, especially in situations where a person or persons experienced "hurt" at the hands of an organization.[4] Apologizing carries risk in both cases—but the risks are very different, as a doctor speaks to a family member as an individual and the CEO speaks for the collective. Likewise, in both cases, apology has implications—but the implications are typically broad when one is in a leadership role, as in the case of the public apology by the CEO. An apology to an intimate is typically more limited, but no less important. Our lives would be less complicated if we could know precisely when an apology is warranted—and when it is not. In truth, there is no universal answer to the question of when apology is warranted. It may be better to base our decision to apologize on when one is expected. Acknowledging injury and accepting responsibility for causing an injury allows us to meet the expectation of others.

Why Is Apologizing Important?

You may have heard the phrase, "Good fences make good neighbors." A corollary might be: "Mending fences makes for good neighborhoods." Offering an apology paves the way for reconciliation and, in some cases, forgiveness. Aaron Lazare argues that effective apologies must, at a minimum, meet one of seven psychological needs:

- Dignity must be restored to the offended party.
- Both parties agree on a set of values. As such, they agree that wrongdoing occurred.
- It is clear to both parties that the offended person was **not** responsible for the offense.
- The offended person is assured that the offense will not recur.
- The offended person witnesses the offending party experiencing some type of punishment.
- The offended person is compensated in some manner for experiencing the offense.
- Offended persons have the opportunity to express their feelings about the offenders, and, in some cases, are able to grieve the loss.[5]

Ideally, when the offended parties have more than one need, all the needs would be met by the apology. When an apology meets the needs of the offended party, forgiveness—by the offended—is possible. When an apology is effective, the offended party feels lifted of a burden. In turn, forgiveness can help the offender feel lifted of the burden of guilt.

How to Apologize

Learning how to apologize is similar to learning any new behavior. It may feel awkward and may not be polished at first, but with practice, everyone can learn to do it. There are several tips that will help you as you learn how to apologize.

First of all, wait until the right time and you are in the right place. Although public apology is often appropriate, especially when one is apologizing for the behavior of a group or organization, discretion should be used. Most apologies can and should happen in a private setting. Remember, you will be raising a topic that may recall a bad experience or bad feelings. Be respectful as you approach this task.

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Be direct and succinct in your approach. Acknowledge the fact that injury has occurred and then take responsibility for what happened. Be authentic in expressing your remorse and demonstrate your vulnerability. In other words, avoid excuses and offer to repair the damage.

Even if you follow these steps, be prepared for rejection. Sometimes, the person apologizing has an expectation that the apology will lead to immediate forgiveness and acceptance. Forgiveness and acceptance may take time. If you think of the offense as an emotional bruise, think of the healing process as the color changes we see as a bruise heals. It may take a couple of weeks before the "natural" state has returned.

Listening to the response to our apologies is important. In a previous Career Watch column, I offered the advice: "Knowing when to keep one's mouth shut is a virtue."[6] Keeping quiet may be very difficult, as post-apology listening is not easy. We may hear unpleasant observations from another about our own shortcomings. We may hear the expression of anger or rage. We may have to endure a tearful episode that, in turn, brings us to tears. One of the ways we let others know we are truly responsible and accountable for our mistakes is by listening to the other party verbalize the feelings associated with our actions. However, there are two positive aspects that may emerge in this process. First, taking the time to listen creates an opportunity to hear an apology from the offended party in response to our apology. The offended party may feel remorse about his or her behavior that preceded the event. He or she may be embarrassed by his or her behavioral response to the offense. Any time strong emotions are involved, the potential for "emotional bruising" increases. Second, we may hear the offended party forgive us for our faulty behavior.

Use Apology to Everyone's Advantage

Too often, an apology is warranted, but never happens. Resulting conflicts fester, at times resulting in an adversarial legal process involving attorneys as the wronged party seeks justice. There is a time and place for using the adversarial process—but there are many times when adversarial processes could be avoided altogether through the proper use of apology. A higher degree of "emotional intelligence" often leads to less conflict in general.[7] Individuals who are conscientious in understanding organizational culture and developing organizational savvy may be more adept at preventing, reducing, or managing interpersonal conflicts.[8] Knowing when, why, and how to apologize within an organizational culture reflects a higher degree of emotional intelligence. Whether we choose to be proactive or reactive, two things are sure: we will make mistakes and conflict will not go away by itself if we are too proud to say "I'm sorry." ❖

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