



# The art of the apology

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We all need to say sorry sometimes.

When you're sorry about something you've said or done, apologise! But don't sound guilt ridden. It is best to apologise in a manner that is straightforward and sincere.<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

This is the first of two modules. In the first we shall focus on the apology, and in the second we shall consider the obverse, forgiveness.

As coaches we may on occasion say something or do something that inadvertently offends a client or a third party. We may or may not be aware that we have offended or hurt another person. We may have deliberately done something or said something for the greater good and a person has become caught up in what we have said and is offended or hurt. With knowledge that we have offended or hurt somebody accidentally or inadvertently, we are faced with the need to apologise. This module explores the 'why' and 'how' of

apologising. As a coach you may also become involved in mediation, of which apology and forgiveness are elements.

## Why apologies and forgiveness are important

Apologies and forgiveness are important because conflicts can generate deep and searing emotions. Even after the incident is past, people may still feel the pain, hurt, anger,<sup>2</sup> fear<sup>3</sup> and even hatred. Without apology and forgiveness, little progress beyond a cessation of hostilities can be made and the sufferer remains locked in negative emotions towards the offender.

It is not easy, however, to apologise or forgive.

## Types of incident

There seem to be four sorts of incident that give rise to the need for an apology:

- First is the accident with one responsible person. There was no intent, but the instigator has

the responsibility to apologise for creating the situation in which another suffered.

- The second is hurt caused to another person deliberately, but with good intent. It is likely that the hurt was not intended, but the action that caused it was intended.
- Third is the result of conflict in which both parties may be held responsible to some extent. In this case it is the person with the power or the victor that should normally apologise.
- Fourth is a situation where an instigator causes conflict deliberately. In this case the instigator should apologise for the harm caused to the other party.

## Key learning points

- ◆ Types of incident for which an apology is required.
- ◆ Levels of apology.
- ◆ Dos and don'ts when apologising.
- ◆ Helping your client to apologise.
- ◆ Steps in apologising.

Choose the approach that is easier for you. That will save you from making an apology that is so grudging that it fails.

- Don't think in terms of an 'expression of regret'. Instead, your goal should be communicating your regret to the other person. Expression is one sided – as though one were getting an apology off one's chest. Communication, however, occurs between people, and an apology needs to work well for the other person in order for it to be effective. Take the focus off yourself. Instead, keep it on your counterpart and the three elements of an apology: acknowledgment, regret and responsibility. This protects you from sounding defensive, and your apology will be better received.

## The non-apology

- Don't apologise for the wrong thing. Politicians and institutions tend to apologise for what maintains their image. If there is no clear relationship between the offender's apology and what the sufferer experienced as the original wrong, the apology tends to exacerbate the problem. At best, the offender will seem blind to the problem; at worst, they will be perceived as intentionally distorting it.

That gives the sufferer two problems: the original offence and the sense that a similar offence is likely to occur. The offended party thinks, 'How can I accept this apology? It makes me appear to be complicit in allowing the problem to happen again.'

- 'I want to apologise' is not an apology. It's no more an apology than 'I want to lose

weight' is an action to lose weight. Deliver a clear, direct apology; don't hide behind vagueness, circumlocution or clichés.

## Steps in apologising

- 1 Think about what happened and what you are sorry for doing.
- 2 Organise your thoughts. (**Tip:** write your apology down.)
- 3 Know the message you want to give, (**Tip:** practice what you want to say.)
- 4 State clearly what you are sorry for doing.
- 5 Share your feelings about what happened.
- 6 Never make excuses, blame, exaggerate or say empty words.
- 7 Listen to the other person's response without being defensive.
- 8 Offer to make amends if appropriate.
- 9 Move on. Once you have apologised, it is ended.

## References

- 1 Saf Lerman, *Responsive Parenting*, Chapter 1, 'Helping Children as they Grow', American Guidance Service, 1983.
- 2 Phil Barker, *What is Anger?* <http://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/anger/>
- 3 Phil Barker, *What is Fear?* <http://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/fear/>
- 4 Darrell Puls, *Apology: More Power than We Think*, September 2005, available at <http://www.mediate.com/articles/pulsD1.cfm>
- 5 Holly Weeks, 'The Art of the Apology', *Harvard Management Update*, April 2003.

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‘try to understand what motivates behaviour of the other person’

## Conclusion

Apology involves the acknowledgement of injury with an acceptance of responsibility. It has to be heartfelt, reflecting true remorse for the actions.

It is repair work – work that is often necessary, but difficult because it makes the giver vulnerable.

You may not be able to control whether your apology is accepted, but you can control its quality. Make every effort to control what you can. This will increase your chances of feeling good about your apology rather than feeling bad about having to do it.



## Apologise sincerely and honestly

So an apology involves the acknowledgement of injury with an acceptance of responsibility, and an acknowledgement of the effect on the person making the apology. There is regret or shame (the person must mean it); and vulnerability (the person apologises without excuses). It is repair work, work that is often necessary, but difficult. It is not a ritual. It has to be genuine and meaningful.

### To apologise or not to apologise, that is the question

There are cases that are simply different perspectives of the facts, in which people sincerely believe that they did nothing wrong. However, research shows that people often do blame themselves for what has happened but are afraid to admit it because it will be used against them. They also fear embarrassment and public humiliation.

Friction with another person can be stressful and counterproductive. Resolving the situation may require

an apology. The question is whether you should apologise or the other person should. The steps to move towards a decision are as follows:

- Decide whether you want to confront the person who believes you have offended or hurt them. It is usually better to air grievances than to let them fester.
- Try to understand what motivates the behaviour of the other person. Once you grasp why people feel or behave as they do, you will be able to interact with them more effectively.
- Speak to the other person calmly, politely and rationally. Focus on the situation and facts, avoiding gossip and personal attacks. Use 'I' language, never 'you' language. Bear in mind that they may be hurt and aggressive.
- Be careful not to express hostility in your posture, facial expression or tone. Be assertive without being aggressive.

- Listen to the other person carefully. What are they trying to say? Be sure you understand their position.
- Express interest in what the other person is saying. You can acknowledge their ideas without necessarily agreeing or submitting. Saying, 'I understand that you feel this way. Here's how I feel ...' acknowledges both positions.
- Squarely ask them what they want. Ask what sorts of actions they plan to take to change the situation.
- Communicate clearly what you want, offering positive suggestions and recommendations. Be willing to be flexible. You may recognise

that you need to offer an apology or need to accept the other person's position and forgive them to bring closure.

- Never demand an apology. To do so is a way to prolong the conflict. Just forgive them.

### Levels of apology

It seems that apology<sup>4</sup> can be considered as a continuum of acts on the part of the instigator. People respond differently, on the basis of their emotional make-up and the damage done. What is sufficient for one person is insufficient for another.

**The lowest level of apology:** a social ritual. You bump into somebody and say 'sorry'. The purpose is to acknowledge that you did something unintentional and 'sorry' is said to prevent counteraggression.

**The second level of apology:** simply a confession in which the instigator acknowledges what they did. Confession is an act of ownership of the deed and acknowledgement of the

damage done. There is no expression of remorse. In other words, the sufferer hears the truth from the one who carried out the act. The simple and unadorned 'I did it' stage is where the instigator takes ownership. Confession is sufficient for some, but not many.

**The third level of apology:** this integrates confession with expressions of remorse. Here the instigator acknowledges the act and the damage, and shows sincere regret through words and body language. The showing of remorse acknowledges that the act itself was wrong, damaging or painful, and that the instigator regrets the act and the impact on the sufferer. This is the 'I did it and I'm sorry' level. Many more people will accept this apology than will accept a simple confession.

**The fourth level of apology:** this incorporates the first two and adds repentance – the instigator states how this has affected them and caused them to change their behaviour. This is the 'I did it, I'm sorry, it will never happen again' stage. It must often be accompanied by visible, tangible proof of changed ways. This form of apology is powerful enough to be accepted by the majority of people.

The strongest level of apology adds **justice** to the equation. In essence, the instigator adds an open-ended offer of 'What can I do to make this right?' This is where mediator creativity is paramount, for justice is a slippery issue. Justice for one may be injustice for another.

### Apologies in mediation

Apology is central to mediation. Mediation regularly involves disputes in which one party feels injured by the other. An apology is an act that is about neither

*‘ an apology involves the acknowledgement of injury with an acceptance of responsibility ’*

problem-solving nor negotiation. Rather, it is a form of exchange in which words are spoken that may enable closure. The apology represents an opportunity for acknowledgement that may transform relationships.

There are cases in which apology in any form will never happen and some situations where it may not be appropriate. It depends on what we are trying to accomplish through the mediation itself and is dictated by the needs and desires of the clients. Are we looking for a settlement to a dispute in which the parties will go their separate ways and never again interact? If we are looking at a wounded relationship in need of healing, then apology appears to be a gateway.

### Assisting clients with apology: what makes it work?

People can apologise in mediation, but they often need help in getting past the fear of blame that precludes apology. Apology can't be imposed. It is an opportunity to clear away blockages.

Clients often need preparation and help with the words. An apology involves such vulnerability that often the only way it is safe enough is with assistance from the coach with the words.

Where there is a desire to continue a relationship, apology can have catalytic qualities.

### Dos and don'ts

- Do find words that are clear and accurate, not provocative.<sup>5</sup> A

good apology should make the wronged person think, 'Yes, they understand.' Often what the offended person wants is accountability and to know that it won't happen again.

- Decide whether it will be easier for you to apologise position-to-position or person-to-person.

If you are angry with the person to whom you want to apologise, it may be easier to frame the apology in terms of your respective jobs or ranks. For example, while the senior manager remains angry with the junior manager, they can't offer a sincere personal apology. But they could apologise to them as a senior person to a more junior colleague, from position to position. For example: 'We both work for a good company, and as your colleague I should try harder to see past our individual differences. I'm sorry I spoke harshly.' Such an apology is likely to resonate favourably with both parties, even while anger between them remains.

In other circumstances, a person-to-person apology is easier to offer. For someone who equates an apology with loss of stature, for instance, the person-to-person apology can appear to be a magnanimous act that does not diminish them. For example: 'I don't agree with the stance you are taking, but I like you and want us to work well together. I'm sorry I spoke harshly.'