

KEEPING YOUR SANITY THROUGH KNOWING HOW TO APOLOGIZE

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In 399 BC, Socrates defended himself in the court of Athens against charges that he had corrupted the young and did not believe in the gods of the city. Though his attempt was unsuccessful, and he was shortly put to death, Plato recorded his great teacher's performance that day as his *Apology*.

The title of this account uses the original definition of the word apology: the Greek *apologia*(????????, *apo* – away from or off; *logia* from *logos*, words or speech), that is, “A defense especially of one's opinions, position, or actions.”

Though the modern definition of the word apology is quite different, “an expression of regret for having done or said something wrong;” in some ways, I think we have culturally reverted to this older definition of apology – at least when it comes to politicians and other public figures.

We rarely hear publicly a genuine acceptance of responsibility for hurtful acts. It's more common to hear either a defense of one's actions, a displacement of responsibility onto the listener such as, “I'm sorry you feel badly about this,” or a diffusion of responsibility into the ether through the use of the passive voice such as, “I'm sorry that happened.”

Fortunately, we don't have to behave like these public dissimulators...

We all make mistakes, and sometimes those mistakes let other people down, or hurt them. The first step in repairing the mistakes we've made is to acknowledge that we've done something hurtful. Then the question becomes: “What's the best way to deal with the people we've disappointed or hurt?”

For it matters *how* you apologize, and Heidi Grant Halverson, author of *Focus*, has some great advice about this.

The most important thing to remember is that when you have let somebody down, or done them harm, they don't care very much about how this affected *you*. When you start by explaining why you did or didn't do the act that you're apologizing for, you're telling them about *yourself*, and not addressing the effect you've had on *them*.

“I'm sorry, I was pressed for time...” or “I didn't know the traffic would be so bad...” or “I wasn't able to proofread the report because I couldn't find my glasses...” all exemplified in the great scene above from *The Blues Brothers* movie. None of these excuses speak to how our actions affected the person we're apologizing to. None of them speak to that person's experience.

The best way to apologize is to start with the other person in mind; and that person will have different expectations depending on your relationship with them.

- The main priority for a *stranger or acquaintance* is this: they want to have things the way they were before you came onto the scene and did whatever you did. They want to be compensated. They want the stain on their shirt where you spilled your coffee gone; they want their car back to the state it was in before you crashed into it; they want their money back for a product that doesn't work or a service that doesn't perform.

- The main priority for somebody *you know well* – a friend or colleague, or to your partner – is to know that you empathize with them. They want to feel understood and valued. They want to hear that you understand the effect you’ve had on them, and that you understand their perspective. You can “fix” things all you want, but it won’t mean much; what they really want to hear is something like, “I’m so sorry, you must feel so disappointed (or hurt, or scared, or angry, etc.).”
- The main priority for *a business team* that you’ve let down (or sports team, or any other group that you’re working together with), is to have an acknowledgement that you’ve broken the code of behavior, that you’ve done something or failed to do something, and that this is not the way a teammate is supposed to function. You need to re-establish their confidence that you will hold up your responsibility as a team member. The rest is pretty much meaningless.

A stranger or a teammate doesn’t want empathy; a teammate or somebody you’re close to doesn’t want compensation; and a stranger or somebody you’re close to doesn’t want you to fess up to having broken the code of conduct. Each situation has a different priority.

Think of your own experiences when you’ve hurt somebody or let them down. What do you feel like saying? The most emotionally compelling path – the path that might be most attractive if we went purely from our feelings – is usually to get out of this humiliating situation fast. That road leads to excuses, and deflection, and wanting to “move on.”

But that road doesn’t lead to any good place, because when we head down that road, the people we hurt or disappointed don’t feel any different; they haven’t been acknowledged and our offense toward them has not been redeemed.

We might “move on.” They might “let it go.” But we leave a bit of their trust and confidence behind when we move on, and they drop a bit of their trust and confidence in us when they let go. Our reputation with them stays compromised to some degree.

We don’t have to behave like the public figures who avoid taking responsibility at all costs – and we don’t have to defend our actions as though we are on trial like Socrates.

It’s much better to seek to repair our transgression, which *starts with acknowledging to ourselves* that we have hurt somebody. Then we can focus on how we have affected them, use the above guidelines to find how we can best repair the damage we have done, and then act on it.

This can be immensely important to our personal relationships, because it builds or helps to rebuild trust, and expresses a quality of character in taking genuine responsibility for having done so... It’s good to know what’s genuinely helpful to do when we’ve blown it.

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