

## **MANAGING THE EXPECTATION GRADIENT, PART 3:**

### **THE POWER OF SINCERE APOLOGY**

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I'm really sorry I didn't get around to writing this before, but I was busy writing parts 1 and 2 of the series: Managing the Expectation Gradient. In Part 1, as you may recall, we covered arrangements we make with ourselves (attainable goal-setting to maximize motivation and performance). Part 2 was about arrangements we make with others (under-promise, over-deliver, build credibility and integrity). However, even the most well-intended people sometimes made missteaks, and cause losses and disappointments to others as well as themselves. This article is designed to address these situations, and restore credibility and honor in sustained relationships.

Before we begin, however, we need to look at the **abuses of apology** that give it such a bad rep that people are reluctant to admit error.

**The Apology Lifestyle.** Apology is often overused and therefore undervalued. Some people come from a position of low self-esteem and avoidance of confrontation. They fear offending others, but often repeatedly make mistakes that annoy others, such as arriving late for meetings or missing appointments. The payoff is the attraction of attention and the ego reassurance of repeated forgiveness, but the cost is frequent guilt and interpersonal tension. The apology lifestyle posture is that of felt unworthiness, and yet resentment towards people that are organized and successful. The resentment is expressed passively by attitudes of entitlement to special privileges and allowances that are basically unearned. Apologies are rendered often, but the offending behaviors reappear frequently. Often a person who is trapped in this chronic pattern can improve with counseling to work through the underlying issues. The antidote to this life posture involves a dedication to assertiveness and accountability, and the rise in self-esteem when the person has earned respect through integrity and follow-through in relationships.

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**The Person Who Refuses to Apologize.** Apology is foremost, an acknowledgement of error, therefore, especially for men, potential weakness. Men are socially gender-programmed to be independent problem-solvers. They often take it as a situation of social embarrassment and vulnerability if they have made a mistake. They most often prefer to go on forward as if nothing had happened, learn the lesson, make the correction, and hope that no one noticed the error, and thus avoid the subsequent exposure and shame. With this pattern we have in North America a political and corporate culture of blind decisiveness, and virtual denial of error, even when confronted with evidence. A culture that refuses to acknowledge error will likely repeat it, so this phobia is important to reverse on all societal levels. As usual, the place to begin is at the collective individual level, where each one of us makes a personal decision to stand accountable for the society we wish to shape. This leads back to a discourse on apology, strategies to recover key relationships if we have failed to fulfill an obligation we engaged.

From what we know from research about relationship development, several crucial points are:

**1. There are no mistakes, only lessons. Lessons will be repeated until they are learned.** In situations where you failed to follow through with your word, identify the factors that interfered. Generate a plan to cover these factors before you consider recommitting to deliver a similar project or service. Reset the expectations of others if you are on the jagged edges of a learning curve. Preserve your integrity while you are learning the skills required to deliver consistently.

**2. The Four Elements of an Adequate Apology.** Apologies become useless and generate disrespect or disgust if repeated for replications of the same mistake. To be effective, apologies need to be genuine and well planned. At the point where you realize you need to apologize for an error or oversight, in order to rebuild trust and respect in the relationship, consider these four elements:

- Acknowledge the bother, delay, or disappointment the other person or group has had to endure.
- State your role or contribution to their distress because you did not follow through on your word, or you made an error.
- Commit to a plan of action that will make it unlikely that you will let them down again in the same way.
- Pay enough for restitution plus 10 percent, if possible. That is, deliver the service and compensate the other party additionally for the delays or damage they have had to endure because of you. Realistically, this element may be impossible or impractical, but if you can provide it, it greatly amplifies the power of apology in restoring the relationship, and thus, your reputation of integrity.

**3. Timing the Offering of Apology.** After you have constructed an adequate apology, you are ready to offer it to the offended party. Remember that timing is a crucial element in the relationship-restoration dance. Offers of apology, no matter how well constructed, fall on deaf ears if the wronged party is still going through a major grief reaction, and is still stuck in righteous anger. Best advice recommends that you notify the offended party that you have a proposal to set the situation right and make up for past mistakes, and invite that person to join you in considering your proposal when the time suits him or her. If they continue to forestall that interview, tell them that you will be emailing or posting your apology by

letter. If they refuse to open or acknowledge your offering, the opportunity for the restoration of the relationship may be lost, but not your integrity. You have respected their needs for privacy and boundary maintenance by trying no more than twice to get this message through to them. Now you can rest with the assurance that you made a reasonable and assertive attempt to restore the relationship. If the apology interview is refused, remember that their avoidance is likely an attempt to reduce pain by minimizing contact. Respect this protective wish. Resign yourself, at least temporarily, to a lost relationship. Learn the lessons that may have led to rejection. Learn about the brittleness of the other party and realize that their friendship was perhaps not as valuable as you thought, especially in view of their close-minded rejection. Have acceptance for them, and compassion for for yourself. Acceptance leads to freedom.

**4. Restoring the Relationship.** Perhaps, after a while, the other party now agrees to meet and discuss the situation. In the apology meeting, listen carefully to the pain or disappointment that the other person went through partly because of your mistake. Then when you offer your plan, and discuss its feasibility, both of you review your combined commitment to minimize the possibility of further damage; you are both back on a corrective path. Following through with the plan in the coming several months will allow that trust to be restored, the friendship strengthened with the resiliency of recovery from error and working through difficulties and conflicts. For you the rewards will be a sense of integrity and of personal peace.

**Summary.** It is important to realize in the world of personal credibility in interpersonal relationships that apologies are important and necessary to refurbish and rebuild after the pain that results from unmet expectations. Apologies, when sincere and properly constructed and delivered, are essential to restoring our social support networks and ultimately, our personal sense of integrity and connectedness, and happiness.

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