

The Anatomy of an Apology

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1. Make sure you're not offering a lousy apology. Nearly everyone has made a poor apology at some time or another. It goes without saying that bad apologies do more harm than good. If you have a habit of using any of the following, or anything similar to them, stop.

- I'm sorry you took it that way.
- I'm sorry, but it's not my fault.
- I'm sorry for how things went.
- I feel bad, but it could have been much worse if . . .
- I didn't intend to hurt you, but the situation . . .
- I said I was sorry. Why can't you get over it?

2. Bad apologies come from inside. For many of us, we feel like the apology is a box that must be checked in order to get the offended or hurt party feeling better. But such motives for apology drive a poor delivery. We apologize because we don't want the person to be cross with us any longer. I've fallen for this. Because I want people to like me and to have things "good" between myself and others, I'll do whatever it takes to quickly get us back to "good." But listen to my explanation—you can see that my motive is all about making ME feel good, about ME feeling accepted. Is your motive for the apology about you or about the other person? Is it about the whole relationship or just your half?

3. It's not about saying "I'm sorry." The truth is an apology is needed for moments when [Mutual Respect](#) has been violated in some form. Whether on purpose or accident, you've done something to make a friend, colleague, relative, or partner feel marginalized, hurt, or disrespected. From this realization, one theme has emerged that has helped me a lot:

Apologizing is about more than saying "I'm sorry" or "my bad." It's about restoring respect when it's been lost.

What does that mean? Have you ever restored a house yourself or watched a house restoration on TV? Home restoration takes time and attention to detail. When you've hurt someone, they feel disrespected. You need to restore that respect, brick by brick.

This sometimes means allowing time for the person to heal. Allow them time to see you've changed (not just in your words, but also in your actions). The late Stephen Covey said, "You can't talk your way out of what you've behaved yourself into."

4. It's all in the eyes of the receiver. When I work with Crucial Conversations groups, I ask, "What makes a good apology?" Immediately and in unison, group members say, "Sincerity." Then I ask, "Who decides if an apology is sincere?" The answers don't come as quickly. Students hesitate and say, "The receiver of the apology, I guess." People need to hear or see evidence that demonstrates you get it. They need to know that you understand how respect was violated. I'm not sure which of the following tips speak best to your situation, but here are some ideas:

- Take responsibility—don't blame the situation. Most of all, don't blame the offended or hurt party ("I'm sorry you chose to be offended.")
- Acknowledge, don't minimize, the damage you may have caused.
- Be open to condemning your own behavior. Admit that you have violated your own moral/value code.
- Accept your punishment as justified; make a sacrifice that is as large as or larger than the pain you caused. (The bandage needs to be as large as or larger than the wound.)
- Commit to avoid the offense in the future. In fact, promise to avoid actions that come close to repeating the offense.
- Don't expect or demand to be forgiven. Your goal is to demonstrate that you understand the offended person's values and moral outrage, reject your bad behavior, and not repeat it.

I hope you see the importance of apologizing more deliberately. In the end, your apology should show you're doing it on purpose.

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