

'I'm sorry'

Master the elements of an apology

Question:

During a recent negotiation with a co-worker, I unintentionally said something that offended him. The comment came out before I realized how it would sound. I'd like to make this right, but I am unsure how to handle this. What would you suggest?

Response:

Apologize. Virtually every adult alive today knows how you feel. We've all said things we'd like to take back. The test of your true character rests not with what you said, but rather with how you now respond.

Denying the incident, justifying your statement or making light of the situation by saying, "Can't you take a joke?" or "I was just kidding (when you both know that's not true)" will only exacerbate his feeling of injustice. To rebuild trust, you must admit that you are sorry for hurting him.

Elements of an apology

Psychologists Bruce Darby and Barry Schlenker at the University of Florida define an apology as an "admission of blamewor-

thiness and regret for an undesirable event."

In a negotiation, a disparaging remark made about the other party, a failure to fulfill a promise or a betrayal of trust could all be construed as a blameworthy event. Following a violation, negotiators usually become defensive, less trusting and more likely to retaliate. The right apologies can reverse, or at least minimize, potential damage.

Maurice Schweitzer, Jack Hershey and Eric Bradlow, professors from the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, have identified seven elements that can comprise an apology. Effective apologies can include some or all of the following:

- 1. An apology statement:**
"I'm sorry."
- 2. An expression of remorse:**
"I feel awful!"
- 3. An offer to help:**
"I will do whatever is possible to rectify this situation."
- 4. Self-castigation:**
"I can't believe these words even came out of my mouth."
- 5. A direct request for forgiveness:**
"Please forgive me."
- 6. A promise regarding future behavior:**
"In the future, I promise to think before I speak."
- 7. An explanation:**
"I was frustrated by Larry's lack of urgency to make this project a priority, and I took my frustrations out on you, which was totally inappropriate."

Research has shown that the more serious the violation, the greater the need to use multiple apology components.

Apologize to show intent

"When done well, an apology funda-

mentally changes how the wronged party perceives the person who caused harm thus improving the negotiation outcomes," Professor Schweitzer said. When the wronged party clarifies the intention behind the behavior or communication, understanding can transmute into forgiveness.

Professor Schweitzer recommends tailoring your apology to your situation in one of the following ways:

- 1. Include an explanation that attributes blame to a factor in the negotiation:** "I'm sorry I blew my stack with you. I had just come out of a meeting with Larry who informed me our budget is being cut by 25 percent again – but we are still responsible for delivering the extra revenue."
- 2. Explain an underlying altruistic motive:** "I'm sorry for my comment. I really enjoy working with you and when you said that you might leave this facility to accept a new position, I felt overwhelmed. I can't do this without you."
- 3. Clarify that you won't repeat a harmful action:** "I'm sorry about my behavior. I was wrong and will never allow that to happen again."

In their research, Schweitzer, Hershey and Bradlow examined the effects of apologies in repairing trust in repeated interactions between negotiators. They conducted an experiment in which participants had to make a series of decisions about whether to trust their counterparts. In some cases, when they made a decision to trust the other side, their counterparts responded with untrustworthy behavior. Although untrustworthy behavior did indeed reduce trust, a promise to be more trustworthy in the future spurred the rebuilding of trust. Interestingly, other components of apologies, including an apology statement alone, were not sufficient to rebuild trust.

Apologize to improve outcomes

An apology can ameliorate feelings of anger or hurt. Studies show that victims who receive an apology are less likely to retaliate against those who harmed them. Negotiators who have been harmed by a counterpart are also much more likely to initiate a new negotiation following an apology.

Apologies also improve the bottom line. Jennifer Robbennolt of the University of Missouri found that disputants who apologized reached deals that were financially more lucrative than did those who did not apologize. Offended parties become more agreeable, demand less and give their counterparts better outcomes following an apology.

Be sincere

As in all communications, sincerity influences how a message is received. If the wronged party believes that you are sincere, the likelihood that you will be given a second chance is relatively high. However, if you have a history of abusive or deceptive behavior, particularly during the same negotiation, your credibility will be undermined.

My recommendation is to admit that you made a mistake. Be sincere and heartfelt, and hope that the other person forgives you.



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