

The Power of Apologies

“All I want is an apology!”

People who have been hurt or humiliated often hope for an apology. They may hope that an apology from the person who caused them harm will restore dignity, trust, and a sense of justice. Whether you are requesting an apology or considering giving one, it is important to realize that *a thoughtful apology can mend a relationship while a thoughtless one may cause further conflict.*

What makes an effective apology?

- 1. A specific definition of the perceived offense.** The person offended and the perceived offender need a clear shared understanding of the behaviors (or omissions) that felt hurtful, rude, or wrong.
- 2. Acknowledging that the perceived offense caused harm.** The person offended needs recognition that their pain or embarrassment was legitimate, even if others might have felt differently.
- 3. Taking responsibility.** Offenders should acknowledge that, whether or not the offense was intentional, they were accountable for causing harm.
- 4. Recognition of wrongdoing.** Offenders need to agree that they were insensitive and made a mistake.
- 5. A statement of regret.** While “I’m sorry” is generally not enough for a complete apology, it is a necessary part of any apology and is imperative for re-building trust.
- 6. A promise not to repeat the offense.** The offender needs to offer a clear plan for self-restraint, improved behavior, and how to work with the offended person to address possible future misunderstandings.
- 7. An explanation of why the offender acted this way. Be careful!** An explanation can be risky as it can sound defensive or seem to be an excuse for bad behavior. Sometimes it is useful for healing a broken relationship and may set the groundwork for re-establishing trust and respect. *An explanation is only effective if combined with all the above elements.*

Why apologize?

An apology can often be the first step to better understanding in a damaged relationship. It says that you share values regarding appropriate behavior towards each other, that you have regrets when you don’t behave according to those values (intentionally or unintentionally), and that you will make greater efforts to live up to your shared standards of behavior. Timing can be crucial. An apology delayed may be an opportunity lost.

Why *not* apologize?

If an apology does not feel sincere, it can further damage the relationship. Sincerity is expressed by what you say, how you say it, and what body language you use. You may be caught in some of the roadblocks listed below. If you can’t include all the elements of an effective apology, it may be best not to apologize. *An inadequate or insincere apology can feel dismissive to the offended party and may heighten conflict.* (over)

You may want to tell the offended person that a future apology might be possible if you both are willing to participate in some form of conflict resolution, such as mediation, where you can further discuss both of your needs, interests, emotions, and behaviors. The Ombuds Office may be a useful resource.

Why request an apology?

- To acknowledge how you were hurt
- To confirm that the other person accepts responsibility
- To make sure it won't happen again
- To reconcile the relationship
- To restore your reputation

When you feel someone has offended you, hurt and anger often arise. Sometimes, you want an apology in order to humiliate or blame the other person, a motive that may provide short-term relief, but can damage a relationship in the long term. If you request an apology, you should carefully consider why you asked, what it should include, and how it should be made. Making it a demand rather than a request often backfires.

What type of apology do you want?

If your primary aim is to repair the relationship, requesting a private verbal apology might be most effective to allow the other person to save face. If you feel that your reputation was publicly damaged by the offense, you may feel the need to ask for a written or verbal public apology.

Roadblocks to receiving an apology

You are less likely to receive an apology if the relationship is too conflicted, if there are legal liabilities or potential precedents involved, or if the offender is in a position of power. Cultural, gender, and age differences can be very important: In certain cultures, if an offense occurred, an apology would be considered absolutely necessary, while in other cultures, apologies are considered a sign of weakness and are almost never offered.

It may be that the offender genuinely believes that they did nothing wrong. They may feel that the person requesting the apology is either overly sensitive or is attempting to manipulate them.

Responding to an apology

How you receive an apology can determine the future of the relationship. Sincerity is a key element here as well. You may want to demonstrate acceptance of the apology or extend forgiveness by a handshake or other method, if you are ready to do so. If not, you may want to acknowledge the value of the apology and the offender's regret and ask for more time to heal. Or, if appropriate, you might want to offer an apology for your own role in the misunderstanding ("I'm sorry for my part, too...").

Exchange of apologies

It is common for offenses to occur in the context of other offenses. When people misunderstand each other, they may hurt each other's feelings by speech, actions, or omissions. Often both people feel misunderstood and poorly treated. When one person can take responsibility and apologize for their portion of harm, it may open up communication and allow the other party to apologize as well.

To truly heal a relationship, it is powerful for people to exchange apologies. Each person acknowledges their responsibility, they reach a shared definition of the harmful behaviors committed by each one, they are both truly sorry, and they create a plan to avoid future misunderstandings. This sharing of responsibility for the relationship is a model of peacemaking that restores respect, caring, and trust.

An example

In 1995 on a radio talk show, Senator D'Amato used an exaggerated, stereotyped Japanese accent to mock Judge Ito, who was presiding at the O.J. Simpson trial. After receiving considerable criticism, the Senator's office issued the following press release: *"If I*

offended anyone, I'm sorry. I was making fun of the pomposity of the judge and the manner in which he's dragging the trial out." This dismissive and inadequate apology created vehement objections from colleagues, citizens, journalists, and Asian-American groups.

The next day, the Senator personally read a better-prepared statement in the Senate record: *"I'm here on the Senate floor to give a statement as it related to that episode. It was a sorry episode. As an Italian-American, I have a special responsibility to be sensitive to ethnic stereotypes. I fully recognize the insensitivity of my remarks about Judge Ito. My remarks were totally wrong and inappropriate. I know better. What I did was a poor attempt at humor. I am deeply sorry for the pain that I have caused Judge Ito and others. I offer my sincere apologies."*

Adapted from *Apologies* by Marsha L. Wagner, UCOA Handbook, 2000, and The Ombuds Office at the University of Colorado, Boulder.