

Apologize—Do It Wrong and You'll Be Sorry

By Dianna Booher

Why won't the latest celebrity flap go away? Situations calling for a public apology come and go about once a month. Some rock star, movie actor, athlete, or politician gets caught shoplifting, driving while drunk, doing drugs, having an affair, uttering prejudicial slurs over an open mic, or taking a bribe, and the public becomes outraged about the duplicity. The public persona and principles preached don't match the private behavior.

What further enrages us about such situations is that typically the celebrity involved first takes the stance: "It's none of your business." When that line doesn't work, he or she tries to make excuses: "I was drunk/stoned/conned/didn't know that blah, blah, blah ..."—fill in the blanks. When those excuses don't calm the waters, they finally come out with a belated apology. Life goes back to normal. We once again buy their music, see their movies, go to their ball games, or elect them to office.

There's only one exception to this rule: If the celebrity tries to offer a pseudo-apology, one with no real admission of wrongdoing. When that's the case, the media and public chew on the story until the celebrity spits out an admission of guilt. Only then does life resume for the wronged and the harangued.

Ditto at the office. People have difficulty offering an outright apology—an expression of "I'm concerned because I made a mistake/I did something wrong." And they get the same kind of reaction as celebrities do to their pseudo-apologies.

Pseudo-Apologies That Alienate

Apology, Plus Denial

"No, I didn't e-mail the meeting agenda to everyone ahead of time. I apologize—I didn't know I was supposed to do that."

Translation: I'm not in error here. Whoever was in charge of telling me to do that screwed up—not me.

Apology, Plus Good Intentions

"I've been putting out fires all morning ever since I came in at 6:30, but I won't bore you with the details. So I apologize that I didn't e-mail the meeting agenda to everyone ahead of time."

Translation: I had good intentions, so please give me some credit for those. Besides that, I'm busier than most of you.

Apology, Plus Excuse

“I apologize for not e-mailing the meeting agenda to everyone ahead of time. It’s just been my experience that nobody ever looks at them ahead of time anyway.”

Translation: There’s no reason to apologize then.

Apology, Plus Personal Problems

“I apologize for not e-mailing the meeting agenda to everyone. I think I told several of you about how my weekends have been going, so I hope you understand.”

Translation: Please cut me some slack. I have personal problems.

Apology, Plus Attack

“Well, I apologize for not e-mailing the meeting agenda to everyone ahead of time. Bill, Jean—did you have something you were particularly interested in having on there? Was there something you’re not prepared to discuss because you didn’t see this ahead of time? If so, we can postpone the meeting and reconvene tomorrow when you’re more prepared.”

Translation: You people are making a big deal out of a very trivial issue undeserving of an apology. Why are you trying to embarrass me? I can make you feel very small for bringing this up.

What Makes a Good Apology?

Here are a few essentials in an effective apology:

Admission of Error, Guilt, or Wrongdoing

The person accepts responsibility for what was said or done and its inappropriateness, inaccuracy, weakness, hurtfulness, insensitivity, or whatever.

Specificity

Apologizing specifically sounds sincere. Global, blanket apologies convey lack of concern or understanding of the situation or damage caused.

Amends

Apologizing typically involves some attempt to make things right, some words or gesture of goodwill toward the offended person or group.

Children learn these steps before they learn to count. But medical schools and hospitals are increasingly adding “How to Apologize” to their curriculum for grown-ups to learn as ways to head off malpractice lawsuits. According to a story by Associated Press, the hospitals in the University of Michigan Health System have been encouraging doctors to apologize for mistakes. As a result, the system’s annual attorney fees, malpractice lawsuits, and notices of intent to sue have fallen dramatically.

An admission of wrongdoing isn't always appropriate, of course. But you can express regret over a situation, results, or an outcome no matter who or what caused it.

Failure to admit mistakes leads to outrage. Failure to express concern leads to bitterness. Survivors, even dying victims, forgive mistakes; they don't forgive unconcern.

Concern connects people. In whatever situation—from product recall to layoffs to employee illness to accident victims to stressed colleagues—there's tremendous power in communicating your concern. When logic causes a lapse in the relationship, emotion closes that gap. Apologies preserve the relationship and keep you from being “sent to your room” by coworkers and friends who may just want you to view the situation with the right attitude.

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827 words

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For more tips on conflict resolution, see Communicate with Confidence: How to Say It Right the First Time and Every Time (McGraw-Hill) by Dianna Booher.