Bestselling Author of *The Manager's Book of Questions*

JOHN KADOR

effective apology

mending fences, building bridges, and restoring trust

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To Anna Beth, my apology partner
For every apology, forgiveness

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contents

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introduction: apology is the first resort

"I'm sorry, I never apologize," the CEO said to me.

The speaker was the chief executive of a well-known, publicly traded software company. It was at that moment that I decided to write the book you are holding.

The CEO had called me to help him with a speech. His company was getting hammered for launching a marketing campaign that, in its implementation, was more exuberant than strictly legal. He needed a speech to defuse the situation. I had written a number of speeches for him, and now he asked me what he could say to handle the crisis.

Let's see. Someone in your company made a mistake. Everyone knows it was a mistake. Why not admit it, say you're sorry, and tell the world what you're going to do to fix the problem?

The CEO would have none of it. "I'm sorry, I never apologize."

Why is it so hard for leaders to apologize? I've written dozens of speeches for senior executives and until recently most would rather gargle with razor blades than say, simply and directly, "I made a mistake. I'm sorry." Given the prevailing attitudes about apology and leadership, there is nothing surprising in this. No doubt, too, the CEO had a team of attorneys on speed dial whose job it was to caution him about the costs, legal and otherwise, of apologizing.

But these attitudes about apology are changing. Leaders can always be depended on to do the right thing—after they have tried everything else. One of the goals of this book is to

demonstrate the benefits that leaders and their organizations accrue when apology is considered as the first resort, not the last.

This book is about apology: the benefits when it is available, the problems when it is missing, and the opportunities that abound when apology is effective. It serves as a comprehensive user's manual, reference, and practical guide to using apology to build trust and honor relationships between individuals, within teams, and throughout organizations. The book also tracks the profound shifts in the perception of apology: from a sign of weakness and vulnerability to a signal of confidence, transparency, and accountability.

Effective apology is not easy. Some apologies are better than others, and some apologies are worse than no apology at all. The book gives readers a practical, step-by-step approach for crafting apologies to meet specific circumstance. It guides readers in what to say, how to say it, and—most of all—how not to make a bad situation even worse.

My goal is to give you the definitive "how-to" book on effective apology. It is not a collection of apology phrases and formulas that can be assembled to defuse specific offenses. Step-by-step instructions can build excuses, but not apologies. Nor will this book be any help to those who want to apologize on the cheap or otherwise hedge their bets. It is, rather, an account of how practicing wholehearted apology will lead to better outcomes for both parties and for the world we share. I will show that apology:

- Is in the apologizer's best interest
- Should be the first resort, not the last
- Is a sign not of weakness but of strength
- Although not without costs, is cheaper than reflexive defensiveness
- Is a critical skill for leaders in order to develop accountability
- Promotes transparent leadership

Perfect Response to Imperfection

Apology is humanity's perfect response to imperfection. Yes, it's an obligation we owe to those we have mistreated, but apology is also a gift that benefits those who owe the apology. Practicing apology is not easy—none of us likes admitting we made a mistake—nor does it come without cost, but apologizing pays off for the apologizer in surprising ways. Apology sends the clearest signal that we have the strength of character to reconcile ourselves with the truth. Apology is the most courageous gesture we can make to ourselves.

Yes, there are costs to apology, but stonewalling also imposes costs. Our institutions and relationships suffer when we lie or try to limit our responsibility instead of cleaning up the mess we made. The first lesson of this book is that the costs of apology are never as dear as the costs of lying, denial, and defensiveness.

Who Should Read This Book?

The book will help anyone who has the desire to build, repair, and cultivate more authentic relationships. You may feel that apology comes easily to you. If so, this book will help you craft apologies that will give you and your partners an even sturdier foundation for trust. Or you may see evidence that your apologies are not well received. You may suspect that your failure to apologize effectively damages your relationships and limits your opportunities for leadership. If so, this book gives you a model for crafting effective apologies for every occasion, both business and personal, in good times and in times of crisis. You may believe that leaders shouldn't apologize. Nevertheless, your instincts may be telling you that your reluctance to apologize creates difficulties for you. For you, this book offers evidence that apology, far from making leaders look weak, serves to make leaders appear more transparent, accountable, humble,

and ultimately more worthy to be followed. This book demonstrates that effective apology is in your rational self-interest.

This book's focus is on leaders, managers, and the people they serve, but it embraces apology in the broader context of all human relations. The central message is that the ability to say "I'm sorry" facilitates the basic building blocks of relationships: trust, transparency, accountability, and humility. For many leaders, admitting mistakes and apologizing may seem like overwhelming tasks. This is understandable. Leaders have received many wrong-headed messages about apology. The book provides unmistakable support for the proposition that apology, far from being detrimental to leadership, creates the conditions for building, rebuilding, and sustaining trust and loyalty. After reading this book, your understanding, mastery, and fluency of apology will be improved—as will your awareness of non-apology and its consequences.

Three Questions for the Reader

When I pick up a book and consider whether I should buy it, I ask myself three questions: What's in it for me? Why should I care? And why should I believe the author? I think it's only fair that before I ask you to invest in this book, I take a crack at answering these three questions.

What's in It for Me?

It benefits you to say you're sorry when you make a mistake. I know that's not the way most people think of apology. Few people are comfortable apologizing. We understand on some level that apology is an expression of admirable qualities—compassion, empathy, humility, self-awareness—but when it comes to actually practicing the art of apology, we find ourselves hesitating. It's understandable. Western society sends out deeply conflicting signals about apology. On the one hand, we value humility, owning up to mistakes, straight talk, and candor. On

the other, when things go wrong, the first thing we tend to do is look for someone else to blame.

In kindergarten, we teach our children to say they are sorry when they make a mistake, but how many parents model relaxed apology when they are at home or at work? We know that the cover-up is worse than the underlying offense, yet when we're caught the cover-up sometimes looks mighty attractive. We value apology in the abstract, but turn our backs on it in practice, especially when apology is seen to impose costs.

Throughout this book I suggest that apologizing is in your rational self-interest. Yes, apology is a debt you owe those you mistreated. And it needs to be done right for their sake. But you should apologize for your own sake first, because it benefits you on every level to do so, and it results in more effective apology. The real benefit of apologizing is that it brings you face-to-face with the consequences of your actions and forces you to confront the facts. People of integrity operate based on a sense of justice. In this case, justice means honoring the facts, and if the facts are that you violated your sense of decency, a direct apology is the best way to reconcile your conduct with your values and begin to recover what you have lost.

Whatever offenders may have gained by their offense, they have lost something at least as valuable. The damage works both ways. When you betray your values by making a mistake that someone else has to pay for or offend someone either accidentally or intentionally, a little bit of your soul is at stake. People who refuse to apologize cheat themselves most of all. They trample their own sense of justice. The costs show up in many ways—as anxiety, barriers to intimacy, sleeplessness, strained relationships, difficulties at work, and even, as we will see, in your paycheck—but the costs of not apologizing always show up.

Apology is an attitude as well as a practice. It's a marker of confident leadership. It's the catalyst for restoring broken

relationships and a pathway for personal growth. This book is intended to help you think about the value and importance of apologies and learn how to practice confident apology with friends, family, and coworkers. Making mistakes is not the key issue. Everyone makes mistakes. It's what we do about the mistakes we make that determine whether we move forward or look back. In this book, I suggest that the great power of apology is its ability to help us look forward. I call it the *transformational power* of apology: the mysterious power of apology to heal a broken relationship so fruitfully that the relationship is renewed with possibilities that weren't available before the offense. *Apologies have more power than most of us realize to restore strained relationships, free us from vengeful impulses, and create possibilities for growth.* This book is my contribution to bringing best practices to apology.

Why Should I Care?

Apology is a critical skill for our time. It promises to make every interaction go better. In times of crisis or scandal, the socialized reaction of people is to deny. Many leaders hate to apologize, offering elaborate defenses instead of accepting responsibility for mistakes. Leaders are afraid that admitting a mistake or wrongdoing will damage or destroy the group or organization for which they are responsible—particularly if there is the threat of litigation. As this book shows, the greater risk is in defensiveness and denial. Evidence abounds that we are squandering many opportunities by not knowing when to apologize, how to apologize, and how to make the apology stick. Moreover, the book describes how society's understanding of apology is shifting. Apology was once avoided as an admission of weakness and defeat. Today, apology is increasingly regarded as an expression of strength, character, and integrity. This book tracks this profound change in the understanding of apology.

Why Should You Believe Me?

I've witnessed the power of apology with my own eyes in countless professional and personal settings. In my more than twenty-five years of journalism, writing books and speeches, and consulting, I've been exposed to the inner workings of hundreds of companies and executives as they wrestled with offenses large and small. I've guided hundreds of clients through crises both professional and personal. For years I wrote a newspaper ethics column. I received hundreds of letters and emails from readers who described situations in which they were either the offender or the offended. Some of the offenses were monstrous. Yet time and time again, I saw how a well-spoken apology defused resentment, created goodwill, and, more times than not, mysteriously transformed a relationship ruptured by mistrust and disappointment into something stronger and more durable than it was before. This is the transformational power of apology that I described earlier: its capability to heal a broken relationship and make it stronger.

I give credit to my willingness to apologize for the success of my marriage and the excellent relationship I enjoy with my two children. Multiple studies agree that men, in general, have a much harder time apologizing than women. That's too bad, because I've seen firsthand how my family has been strengthened by my decision to apologize when I've made mistakes.

How This Book Is Organized

Before we get too far, let me say a word about how the book is organized. The book is divided into three parts. Part I—Practicing Apology—defines apology and examines how apology is being transformed by political and technological changes of the twenty-first century. Part II—The Five Dimensions of Effective Apology—introduces the basic building blocks that in various

permutations combine to create effective apologies. In five chapters, I discuss what I call the five Rs of apology: *recognition*, *responsibility*, *remorse*, *restitution*, and *repetition*. In these chapters you'll find many real examples that illustrate how the five Rs cooperate to create effective apology.

Part III—Apologize for Results—describes how to make apology work in the real world. Chapter 8 addresses many of the mechanics of effective apology, including when to apologize, how to apologize, and in what medium (for example, in person, letter, telephone, email) to say you're sorry. Just as it's not easy to offer a graceful apology, it's not always easy to accept an apology gracefully. Chapter 9 describes how to accept an apology gracefully—and how to reject one, when it's warranted. Rejecting an apology generally ends a relationship. I hope you are never put in a position where you feel you have to reject an apology, but if you are, this chapter offers you some guidance. Does accepting an apology mean that you forgive the offender? Apology and forgiveness are inextricably linked, but they are not the same. Chapter 10 explains the differences between them and what accepting an apology means in the context of forgiveness, repentance, and reconciliation.

I encourage readers to issue wholehearted apologies. Chapter 11 contrasts wholehearted apology with half-apology and non-apology, providing plenty of examples of each. If you want a quick lesson on the do's and don'ts of apology, turn to Chapter 12. Most apology mistakes fall into one or more of ten categories; some are mistakes of commission, others are mistakes of omission. I illustrate each of the ten types of mistake with actual examples of defective apologies taken from today's headlines.

Chapter 13 is inspired by the many questions about apology that my talks on the subject generate. I gather some of the more frequently asked questions in this chapter, along with answers that invite further discussion. The chapter concludes

with a list of provocative open-ended questions that discussion or book groups can use to explore the many fascinating aspects of apology. The concluding chapter—What Can I Do Now? Five Apology Practices—describes five steps for integrating apology practices into your routine. This chapter includes some final reflections on the future of apology.

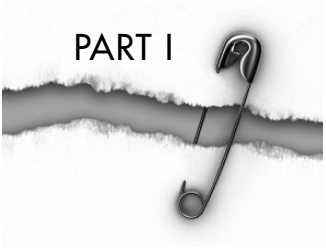
Effective Apology

The message of this book is that although mistakes are inevitable, a well-timed apology can defuse resentment, heal the parties, reduce litigation, and restore the relationship to a new footing so it sometimes emerges stronger than it was before. Apology is not cost-free, but it's more affordable than the alternative.

Does anyone doubt that there is more apology today than there was twenty-five years ago? But we need not just more apology; we need more effective apology. Every time you turn on the news, there's a story about someone apologizing, needing to apologize, or not apologizing enough. Institutions and governments are apologizing for deeds past and present. We're apologizing, all right, but are we doing it as well as we could be? Evidence abounds that we are squandering many opportunities by not knowing when to apologize, how to apologize, and how to be effective when apologizing.

In this book we consider apology as an instrument for repairing human relationships, both personal and societal. As long as we recruit our friends, family, lovers, employees, colleagues, and neighbors from the human race, we will inevitably be hurt, victimized, or offended. Most of us strive for rather more perfection than we can reliably deliver. We are damaged by acts deliberate and unintentional. Since we don't want to be mired in permanent resentment, this certainty underscores the healing importance of apology. We may not get through the day unscathed, but most of the assaults to our relationships can be healed. Let's

put our hearts together and learn the art of apology. Together, one apology at a time, we can build purposeful human cultures that harness our energies to benefit the rapidly shrinking world we share.



PRACTICING APOLOGY

Today's most urgent leadership challenges demand the ability to apologize when you make a mistake. The capacity of leaders to apologize can determine their ability to create the kinds of high-trust organizations required to navigate challenging times. Apology is a leadership skill, and like any other skill, it can be improved with reflection and practice.

In this first part of the book, I define apology, track how attitudes about it have shifted in the past ten years, and discuss why effective apology is so difficult. Apologies are loaded with all the hopes, desires, and uncertainties that make us human, and, at the moment of genuine apology, we express these most clearly. Thus we have endless hesitations about apologizing.

Apologizing is more than just good public relations. Something deeper is at work. Effective leaders understand that there is strength in humility. All organizations are edging toward a higher standard of accountability. At the same time, the revolution in communications and globalization is pushing organizations to greater transparency. The combination provides a fertile ground for those who manage apology well and a toxic ground for those who don't.

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CHAPTER 1

the age of apology

In October 2007, the track and field sensation Marion Jones—who won five medals at the 2000 Summer Olympics in Sydney—made a startling revelation. Jones admitted that she took performance-enhancing steroids, and that she had lied when she previously denied steroid use in statements to the press, to various sports agencies, and—most significantly—to two grand juries. She apologized on the steps of the U.S. District Court in White Plains, New York:

> *It is with a great amount of shame that I stand before you and tell you that I have betrayed your trust. I want all of you to know that today I plead guilty to two counts of making false statements to federal agents.*
>
> *Making these false statements to federal agents was an incredibly stupid thing for me to do, and I am responsible fully for my actions. I have no one to blame but myself for what I have done.*
>
> *To you, my fans, including my young supporters, the United States Track and Field Association, my closest friends, my attorneys, and the most classy family a person could ever hope for—namely my mother, my husband, my children, my brother and his family, my uncle, and the rest of my extended family: I want you to*

know that I have been dishonest. And you have the right to be angry with me.

I have let them down. I have let my country down. And I have let myself down. I recognize that by saying that I'm deeply sorry, it might not be enough and sufficient to address the pain and the hurt that I have caused you. Therefore, I want to ask for your forgiveness for my actions, and I hope you can find it in your heart to forgive me.

Having said this, and because of my actions, I am retiring from the sport of track and field, a sport which I deeply love. I promise that these events will be used to make the lives of many people improve; that by making the wrong choices and bad decisions can be disastrous.[1]

This glimpse into a private tragedy played out on an international stage demonstrates the power and the limits of apology. Jones had violated a number of ethical and legal norms and then lied about it. To her credit, the apology she crafted for her family and fans is a textbook example of an effective apology. In her apology, Jones specified what she did wrong ("making false statements to federal prosecutors"), took personal responsibility ("I am responsible fully for my actions"), expressed remorse ("by saying that I'm deeply sorry"), offered restitution ("I am retiring from the sport of track and field"), and promised to learn from the incident ("I promise that these events will be used to make the lives of many people improve").

Apology isn't a get-out-of-jail-free card. Jones was sentenced to six months in prison and her track and field career is ruined. So why did she apologize? What did it get her? Why should anyone admit mistakes and put themselves in situations likely to be difficult and humiliating at best and risky at worst? Apology is difficult for everyone, but the stakes are higher for celebrities

and leaders. If apologizing signals weakness and vulnerability, why should leaders ever apologize? Leaders are expected to be strong and competent. If leaders admit mistakes, will it rattle their followers, making matters even worse? What becomes of a leader's individual and institutional reputations if he or she apologizes?

In this book, we'll explore how to overcome the difficulties of apologizing and affirm why practicing confident apology is in our self-interest. Apologizing makes many people so uncomfortable that they either avoid apology or apologize badly. This is a double liability, because the ability to apologize effectively is critical in today's interconnected, high-velocity world. Just a few years ago, the mistakes we made were generally limited to a handful of people in a small part of the world and quickly faded. But today, thanks to digital video cameras and platforms such as YouTube, the mistakes we make may become instantly available for consumption around the globe and preserved for as long as media and memory survive.

What Is Apology?

Apology is the practice of extending ourselves because we value the relationship more than we value the need to be right. Effective apology is not about the situation that prompted it, but about the relationship that requires it. I will have more to say about what apology is, but for now I want to emphasize its healing qualities. The purpose of apology is to mend what deserves to be mended. In operational terms, three attributes give apology its healing capability:

- First, apology is a *practice*. Apology is a disposition to act; it is something you can observe and measure. Apology may start as a feeling, a desire to make matters right, but apology requires a commitment to move that desire into practice, to actually take on the great

courageous task of showing compassion to others. It's something that we *do* in the context of a relationship. It's an observable dynamic that a wrongdoer shares with the wronged. An intention to apologize is a start, but it's not apology until you actually do it. If the experience is internal or through an intermediary, what you have is confession. Confession is good, but it's not apology.

- Second, apology requires us to *extend* ourselves, to stretch toward something *bigger* than us, in the service of a relationship. As we contemplate the apology, that something may be unresolved, but we apologize anyway. We are aware that extending ourselves demands vulnerability. It requires tolerance and sacrifice. Sometimes, as we will see, apology is costly, although by no means as costly as the alternative of lying or denial. Most of all, apology demands that we extend ourselves by actually *doing* something. We cannot talk our way out of situations we acted our way into.
- Third, apology challenges us to be *humble*. Humility does not mean thinking less of ourselves; it means thinking of ourselves less often. In the context of apology, humility means we engage the person we mistreated as essential to our own well-being. The offender finds that by being willing to treat the victim as an equal, he or she becomes more authentic. The willingness to embrace our humility provides us with excellent grounds for forgiveness.

Now we are ready for the definition of apology:

We apologize when we accept responsibility for an offence or grievance and express remorse in a direct, personal, and unambiguous manner, offering restitution and promising not to do it again.

Wholehearted Apology

If you're going to apologize, you may as well do it completely. Half apologies only make things worse. This book encourages what I call wholehearted apology—unapologetic apology, if you will. Wholehearted apology is not easy to define (I give examples in Chapter 11), but when you are the recipient of such an apology, you know it. Wholehearted apology is inherently satisfying. At its core, wholehearted apology requires a commitment: to place more value on the repair of a relationship you have strained than you place on the need to be right.

Wholehearted apology emphasizes compassion for the victim rather than redemption. That means you are grounded in the experience of the other person. You accept responsibility for the consequences of your hurtful words, attitudes, and behaviors. Your authentically remorseful statements are free of self-loathing and a self-centered preoccupation with guilt. Your focus is not on a mission of personal redemption (although that might come) nor of moral or opportunistic advantage. For one instant, you abandon all formulas, answers, beliefs, expectations, and efforts to achieve a predetermined outcome. What remains is self-awareness.

Wholehearted apology doesn't rationalize, defend, or mitigate. It specifies what the offender did wrong and accepts moral responsibility. It expresses regret for the conduct, using direct words such as "I'm sorry" or "I apologize." It also includes meaningful restitution and a commitment not to do it again. Wholehearted apology is not a mindless, feel-good exercise that throws us on the mercy of predatory victims. In the long run, it's actually less costly than half-measures or outright refusals to apologize. By apologizing, we align ourselves with reality; we feel better about ourselves and act with more integrity. Apologizing not only helps restore a broken relationship but also reveals possibilities that weren't apparent to the parties before.

Apology Is Both Transactional and Transformational

Apology has transactional and transformational qualities. Apology is transactional in that it restores the balance in a relationship that has been strained by the offense. For example, you are late for an appointment. When you arrive, you apologize to me. I accept your apology. We get down to business and our relationship continues. It's the transactional quality of apology that lubricates society and prevents day-to-day frictions from grinding civilization to a halt. This exchange of apology and forgiveness is a potent and desirable form of conflict resolution that has been embedded in most judicial and religious systems throughout the world.

Apology is also transformational in that it has the power to change the nature of broken relationships so that when they are repaired, they are stronger in a number of dimensions than they were before the breach and apology. For example, you are late for an appointment. When you arrive, you apologize to me. I use your apology as an opportunity to talk to you about other issues in our relationship that I find difficult. You consider my grievances, agree that they are accurate, and apologize for those offenses as well. I accept your more comprehensive apology. As a result of this difficult but rewarding conversation, our relationship is transformed, liberating possibilities that simply weren't accessible to us before.

When you no longer think of apology as a bargaining chip, or as a token to be exchanged for forgiveness or the hope of restoring the situation to exactly as it was, then you are ready to think of it in its transformational sense. Transformational apology calls for a willingness to sacrifice on behalf of the wronged party and the inherent value of the relationship.

No apology is equal to the task set before it. No matter how sincere or effective, an apology cannot actually undo the damage the offender has caused. Shattered vases don't suddenly become intact. Nor do shattered relationships. Generous restitution can

sometimes restore damaged property or reimburse economic loss, but the victim can never be made whole. The relationship can never go back to what it was before. So why do we assign apology so much value? Because although we admit that an apology cannot undo what has been done, transformational apology can sometimes get close. It does so by redefining the relationship so that the offense becomes part of the foundation for a new relationship. On some level that defies strict rationality, the wrongdoer and the wronged enter into a process that, by a ritual exchange of shame and power, effectively eradicates the wrong and restores the parties to a position from which they can act with unprecedented flexibility. Sometimes you need a breakdown in order to have a breakthrough.

Apology Expresses Empathy

Before we go on, let's take a minute to distinguish empathy from sympathy—because empathy, not sympathy, is what effective apologies should drive for. Sympathetic statements may sound like apologies, but they are often not apologies at all. For example, a statement such as, "I'm sorry that your aunt is in the hospital," is an expression of sympathy. It's a nice thing to say, but it's not an apology unless you are responsible for putting my aunt in the hospital. Apologies may express sympathy ("I'm sorry I stood you up; I know how painful that is, because I've been stood up many times myself") but when they do, they often become more about the offender than about the victim.

The point is for the offender to be clear whose pain matters. In an effective apology, it's the victim's pain that matters. The offender sympathizes with the victim when the offender suffers with the victim. When the offender is sympathetic to a victim, the offender implies that his or her sympathy is shared with the victim, as if the pain belonged to both parties. Sympathy is the offender's feeling what the victim feels through *the offender's* experience. Empathy is the offender's feeling what the victim

feels through *the victim's* experience. An effective apology requires the detachment that empathy provides. In empathy, offenders "borrow" the victim's experience to observe, feel, and understand them—but not to take it on themselves. By being a participant-observer, offenders come to understand how the victim experiences the offense.

The following examples illustrate the distinction between sympathetic and empathic apologies:

> Sympathetic Apology: *I'm sorry I lied to you. I've been lied to as well, so I know how bad it feels.*
> Empathetic Apology: *I'm sorry I lied to you. I want to make sure I understand how you experience my betrayal.*

> Sympathetic Apology: *I apologize for losing the cell phone you let me borrow. When I lost my cell phone I felt completely lost.*
> Empathetic Apology: *I apologize for losing the cell phone you let me borrow. There are so many ways this loss can be a problem for you. What are you most concerned about?*

In an effective apology, the offender seeks to *understand* the victim's experience as if the offender were the victim. In a sympathetic apology, the offender experiences feelings on the basis of shared suffering, as if he or she were the victim. Effective apologies tend to be effective because of the quality of empathy they communicate.

What If the Apology Is Insincere?

Can we protect ourselves from fraudulent apologies? I don't know, but I suggest counterfeit apologies may not be as big a problem as some people think. Most victims welcome apologies even when they are suspicious of the offender's sincerity. We expect apologies to be self-serving on some level, but we desire

them anyway. Even the most cynical among us are defenseless against the stories we want to hear. Apology is intrinsically satisfying.

For victims who are loath to accept an apology for fear that the offender might not be totally sincere, I can only suggest that we can never be certain of the contents of another's heart. That's why we listen carefully to the apology statement itself, but then focus on the action that follows. An effective apology contains within it the answer to the question, "How am I to be held accountable?" Effective apology is much more than saying "Sorry." The process of apology includes a number of steps that require the offender to consider the consequences of his or her conduct for specific individuals. These steps include engaging the victim in corroborating the factual record of what actually occurred, identifying what the conduct was, accepting responsibility for the conduct, expressing a shared commitment to moral principles that the named conduct violated, offering meaningful restitution, and promising not to do it again. The willingness of an offender to take these steps is the truest test of sincerity. An apology *informed* is good; an apology *performed* is better.

I know that many people posture apologies they don't mean for all kinds of reasons. Shouldn't we be wary of these postured apologies, lest we reward opportunistic apologizers? No. I believe that accepting such apologies may be the optimum course we can take. When we respond to a postured apology with acceptance, a curious development sometimes occurs. Offenders frequently dive into apology thinking they can control the process, but the apology process often takes over and controls them. The insincere apologizer is overtaken by the process itself and converted on the way there. The very act of apologizing, sincerely or not, is transformational.

People speak of "a simple apology," but there is no such thing. To acknowledge a transgression, seek forgiveness, and restore balance to the relationship is a complex act. Apologies

are prompted by fear, guilt, and love—and by the calculation of personal or professional gain. They are shaped by culture, context, and gender. They may be base and self-serving or generous and high-minded. And when extended in public, they amount to a performance—to which different audiences react in different ways.

What, then, constitutes an effective apology? Above all, an effective apology must be complete in form and presentation. An effective apology is a series of coordinated actions. It's about delivering the right words, with the right body language and tone of voice, followed by appropriate restitution and a promise not to repeat the offense. Just as actions determine the quality of one's character, actions determine the quality of one's apology. Recipients of apology are not content with words; they want to see action. Effective apologies aren't informed, they are performed. At the end of the day, the effectiveness of an apology is determined solely by the recipient. Most recipients will want to see evidence, not just posturing and promises but palpable evidence that the offender understands the nature of the wrong, rejects it, values the relationship, and has changed. Such apologies are usually best offered in a timely manner, and they include the following five dimensions: recognition of the offense, acceptance of responsibility, an expression of remorse, an offer of restitution, and a promise that the offense will not be repeated.

Apology on the Rise

By every measure, apology is on the rise. Everywhere you find people apologizing, criticizing the inadequacy of apologies, or demanding apologies. In many ways the escalation of apology is a good outcome. It signals the final gasps of a world that has systemically maintained its power and privilege at the expense of women, people of color, sexual minorities, and other oppressed groups. Stated simply, the demand for so many apologies today is compensation for not nearly enough apology in the past.

There are many other reasons for the increase in apology. First, like it or not, the global community is crowding us closer together. Friction is inevitable as cultures and values collide. We may be citizens of a particular country, but we are increasingly jammed together in a single, interwoven global economy in which the impulse to exploit and profit is developing faster than our ability to work and live together. Mistakes, offenses, and misunderstandings are entirely predictable. Apology allows people to resolve grievances and defuse conflicts without resorting to violence or revenge. Apology is a lubricant absolutely essential to the development of a global ethic.

It's in the public sphere that the apology wars are being fought. The very distinction between "private" and "public" apology is disappearing. Many of the walls that once demarcated private spaces in our society have crumbled. Our celebrity-obsessed culture degrades lines that were formerly respected. Our legitimate desire for transparency lifts the veil from activities that were formerly considered private but are now squarely available for criticism in the court of public opinion. The days of "he said, she said" ambiguity are coming to a close. At some point in the past, the phrase "off the record" had some meaning. Today, nothing is off the record.

Second, digital technology is contributing to the increase of apologies. Technologies such as camera cell phones and the video sharing service YouTube have invaded formerly private spaces, resulting in tectonic shifts in communications, accountability, and privilege. Apologies that once could be transacted discreetly between parties in private (and later denied, if necessary) are increasingly broadcast for all to scrutinize. Technology dramatizes offenses for all to see, so starkly that even the most recalcitrant must express their remorse. Picture the images of detainee abuse at Abu Ghraib in Iraq. Only the photos, not the acts they depicted, extracted an apology—such as it was—from then-President George W. Bush.

The failures of our leaders also contribute to the increase in apology. I am speaking of the self-serving individuals leading our institutions: political, financial, religious, and social. Much of the demand for apology today is a challenge to leaders who have betrayed our trust and a desire to correct current abuses of power. Some of these demands are an attempt to resolve abuses of power that occurred in years past. People in power, having escaped being held accountable, are now expected to be responsible not just for themselves but also for the historical sins of the institutions they represent.

The rise in apology is part of modernity's dealing with systemic unfairness. We are seeing a wholesale dismantling of practices that have long silenced victims and denied their humanity. This is human progress in the truest sense of the term. When formerly disempowered groups seize their power, right away they want two things from their former offenders. First, they want the offenders to corroborate the historical record and acknowledge that great moral values were violated. This is the basis for all truth and reconciliation commissions. Second, they want the offenders to acknowledge their complicity in this great wrong and to apologize.

Recently a number of governments and institutions have issued apologies for injustices of the past. Public apologies serve an important role in the interconnected modern world. One of the main appeals of public apologies is that they corroborate facts that have long been in dispute. For victims, just corroborating the record is important. The apology establishes that, yes, the perceived injustice was real. The apology itself is often merely icing on the cake. It's likely there will be increasing demands for governments and institutions to hold themselves accountable for past injustice. The best public apologies acknowledge the injustice for what it is in the present as well as in hindsight.

We live in an age of heightened sensibilities, percolating resentments, and unresolved battles. This noxious brew breeds

resentment and hypersensitivity and a penchant for fighting proxy battles in the present to resolve injustices that should have been resolved in the past. Victims burden contemporary apologies with the need to deliver a verdict on old injustices. The subtext for apology is nothing less than the redistribution of privilege.

Test Your Apology Quotient

It's easy to apologize. Or is it? An effective apology is more than just a quick "I'm sorry." How much do you know about apology? How well can you craft effective apologies? This quiz will determine your Apology Quotient (AQ).

Directions: *Consider each of the following ten apologetic statements. For each statement, indicate how likely you would be to say something like this if you had to apologize. For example, if you can imagine yourself apologizing using language similar to that statement, select "likely." If you decide you would not be comfortable using the statement, select "unlikely."*

1. Believe me, I had no intention of offending you, but if I did, I'm very sorry.
   ☐ unlikely ☐ likely

2. I know that my carelessness imposed costs on you. I insist that you accept this check as a gesture of my wanting to make things right.
   ☐ unlikely ☐ likely

3. I know that you feel as bad as I do about what happened and I'm certain you agree with me about what we need to do to get this behind us.
   ☐ unlikely ☐ likely

4. I handled things very badly and I'm sorry. I intend to work very hard to earn your trust so that someday it may be possible for you to forgive me.
   ☐ unlikely ☐ likely

5. I want to apologize for acting like such a jerk. So, do you accept my apology?
   ☐ unlikely ☐ likely

6. I acknowledge that my actions hurt you. I am particularly ashamed that I betrayed you by [name the specific offense here].
   ☐ unlikely ☐ likely

7. Yes, I hurt you and I'm sorry, but here's what happened.
   ☐ unlikely ☐ likely

8. I'm sorry. I value our friendship and I ask only that in the coming months you allow me to demonstrate that I keep my word.
   ☐ unlikely ☐ likely

9. I'm sorry for the inconvenience. My secretary is normally very reliable.
   ☐ unlikely ☐ likely

10. You were right and I was wrong. I behaved very badly that night, and now I'm here to apologize. I'm sorry for losing my temper. I'm sorry for saying the ugly things I said. Most of all, I'm sorry for not coming to you right away.
    ☐ unlikely ☐ likely

Scoring Instructions

For odd-numbered statements score 10 points for each item you marked "unlikely" and 0 for each item you marked "likely." For even-numbered statements score 10 points for every item you marked "likely" and 0 for each item you marked "unlikely."

Statement	Score	Statement	Score
(10 points for "unlikely")		(10 points for "likely")	
1	_____	2	_____
3	_____	4	_____
5	_____	6	_____
7	_____	8	_____
9	_____	10	_____
Subtotal	_____	Subtotal	_____
Total	_____		

Results and Analysis

0–20	Clueless. Who's your apology coach? Attila the Hun? The apologies you offer are defensive and begrudging. You have only a rudimentary understanding of what apology is, much less what it can do. You need a basic primer in Apology 101. Start with Chapter 1 and don't stop until you have a good understanding of the five dimensions of effective apology.
30–50	Novice. Your grasp of apology is rudimentary. It's likely that your relationships at home and at work have suffered. If you aspire to leadership, apology is a critical skill you must master. Review the examples of wholehearted apology in Part III of this book. Give particular attention to Chapter 12, "Ten Apology Do's and Don'ts." It will help you craft your apologies, which will help to improve your relationships.
60–80	Accomplished. Well done. You practice effective apology at home and at work. Your leadership is at a powerful level because of your skill with apology. On occasion, it's possible that your apologies are not as effective as possible. Chapters 8–14 will help you tune your apologetic instincts even further.

90–100	**Expert.** Congratulations! Your AQ demonstrates that you apologize at a world-class level. You have a complete understanding of the technical and emotional qualities of apology. Further refinement will help you communicate even more authentic apologetic meaning during times of tension and crisis. Please study Chapter 10, on apology and forgiveness, to refine your apologies even further.

Take the Apology Quotient quiz online! You can find it and additional resources on apology at www.effectiveapology.com.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Apology is a practice.
- We apologize when we overcome our universal resistance to acknowledge being in the wrong and instead accept responsibility for an offence or grievance, expressing remorse in a direct, personal, and unambiguous manner, offering restitution, and promising not to do it again.
- Apology demonstrates accountability, humility, and transparency.
- Apology is difficult in part because we fear that it makes us look weak.
- Apology is both transactional, in that it restores what has been broken to what it was before, and transformational, in that it creates opportunities that didn't exist before.

CHAPTER 2

why we apologize and what it accomplishes

Should I have apologized? I was attending a poetry festival in Tieton, Washington, a picturesque arts community about two hours east of Seattle. At one point, about ten of us participated in a letterpress workshop. We each had the opportunity to hand set the type for one of our poems and then print copies using a process akin to what Johannes Gutenberg used. So that we could quickly check our work for accuracy prior to printing, the instructor combined all our type forms and ran off a single sheet with all our poems. Later, the blocks of type would be separated so each attendee could run off individual copies of his or her poem.

The sheet with all the poems was passed from author to author. When it came to me, I checked my work—it was fine—and then I noticed that one of the other workshop attendees, Tom (not his real name), had a glaring spelling error in the title to his poem. *Should I say something?* A part of me wanted to. But I wasn't sure. I said nothing. We then took turns cranking the old letterpress machine.

Later, the instructor posted all the poems on the bulletin board for everyone to see. Someone must have noticed the misspelled word and alerted Tom. I imagine he felt humiliated. Later that evening Tom approached me. Perhaps he had noticed that I had spent some time inspecting all the poems, not just mine. He asked me if I had noticed the misspelling. I said I had.

"Well, for Pete's sake, why didn't you tell me? I look like a fool."

"Tom, I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't think it was my place to edit your work."

He walked away, shaking his head, and avoided me for the rest of the workshop. I wasn't happy with my response to his question, and I couldn't shake a feeling that I had let him down. I suspect he felt that I shared some responsibility for his predicament. Did I?

I offer this story as an example of one reason why apology is so difficult. It's not always easy to know if one should apologize. I had no desire to offend Tom, but he was offended. This is the situation for which apology was invented. The offering and accepting of apologies is one of the most intense interactions human beings have developed. Apology lets people move out of humiliation and resentment. By restoring dignity to the victim, apology minimizes the desire for vengeance and continued conflict. For the offender, apology relieves the shame that comes with having done something wrong and reduces the fear that the victim will retaliate. Apology restores integrity. It is the most powerful tool we have to promote forgiveness, encourage reconciliation, and restore strained relationships. In some cases, the relationship is actually stronger for having been broken and reconciled.

Getting back to the incident with Tom, I now realize what I said wasn't an apology—not even close. I wasn't as compassionate with Tom as I would have wanted Tom to be with me. I owed him common decency, and I had failed to provide it. I concluded that if the situation were reversed, I would have welcomed a comment along the lines of, "Hey, John, that's an interesting way to spell _____." If I had it to do over again, I would say something to Tom, even at the risk of intruding. I wish I had said something like, "Tom, I'm sorry. I did notice the typo in your poem. I should have mentioned it to you. It was

wrong of me not to, and I'm sorry I didn't. As a gesture of how sorry I am, I hope you'll allow me to get the first round of drinks at the reception."

When I speak about apology, I often tell this story. It invariably sparks a spirited conversation. Some people feel that I didn't do anything wrong. Others agree that I was in the wrong. Some people focus on the fact that I hurt Tom by a failure to act. They wonder, is a hurt caused by something someone *didn't* do more or less serious than a hurt caused by something someone *did* do? (See Chapter 13 for a discussion of this question and other frequently asked questions about apology.) More than a few people have asked me if I ever wrote Tom a note or otherwise contacted him to apologize. The answer to this question is also to be found at the end of Chapter 13.

The Essential Role of Apology

It is part of the human condition to offend and to be offended. As long as we recruit our friends, partners, employees, colleagues, and neighbors from the human race, we will inevitably face disappointment, frustration, and worse. The reality is that fallible humans strive for something more than we can reliably deliver. Apology makes it possible for us to live together and strive for the common good. Apology is necessary to secure our cultural survival—it is that important. Without the healing powers of apology, our impulse for vengeance, grudges, feuds, and other hostile behaviors would make the development of healthy individuals and healthy societies all but impossible.

The lesson of history is that the majority of these offenses relate to our sense of standing in the community. There is something about our makeup that is acutely sensitive to our relative status, power, or respect. For many people, the offenses that hurt the most and are the hardest to get over are experienced as insults against their dignity or honor. We experience these insults as humiliation.

We resent the means that are employed to bring humiliation about (such as bullying, intimidation, deception, and embarrassment), but it's the experience of humiliation—of being reduced to submission—that many people find unbearable. The stakes couldn't be higher. There are no limits that humiliated human beings will respect in their attempts to restore the self-respect that has been taken from them. The hardest challenge of apology is to reverse the effects of humiliation by restoring to the victim the dignity that person once enjoyed. Apology is the process humans have developed to mitigate the devastating effects of humiliation. It doesn't always work, but it is definitely worth the effort. If there's anything more effective than apology in countering the effects of humiliation, it hasn't been discovered yet.

Benefits to the Offended Party

Almost all the research on apology centers on its benefits to the offended party. Indeed, for those who have been mistreated the power of apology can soothe painful wounds, heal broken hearts, drain away resentment, and restore strained relationships, sometimes so thoroughly that the mended relationships are stronger than before. When victims of an offense receive an apology, they no longer tend to perceive the wrongdoer as a personal threat. We all need to feel visible to others. Apology acknowledges that, yes, we had a reason to feel hurt and a right to be angry, even as it helps us move past our anger and keeps us from being stuck in the past. Let's look at a number of other benefits that apology offers victims.

Apology Restores Dignity and Honor

The number one requirement of a person humiliated by another is the restoration of dignity and honor. Compounding the problem is the reality that many victims deny being humiliated. In our society, it is humiliating to even acknowledge one's humiliation. An effective apology, as we will see, levels the playing field.

What makes apology work is the dramatic evidence of the offender figuratively (and sometimes literally) prostrating him- or herself, restoring to the victim the dignity that the offender had unfairly appropriated, and thereby equalizing the relative power of the parties to what it was before the offense. In subsequent chapters, we will see dramatic examples of this power of apology to restore self-respect.

In addition to restoring dignity and honor, apology also addresses four other fundamental needs of those who have been mistreated. Victims need reassurance that (1) they are not at fault, (2) they are safe, (3) both parties continue to share the same values, and (4) the offender is seen to suffer. Let's look at each of these needs.

No Blaming the Victim. First, an effective apology, by assigning responsibility to the offender, reassures the victim that he or she was not at fault. This is important because our society has a historical tendency to blame the victim. In many situations mistreated parties are encouraged to question whether they were somehow at fault. "Was I in the wrong place at the wrong time?" "Perhaps I'm just too sensitive." "Was I asking for it?" "Was I dressed too provocatively?" These thoughts undermine our reliance on our senses and our view of the universe. An effective apology signals that we as victims were not at fault and that we did not invite the mistreatment.

Safety. A second need we have when we have been mistreated is for assurance of safety in our relationship with the offender. An effective apology does this by answering a number of questions. The most important is, "Am I safe?" Related questions are "What are the chances that the mistreatment will be repeated?" "Was the offense accidental or purposeful?" "What can I do to

make myself less vulnerable?" Sometimes the offender's apology must address these questions explicitly. Other times it is sufficient for the apology to signal that the offender continues to share the same perspective as the victim and that the offense was a "one-off," a mistake and an aberration.

Shared Rules and Values. By apologizing, the offender reaffirms that the rules and values that governed the relationship in the past will continue to govern it going forward. Again, this serves to reassure victims that their good estimation of their offenders was essentially sound and that their trust was not, in the end, misplaced. When such an assurance of shared values is not forthcoming, relationships often terminate. Ironically, the more intimate the relationship, the greater the need for an apology that affirms the shared values of the offender and the victim. "When those who have offended us refuse to acknowledge their behaviors as unacceptable, we may feel we can no longer count on the trustworthiness, predictability, and support that we always took for granted," says Aaron Lazare in his book, *On Apology*.[1]

Seeing the Offender Suffer. It's natural for victims to say, "You hurt me and now it is your turn to see how it feels." In the vast majority of apologies, the offenders' suffering is evident as they say the words "I'm sorry" or "I was wrong," express remorse for what they did, adjust their future behavior, and pay restitution or otherwise make amends. Sometimes these amends come with the authority of the criminal justice system or another third party such as a disciplinary board. Courts frequently recognize the legitimacy of victims' desire to see their offenders suffer by imposing conditions, such

as making offenders write letters of apology, pay fines, or perform community service.

Benefits to the Apologizer

We have seen that apology benefits the victim. But the benefits are no less significant for the offender. The willingness to apologize reminds us that the facts are friendly. The facts may not always be convenient or attractive, but they are helpful in that we are always more successful when our lives are aligned with reality. Apology demonstrates to offenders that acknowledging the facts—including those that make us look bad—is really the healthiest way to go. Apology is a way of honoring what we know to be true while at the same time honoring ourselves and those we care about.

Apologizing permits us to be imperfect. It's not a get-out-of-jail-free card by any means. Nor does apologizing provide absolution for the hurt our imperfection causes. What it does do is provide a healing process that involves saying we're sorry, making amends to those we have mistreated, and resolving to do *better*. This is more sustainable than pretending that we are perfect. By acknowledging, naming, and ultimately accepting our mistakes, we embrace our humility and make room for our true selves, imperfect and all too human, just like everyone else. The advice columnist Carolyn Hax puts it best: "The highest-quality human beings earn that distinction not by being perfect, but by recognizing when they've acted like jerks and doing their best to clean up whatever messes they create."[2]

The price offenders pay when they hold on to arrogance and refuse to admit it when they are wrong is very dear. Arrogance breeds blindness, blindness breeds stupidity, stupidity breeds disaster. Offenders lose marriages, careers, and the respect of children and colleagues. Most of all, they lose themselves. "The more you build up walls of arrogance in order to protect your pride, the less contact you have with your true self," says thera-

pist Beverly Engel in her book *The Power of Apology*. "Ultimately, the false self you show the world—the person who is always confident, always right, always on top of things—will take over and you will have little or no true self to come home to."[3]

The willingness to apologize benefits offenders in practical ways. When you develop the courage to admit you were wrong and work past your resistance to apologizing, you develop a lasting sense of integrity. Ultimately the act of apologizing brings a healthy dose of self-awareness: awareness of your actions and the effect of those actions on other people. In hoarding the blame for your actions, you reinforce the power that you have to impact the world around you. Effective apologies actually generate clarity about who you are in this world.

Apology has an important social context. Abandoning the need to be an all-knowing, infallible expert will allow you to be more curious and empathetic. Having been honest in your assessment of what you did and how that conduct injured another person, you will naturally be much less likely to repeat the offense. By confronting your own mistakes, you relinquish the effort required to hide your errors. Hiding your mistakes not only does a disservice to the organization but also exacts a terrible price from those with secrets to hide. Apologizing releases you from constant guardedness and gives you a better shot at taking corrective action faster, so you don't have to distance yourself from those you have wronged. Apologizing keeps you connected to your friends, family, and colleagues. You'll experience much more alignment with the people around you, who will sense that you're available for authentic two-way communication.

Want Better Performance? Say You're Sorry

In 2007, an online retailer noticed something intriguing. From an informal survey of customers buying pearl jewelry, the Pearl

Outlet learned that a growing number of customers presented the baubles as part of an apology, usually to wives and girlfriends. For obvious marketing reasons, the company wanted to know more about the relationship between pearl giving and apology. From a formal research study of eight thousand customers, the company discovered something unexpected, not so much about pearls but about people who give pricey gifts as part of their apologies. The Pearl Outlet determined that people who are more willing to say "I'm sorry" make more money than people who rarely or never apologize. In fact, people earning over $100,000 a year are almost twice as likely to apologize after an argument or mistake as those earning $25,000 or less.

The study was simplicity itself. Respondents were asked whether they would apologize in three situations: when they felt they were entirely to blame for a problem; when they thought they were only partly at fault; and when they believed they were totally blameless. They were also asked to identify themselves as belonging to one of a set of income ranges. It turns out that a person's willingness to apologize is an almost perfect predictor of the person's place on the income ladder. For example, 92 percent of those earning more than $100,000 apologize when they believe they're to blame. Among survey respondents who make $25,000 or less, just 52 percent apologize when they know they're at fault. Even when they believe themselves to be completely blameless, 22 percent of the highest earners say "I'm sorry," compared with just 13 percent of those in the lowest income group.

A couple of factors may influence the statistics. First, apologizing now and then (even when you really don't have to) is an indicator of confidence and strong people skills focused on repairing strained relationships. People who display these traits tend to advance in any organization. It also suggests an undefended personality that is not afraid to confront and learn from mistakes—other traits that predict long-term success and higher income. "High earners tend to be more secure and less likely

to go on the defensive when challenged or criticized," suggests Marty Nemko, author of *Cool Careers for Dummies*. "They realize when they're wrong and know it won't hurt their career much to apologize."[4]

One of the benefits that perspective-taking CEOs bring to their organizations is the willingness to blame poor performance on controllable internal factors rather than offering excuses outside their control. The stock prices of companies with CEOs who accept accountability are significantly higher than those of companies run by CEOs who blame poor performance on external factors. In a 2004 study of annual reports, Fiona Lee of the University of Michigan and Larissa Tiedens of Stanford showed that stock prices were higher one year later when CEOs blamed poor performance on controllable internal factors rather than on external issues.[5] These results are consistent with studies that have shown that consumers value an admission of failure and an apology.

In today's business world, an executive who refuses to apologize is often seen as a liability. In the dramatic story of the downfall of the investment bank Bear Stearns in 2007 and 2008 told by Bryan Burrough in *Vanity Fair*, there is an anecdote describing how the number three executive was fired. The players are CEO Jimmy Cayne, who was replaced by Alan Schwartz, and Warren Spector, a trader who had been elevated to manage a critical subsidiary of the company. Cayne and his replacement Schwartz are debating the future of Spector. We pick up the story as the company is at the brink:

> *For the rest of the summer of 2007, Bear was buffeted by rumors that the bailout might force it into bankruptcy, or worse. For the most part, Cayne rode out the storm at the bridge table and his golf club, though by late July he began to sour on Spector. "Warren never showed any real remorse or contrition," says another Bear executive. "That just drove Jimmy mad." For three solid*

> *hours Alan Schwartz sat down with Cayne and argued against firing Spector, whom he genuinely liked, a conversation that ended when Cayne said of Spector, "Do you know he's never once said, 'I'm sorry'?" Schwartz replied, "That's kind of shocking."*[6]

Perhaps nothing could have saved Spector's job, but the implication is clear: his unwillingness to apologize for a multi-billion-dollar set of mistakes sealed his fate. Cayne fired Spector on August 5, 2007. Bear Stearns was acquired by J.P. Morgan in May 2008.

The Economics of Apology

Apologies can be serious business. Mounting evidence is clear that the healing power of apology can go a long way toward avoiding expensive litigation and minimizing damage awards. If you want to minimize liability, the best course is to keep your mistakes small. But if you make a big one, there is still something you as a leader can do to minimize liability. Just say you're sorry. An apology shows humility, models respect for others, and demonstrates a desire to learn, all of which are traits of strong leaders.

Consider the example of Toro, the lawn mower and snow-blower manufacturer. The company used to follow the standard practice of "deny and defend" when customers claimed injury from a product-related accident. Its liability costs went through the roof. But in 1991, Toro switched to a more conciliatory approach. Now it engages in a mediation process that always begins with an apology from the company, regardless of who's at fault. You lost a finger cleaning grass out of a running mower? Toro is very sorry. Expressing sympathy is not the same as accepting blame. The message is, "Setting aside the question of who's at fault, we want you to know that we feel terrible that this happened. We're going to do our best to resolve this situation and

make sure it doesn't happen again." The company hasn't been to trial since 1994, and 95 percent of its cases are settled on the day of mediation or shortly thereafter. Toro says the conciliatory approach has halved the time it takes to settle a claim and has cut the average cost from $115,000 in 1991 to $35,000 in 2008.

Professionals and companies deserve a chance to apologize in a way that really matters. Conventional wisdom has cautioned professionals that an apology will be viewed as an admission of liability and will be used against them in court. But that thinking is increasingly out of touch with reality. The federal government and many states—including California, Texas, Florida, Washington, Massachusetts, and Tennessee—have enacted apology-immunity statutes, making expressions of sympathy inadmissible.

Patients and physicians both benefit from the opportunity to have a healing conversation about medical errors. In the past, such conversations were all but impossible. When there was an adverse medical outcome, at a time when patients and their families needed their doctors more than ever, doctors were instructed to withdraw and cut off direct dialogue. All this did was infuriate patients, who often filed malpractice suits out of desperation. Today, more and more, doctors and hospitals realize that a coordinated program of disclosure and apology dramatically reduces malpractice claims.

One story illustrates the power of this new model. It occurred at the Lexington, Massachusetts Veterans' Affairs (VA) hospital. An elderly female patient was admitted with several health complications and subsequently died. The woman's daughters did not suspect anything amiss. However, a hospital investigation determined that a number of errors had hastened the woman's death. "This was a telling moment," says Doug Wojcieszak in his book *Sorry Works!* "Here was a case that could have been swept under the rug. The daughters thought it was mom's time and no attorneys would have been banging down the door."[7]

What happened next is eye-opening. The hospital officials informed the daughters that they had some information to share about their mother's death. A meeting was scheduled. They were advised to retain legal counsel. At the meeting, the attending physician recounted what had happened, admitted fault, expressed a personal apology, explained what the staff had learned from the experience, and discussed compensation. The case was settled in a few weeks.

This process was not only good for the patient-doctor relationship, it was also good for the hospital's reputation and bottom line. When compared to thirty-five other VA hospitals, the Lexington VA was in the top quarter for total claims—not surprising, because they were disclosing so much—but they were in the bottom quarter for total payments. Over a thirteen-year period, the program handled over 170 claims, and the largest single payment made was $341,000 for a wrongful death case. According to data from the office of the VA general counsel, in the year 2000 the mean national VA malpractice judgment was $413,000, the mean settlement pretrial was $98,000, and the mean settlement at trial was $248,615. During that same year, Lexington's mean payment was $36,000.[8] The Department of Veterans Affairs was sold on this approach: in 2005, the VA mandated that all of their facilities follow Lexington's lead by implementing disclosure programs.

Doctors who participate in disclosure programs are sued less often, on average, than doctors who deny and defend. The reasons go beyond the obvious point that patient claims are handled by mediation and voluntarily settled. Doctors who apologize and otherwise demonstrate contrition are just not attractive targets, at least as far as a plaintiff's lawyers are concerned. Even in the unlikely case that a patient is determined to sue an apologetic doctor, it's unlikely that any lawyer would take the case. Lawyers must be selective because they work on a contingency basis. They generally take about one-third of

the award as their fee. If a client loses or gets a small award, the lawyer loses money. What malpractice lawyers look for is an unsympathetic doctor who has hunkered down, denied responsibility, and refused to meet with the patient or the family. These are the doctors who incense juries—the panels that can endorse multimillion-dollar punitive damage awards. Any client who wants a lawyer to represent him against a doctor who has apologized and will apologize again in court will quickly learn that lawyers don't take cases against sympathetic doctors.

Apology Is Difficult

We are endlessly aware of why it's hard to apologize. We fear that if we apologize, we might:

- Appear weak
- Cause people to lose respect for us
- Give spouses, coworkers, or friends ammunition to use against us
- Be misunderstood and make matters even worse
- Damage our career, derail a promotion, or stain our reputation
- Create a shouting match, tears, or a big emotional scene
- Be filled with shame and embarrassment
- Give enemies the ammunition to sue us
- Suffer costly consequences or restitution
- Alert victims who are unaware of the offense

All of these fears are real, although I think we overestimate their likelihood. Not apologizing has costs, too. Some of the reasons for not apologizing are primarily external—concerned with loss of status or power. Objections in this category suggest that apologizing will terminate relationships, make us vulnerable, and open us up to excessive costs and punishment. Some objections to apology are primarily internal, prompting feelings

of guilt, shame, humiliation, weakness, incompetence, or defeat, or other sensations that we avoid. These objections often flow from two questionable assumptions: first, that apologizing makes us so vulnerable we can't defend ourselves; second, that the response to the apology will be punitive. Evidence does not support these assumptions.

At the heart of all these objections is what I believe to be the main reason why apology is so difficult. The main impediment to apologizing is that we can't control how our apology will be received. Apology, at its core, is really an exchange of shame and power between the offender and the victim. Apology involves a role reversal. Apologizers relinquish power and put themselves at the mercy of their victims, who may or may not accept the apology. I think it's this moment of uncertainty, when we reverse roles, that makes apology so excruciating. Even if we do manage to offer an apology, the reluctance to lose control results in defensive, halfhearted, and otherwise ineffective apologies for individuals and institutions.

Apology is the bravest gesture we can make to the unknown. If you think about it, the unknown is exactly what we enter whenever we apologize. Offering an apology is like tossing a lit firecracker and hoping it'll be caught and maybe—just maybe—will become, through the gentle power of acceptance, an instrument of healing. Will your apology be accepted? Will the person you are apologizing to become emotional and make a scene? If you make yourself vulnerable, will the person you are apologizing to be compassionate or punitive? What if the recipient uses the apology to punish you or uses it against you in court? If your apology is rejected, then what? Apology draws its power from requiring us to trespass on uncertainty. If the outcome of an apology were predetermined, it wouldn't be so difficult—and it wouldn't be so powerful. Apology derives its moral authority from this fundamental uncertainty. There are no guarantees.

Here is the paradox: it is this very uncertainty that energizes apology. Apologies unmask all the hopes, desires, and uncertainties that make us human because, at the moment of genuine apology, we confront our humanity most fully. At the point of apology we strip off a mask and face our limitations. No wonder we hesitate. Or we hesitate because we are not sure whether what we did merits an apology. Sometimes we feel the other party needs to apologize first. *Maybe*, we think, *the best course is to let the whole situation blow over.*

Stepping Out of Resentment

Human beings often have a hard time stepping out of resentment. When we are hurt, we have a difficult time opening our hearts until the person who hurt us admits to being wrong and gives us an apology. We grieve for the relationships that have been strained, but we'll be damned if we will make the first move and risk being hurt again. Former lovers and allies find themselves locked into negativity and conflict at the expense of the openheartedness both claim to favor—if only the other side would make the first move.

We all know what happens when effective apology is not forthcoming. Lifelong friendships and important family relationships are ruptured. Often the details of the original offense are forgotten. After many years of grudge holding, often all that remains of the argument is the bitterness over not getting an apology. I have two cousins who have feuded for decades over some long-forgotten exchange of insults over some a rivalry regarding a long-forgotten boy. The energy that continues to fuel the resentment between these two women is the conviction of each cousin that her dignity requires the other to apologize first.

Every family seems to have a story like this. Apology is so powerful that failing to apologize for injuring someone can

actually be more offensive than the injury itself. For example, if I borrowed your pristine bicycle and returned it covered with mud, you might consider it an annoying but fleeting offense. But if I refuse to acknowledge my thoughtlessness, much less offer an apology, you might be outraged. And why? Because my failure to apologize signals disrespect or even contempt, as if I had a right to take for granted not just your property but also you and our friendship. Such an attitude is a deal-breaker in any relationship.

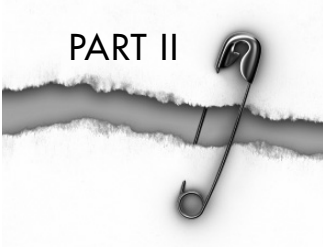
Quarrels often escalate into serious conflicts on the fulcrum of apology. Back in the days when gentlemen fought duels, the animus was more often attached to the failure of the offender to apologize than to the offense underlying the apology. Throughout human history, endless cycles of revenge and untold suffering have resulted from the denial of effective apology. It's a tragedy because apology has the power to defuse almost all human conflicts.

Honoring just one principle can make our apologies more effective. Apology, like all communications, is ultimately determined by the recipient. If the recipient doesn't perceive our apology as an apology, then the issue isn't fully resolved. What this means in practice is that we must make certain our apology is more about the parties we offended and their need to be healed than about our own need to be right.

Putting the interests of others above our own is not easy. But that, in a nutshell, is what effective apology demands. Genuine apology emphasizes compassion for the wronged party, not redemption for the offender. Our apology must be grounded in the experience of the party we offended. When we can do that—when we can acknowledge the hurtful consequence of our words and actions on other people without evasion or defensiveness—we find that the interests of the victim and the offender are actually remarkably aligned.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Apology meets the needs of both the person who has been mistreated and the person who accepts responsibility for doing the mistreating.
- Apology restores dignity and honor by reestablishing safety, confirming shared rules and values, hoarding blame, and ensuring that the offender accepts a loss.
- The willingness to apologize benefits not only the victim but also the offender.
- Apology is not without cost, but it's less than the costs of denial and defensiveness.
- Effective apologies are as unique as the offenses that inspire them, but they all share to varying degrees the following five dimensions: recognition, responsibility, remorse, restitution, and repetition.



THE FIVE DIMENSIONS OF EFFECTIVE APOLOGY

The apologizer is faced with several decisions when formulating an apology. Effective apologies are as unique as the offenses that inspire them, but they all have, in varying degrees, the following five dimensions:

- Recognition
- Responsibility
- Remorse
- Restitution
- Repetition

Effective apologies include each of these dimensions, and you will easily remember them if you think of the five Rs. I don't mean to imply that every apology needs an explicit reference to all five dimensions. But the higher the stakes, the more significant the offense, and the more formal the occasion, the more I recommend that apologies reference all five implicitly.

Sometimes I'm asked which dimension of the apology is most important. My response is that they are all equally important. The dimensions of effective apology are akin to five balls being juggled by a performer. No one ball is more important

than the others. The audience's attention is on the totality of the performance; what's important is that all the balls remain balanced in their equal and unobtrusive roles. In this part of the book, we take a detailed look at the five dimensions of effective apology.

CHAPTER 3

recognition

Recognition—acknowledging the offense—is the first dimension of apology. It establishes that an offense requiring apology has been committed. To the offender this step may seem as obvious as the offense itself, and therefore it may be tempting to just get through the apology to "get on with it." But more often than not, skipping the recognition step results in a statement that just compounds the offense because it leaves the victim uncertain whether the apologizer understands why the victim is so upset. I urge offenders to make the effort to refract their offense through the consciousness of recognition.

It's not easy. First, it's hard to put words to the offense, which is what the recognition step demands. It's not enough for me to apologize by admitting I was a jerk. Recognition requires me to specify exactly how I was a jerk. *I'm sorry I didn't show up at your dinner party after accepting your invitation. That was rude of me.* Second, recognition requires that the apologizer mentally exchange places with the victim. To prevent an apology from being completely self-serving, offenders need to be able to have a toehold inside the victim's point of view. Recognition asks the offender to stand with one foot comfortably inside a carefully circumscribed zone of her own interests while placing another foot squarely outside the zone.

Rep. "Duke" Cunningham Apologizes for Bribery and Perjury

In 1995, U.S. Representative Randall "Duke" Cunningham was convicted of bribery and perjury. He was sentenced to a prison term of more than eight years and forced to pay $1.8 million in restitution. At sixty-five, with his liberty forfeited, reputation destroyed, property confiscated, and facing substantial fines, Cunningham had absolutely no tactical incentive for issuing an apology that, it turned out, is a model of candor, courage, and authenticity. Note how Cunningham's apology does not flinch from naming his offenses, something that few politicians seem willing to do:

> *I am resigning from the House of Representatives because I've compromised the trust of my constituents.*
>
> *When I announced several months ago that I would not seek re-election, I publicly declared my innocence because I was not strong enough to face the truth. So, I misled my family, staff, friends, colleagues, the public—even myself. For all of this, I am deeply sorry.*
>
> *The truth is—I broke the law, concealed my conduct, and disgraced my high office. I know that I will forfeit my freedom, my reputation, my worldly possessions, and most importantly, the trust of my friends and family.*
>
> *In my life, I have known great joy and great sorrow. And now I know great shame. I learned in Viet Nam that the true measure of a man is how he responds to adversity. I cannot undo what I have done. But I can atone. I am now almost 65 years old and, as I enter the twilight of my life, I intend to use the remaining time that God grants me to make amends.*
>
> *The first step in that journey is to admit fault and apologize. The next step is to face the consequences of my*

actions like a man. Today, I have taken the first step and, with God's grace, I will soon take the second.[1]

Recognition demands that you let go of all defenses, excuses, and rationalizations for your misbehavior. The hardest part is to acknowledge that even as you recognize the victim as a victim, that person gets to recognize you as an offender. Genuine apology requires that you not only accept the victim's interpretation about what happened, but—and this is the excruciating piece—you also accept on some level that the victim's interpretation of you may be correct. In other words, you don't just recognize what the victim dislikes about you; on some level you have to agree with the victim. If we are not willing to see and accept those events in which we have been the source of others' suffering, then we cannot truly know ourselves.

Recognition Requirements

This acknowledgment that on some level you've been a jerk creates the possibility for you to craft an apology that responds to seven recognition requirements that many victims have when they have been wronged. These seven elements can be phrased as questions that the victim, in order to evaluate the apology, requires the offender to answer:

1. What am I apologizing for?
2. What was the impact of my behavior on the victim?
3. What social norm or value did I violate?
4. Am I apologizing to the right person?
5. Do I have cause to apologize?
6. Do I have standing to apologize?
7. Should apologies include explanations?

Every apology need not explicitly provide answers to each of these questions, but unless you are clear about those answers, you increase the odds that the apology will be rejected. When an

apology fails, it is frequently because the parties have assumed, incorrectly, that they have agreement on these five questions. Let's take these questions one by one.

What Am I Apologizing For?

The first requirement of apology is to acknowledge the offending behavior(s) in adequate detail. Sometimes it's as a simple as saying:

I'm sorry for stepping on your toe.

Notice how much more effective this statement is, compared with:

Sorry about that.

It's tempting for many offenders to skip the recognition step because the offense is "obvious." Even if it is obvious, the victim still benefits from your acknowledging it. The bigger lesson is that the offender has no business deciding what is obvious. Apologies are for the person who was mistreated. For apologies responding to significant offenses, and for public apologies, there may be thousands or even millions of victims. Serious misunderstandings can result if the apology is not acknowledged in sufficient detail.

Apology is basically giving up our struggle with history. Contested facts invariably lie at the heart of botched apologies. It's easy to get hung up on what "really" happened. Families have been ripped apart by a lack of agreement on what happened at a family dinner so long ago.

The recognition step is essential to corroborate the record. Apology always goes better when the wrongdoer and the wronged agree on the facts related to the offense. Without such agreement, apology is all but impossible. So important is this agreement that nations such as South Africa have established formal truth and reconciliation commissions for the express purpose of corroborating the factual record. This process frequently

includes copious opportunities for apologies. But as welcome as these apologies are, the wronged take as much satisfaction—or more—from finally having an official account corroborating the claims and moral legitimacy of the victims.

Turkish Intellectuals Offer Apology Petition for Armenian Genocide

Well-intentioned apologies often fall short of adequacy in the recognition dimension. Take the long-simmering conflict between the Armenian Diaspora and Turkey over events that occurred in the Ottoman Empire during and just after World War I. To date, twenty-three countries have officially recognized the events of the period as genocide, and most genocide scholars and historians accept this view.[2] Nevertheless, the Republic of Turkey, the successor state of the Ottoman Empire, does not accept the word *genocide* as an accurate description of the events. The parties are more or less in agreement that terrible loss of life occurred and that the Armenian population experienced a dramatic decline. The major dispute is over the characterization of the events.

It was against this background that in late 2008 a group of Turkish intellectuals issued an apology for the "great catastrophe that Ottoman Armenians suffered in 1915." The apology takes the form of a petition that Turks are invited to sign:

> *I cannot conscientiously accept the indifference to the great catastrophe that Ottoman Armenians suffered in 1915, and its denial. I reject this injustice and acting of my own will, I share the feelings and pains of my Armenian brothers and sisters, and I apologize to them.*

Predictably, the apology petition was attacked by Turkish Nationalists on the basis that the death of Armenians cannot aptly be deemed "genocide" because the killings were not deliberate, were not governmentally orchestrated, or that they were justified. But the apology petition was also attacked by intel-

lectuals sympathetic to the Armenian cause. For example, civil rights activist Aytekin Yildiz criticized the petition for not going far enough and for being insufficiently specific. "Firstly, what do they mean by ["great catastrophe"]? Let's name it, it is genocide," he said.[3]

The focus on the naming the events that occurred almost a hundred years ago underscores the importance of the recognition step to provide the corroboration both parties need to move their relationship forward. Without that specificity, the relationship is stuck in the past. This book is not the place to resolve the merits of this conflict; I offer it as an example of how an apology that does not unambiguously specify the conduct being apologized for will fail in the ultimate test of an effective apology: to mend fences, build bridges, and restore trust.

The recognition step can be very difficult. Rachel Naomi Remen, author of *My Grandfather's Blessing: Stories of Strength, Refuge and Belonging*, recalls an incident from 1944, when she was six years old. While visiting her physician uncle, she flipped through one of his books on reproductive physiology. She found the illustrations so interesting, she tore several pages out of the book and took them to school to show her friends. What happened next is predictable. The teacher was horrified; the principal went ballistic. Remen's mother was called to pick up the offending material. The principal brought Rachel and her mother into his office and, addressing the child's mother, demanded that Rachel apologize to the children who had seen the pictures and that she write a letter of apology to their parents. He also demanded that Rachel be punished.

Remen's mother asked the principal to explain exactly what Rachel had done to offend the school or the other children. Then she listened to her daughter's simple description of what she told her classmates about sexual intercourse and looked at the pictures she had shown them. She turned to the principal

and refused to make her daughter apologize to the students or parents. "It's true, isn't it?" she told the principal.[4]

But Rachel was not off the hook. There was one apology that she did have to make, and in making that apology she came to recognize what she had done wrong. The apology went to her uncle, of course, for the offense of tearing pages out of one of his books. It may or may not be appropriate to force children to apologize, but if it is, we should let their apologies identify what they are apologizing for.

Most of us are reluctant to admit that we have offended someone or made a mistake. There are real consequences to doing so. We fear we may look weak. The consequences may be painful. It's understandable that we may want to wait and hedge our bets before we acknowledge what we did. *Who knows?* we think. *Maybe it's not as bad as it looks. Maybe nobody will even notice.* In all these ways and more, we resist the first step of apology.

Although the recognition step requires us to be specific about what we did and who we hurt, it's possible to craft an effective apology without an ounce of specificity. Witness this apology from Charles H. Green, coauthor of *The Trusted Advisor* and a blogger on matters related to trust:

> *In that vein, I want to apologize to (he knows who he is) for what happened back in (he knows when it was). It was my doing—he knows that, and I want to say to him he was right. And I'm sorry.*[5]

University Department Chair Apologizes to Colleague

A college professor friend told me a story about departmental treachery. The professor (let's call him David) wrote a grant and was awarded $30,000 for a research project. A committee of three—including the professor, another colleague, and the

chairman of the department—agreed that the money would be divided among a number of graduate students collaborating on the research. At the end, the project was a huge success and there was about $1,500 left over. David asked that the surplus funds be reserved so he could buy some much-needed tools for his lab. The committee agreed this was a good idea. But when David sought to access the funds, he found the account was zeroed out. The chairman of the department had used the funds for his own research.

David was livid. The chairman apologized: "I'm sorry, David. I took grant money that was rightfully yours. I screwed up."

David did not accept this apology, and he remains angry and mistrustful of the chairman. "But why?" he asked me. "After all, the chairman admitted responsibility and apologized."

As we talked about the merits of the chairman's apology, David came to understand why the apology was so inadequate. First, the recognition step was missing and, to the extent that it was implicit, the chairman apologized for the wrong offense. The money wasn't the real issue. The real offense was the chairman's disrespect, lack of consultation, sneakiness, and lack of collegiality. That's what he should have apologized for. The second problem is that the chairman failed to make restitution. The least the chairman could have done was to restore the funds to David's account.

What Was the Impact of My Behavior on the Victim?

One of the key aspects of the recognition step is the offender's acknowledging an understanding of how the offense has damaged the victim as an individual. This goes beyond specifying the offense. It requires particularizing the impact or effect of the offense on a specific victim or victims.

U.S. Army Apologizes for Desecration of Holy Book

On May 9, 2008, a bullet-riddled copy of the Quran, Islam's holy book, was discovered by an Iraqi militiaman at a police shooting range at Baghdad's western outskirts. One or more American soldiers had been using the book for target practice. His hands trembling in outrage, the Iraqi militiaman reverently opened the book. The rounds had penetrated deep into the thick volume. Turning the shredded pages, the man found an English profanity, scrawled in ink.

The discovery was incendiary. Word of what the Americans had done rippled throughout the district. The dignity of Islam required a response, and many clerics called for violence. Because Danish cartoons depicting Mohammed had caused fatal riots throughout the Muslim world, one could only predict that the impact of American soldiers shooting up the Quran would be worse. Seen strategically, the shooting of the Quran threatened to unravel years of cooperation between the United States and the Iraqi militias.

As it turned out, the public anger at the desecration of the Muslim holy book was muted because the American apology was quick, direct, and nuanced. A week after the incident, a delegation of U.S. commanders arrived in Radhwaniya to face tribal sheikhs and hundreds of chanting tribesman lined up behind razor wire. Major General Jeffery Hammond, commander of the 4th Infantry Division, began the apology.

> *In the most humble manner, I look into your eyes today and I say, please forgive me and my soldiers. This soldier [the staff sergeant identified by the investigation] has lost the honor to serve the United States Army and the people of Iraq here in Baghdad.*

Then Colonel Ted Martin, commander of the Division's 1st Brigade, greeted the crowd with an Islamic blessing. He said

that what the sergeant had done was wrong and that he had been relieved of duty, reprimanded by the commanding general, dismissed from the regiment, and redeployed from the brigade. Then Colonel Martin apologized. Sometimes the best apologies are nonverbal. Holding a copy of the Quran up for all to see, Colonel Martin kissed the book and touched it to his forehead as a sign of respect. He then presented the book to a tribal leader. For the moment, at least, the apology was accepted. A local sheikh came to the microphone.

> *In the name of all the sheikhs, we declare we accept the apology that was submitted.*[6]

Every effective apology is suited to the occasion. In a culture in which demonstrating respect is very important, Colonel Martin's apology focused on respect for the culture (by speaking Arabic) and showing respect for the Quran (by holding the book above his head). The apology was effective enough to defuse tensions in Radhwaniya.

What Social Norm or Contract Did I Violate?

Apart from naming an actual offense, an effective apology also specifies the community value that was violated. This step requires that we move from simply naming the offense to identifying the moral value the offense breached. Doing so is important because it signals to the recipient of the apology that the wrongdoer shares, on some level, some important social values. It also gives some assurance that the offender will not repeat the offense.

The recognition step of apology is basically a statement that establishes the necessity for an apology. For example, while making a U-turn on a rural road, my friend Stuart accidentally knocked over a mailbox. The mailbox was set well back from the farmhouse to which it belonged. No one was around, and Stuart

could have gone on his way undetected. But he did not. He wrote out the following note and attached it to the mailbox:

> *While trying to make a U-turn, my car accidentally damaged your mailbox. I'm sorry. Since I caused the damage, it's only fair that I pay for it. My address is at the bottom of this note. Please send me the amount required to repair or replace your mailbox, and I'll send you a check. Again, my apologies for the inconvenience.*

Stuart did get a note from the mailbox owner. The letter thanked him for his honesty and indicated that it was about time to get a new mailbox anyway. The owner asked for no money.

Sportswriter Mitch Albom Apologizes for Unprofessional Conduct

The recognition step sometimes requires offenders to explain why what they did was such a violation. Without such a step, it may be difficult or impossible for some observers to understand the issue. Mitch Albom, the author of *Tuesdays with Morrie*, is a working sports reporter for the *Detroit Free Press*. In 2005, Albom apologized for a fabrication in one of his columns. Albom faced a problem common to many reporters: deadlines forced him to file his column several hours before the event he was reporting on. What Albom did was make an assumption that two former Michigan State football players would attend a particular game, as he was told they would. So he took a shortcut and wrote the column as if the players were among the crowd, reminiscing about their college experiences. Unfortunately for Albom, neither of the players actually showed up.

Albom appeared guilty of a professional violation. Reporters are duty-bound to report what actually happened, not what is supposed to happen. Reaction to Albom's misjudgment was scathing, especially from his peers. Albom got off with a one-

day suspension, largely on the strength of his apology, which is outstanding for how clearly he recognizes the professional standard he violated:

> *I made an assumption in a column this past weekend. It was a bad move. In a column written Friday for our Sunday newspaper, I assumed that what I had been told by Mateen Cleaves and Jason Richardson had indeed happened; that they had indeed flown to the Final Four, sat in the stands together rooting on Michigan State in Saturday's game. That was their plan. Both told me so in separate interviews. Because the column had to be filed on Friday afternoon, but appeared on Sunday, I wrote it in the past tense, as if it already had happened.*
>
> *While it was hardly the thrust of the column—which was about nostalgia and college athletes—it was wrong just the same. You can't write that something happened that didn't, even if it's just who sat in the stands. Perhaps, it seems a small detail to you—the players still love their teams, they are still nostalgic, they simply decided not to go after the column had been filed—but details are the backbone of journalism, and planning to be somewhere is not the same as being there.*
>
> *So I owe you and the Free Press an apology, and you have it right here. It wasn't thorough journalism. While our deadlines would have required some weird writing—something like, "By the time you read this, if Mateen and Jason stuck to their plans, they would have sat in the stands for Saturday's game"—it should have been done. We have high standards at this newspaper, and I have high standards for myself. We—the editors and I—got caught in an assumption that shouldn't have happened. It won't again. Thanks.*[7]

Am I Apologizing to the Right Person?

As self-evident as the answer to this question may seem, it's important to actually think about it. One way to start is by asking, Who exactly is the victim? Is there more than one? For most personal apologies, the answer to this question is obvious, and there is no need to be explicit about it. If I step on your toes while in line at Starbucks, it's pretty clear who owes the apology to whom. But suppose I accept an invitation to a wedding. At the reception I sit down on a chair and it collapses under me. I am more embarrassed than hurt. Exactly who, then, is the victim in this situation? Who is owed an apology? The bride and groom? The hosts of the party? The owner of the chair? The other guests? What if the chair was defective? If so, might there be an apology due to me? The question of who is owed the apology is central to all apologies, and it is in the recognition aspect that the details are sorted out.

Acupuncturist Apologizes to Staff

My brother Peter owns an acupuncture practice in New Jersey. His staff includes a number of associates, of which just one is a woman—an acupuncturist we'll call Susan. Once, toward the end of the day, Peter walked into the staff room where his staff was discussing a new patient who had just made a last-minute appointment. As he entered, Peter heard one of the acupuncturists say, "Maybe Peter should see this patient."

My brother was tired and feeling overwhelmed. He certainly didn't want to see yet another patient. "No more patients for me," he announced. "Give him to Susan. She's the best person to handle him." As he left the room, my brother was in too much of a rush to notice the looks the staff gave to each other.

The next day, Peter learned that the patient he had so arbitrarily assigned to his one female associate had been seeking treatment for erectile dysfunction. Peter was immediately mortified

that his staff might have misinterpreted his comment to suggest that the patient would benefit from being aroused by a female acupuncturist. Peter immediately went to his associate. "Susan, I fear I embarrassed you. I consider you a fine acupuncturist, and I would never want to undermine your professionalism. I'm sorry for speaking without knowing all the facts."

My brother knew I was writing a book on apology. "How'd I do?" he asked me. I replied that the apology was fine, but that he probably apologized for the wrong offense and to the wrong person. He looked stricken. "What do you mean?"

I told my brother that, for me, his primary offense was not "speaking without knowing all the facts" but failing to listen. That failure is what I believe he should have apologized for. And, further, the apology should go to the entire office. He had missed a vital clue in ignoring the comment he heard when he first walked into the staff room. He heard someone say, "Maybe Peter should see this patient." His associates were unsure about what to do. What my brother missed is that the comment was his staff's request for leadership. Peter's failure to stop and have a conversation was the lapse that he should have apologized for. Everything else flowed out of that failure. Had the conversation taken place, the patient's presenting complaint would have come out, and Peter would have let the problem be solved in the collaborative way that was generally standard operating procedure in his office. As it was, the leadership failure affected not only Susan, but also the rest of the staff—although as the sole woman she might have borne the brunt of the failure, further compounding the mistake.

Peter considered this and agreed that the apology should have gone to the entire staff, not just Susan. I asked him to think about what he would say if he could do the apology over again. He thought about it for a while and then said:

> *I asked you all here today because I owe each of you an apology. I didn't listen well the other afternoon. I*

went off and made an ignorant decision that was not only for us to make as a team but was unthinking and created a suggestion that was embarrassing for Susan, embarrassing for all of you, and embarrassing for me. I am truly sorry and I apologize to each of you, starting with Susan. That it was the end of the day and I was tired is no excuse. We were all tired. Going forward, I promise I will do a better job to remember I am honored to be working with each of you.

As he thought about it some more, Peter decided there was no reason he couldn't apologize again, and this time do it right. I was very proud of my brother in that moment.

Lee Iacocca Apologizes for Chrysler Odometer Setbacks

In 1987, Lee Iacocca, then the chairman of Chrysler Motors, faced a perfect storm of a scandal when it was revealed that some Chrysler managers had a quality control policy of disconnecting the odometers of cars, driving them around for up to one hundred miles, and selling the cars as new to unsuspecting customers. Chrysler was also accused of repairing cars that were damaged in testing accidents and then selling them as new. Dealers reported a decline in showroom traffic. Consumer advocate Ralph Nader called for massive financial reparations. Eventually two Chrysler executives were indicted. It fell to a chastened Iacocca to manage the crisis. In a refreshing departure from conventional CEO performances, Iacocca confronted the issue with candor, calling Chrysler's actions "dumb" and "stupid" and taking personal responsibility for cleaning up the mess.

Our big concern is for our customers, the people who had enough faith in Chrysler to buy a vehicle from us. These charges, and the press reports about them, are

causing some of those customers to question that faith, and we simply cannot tolerate that. If we did something to cause them confusion and concern about the quality of the vehicle they bought, then we're going to fix that right now! And by the way, we did do something to have them question their faith in us—two things, in fact.

The first was dumb. We test-drove a small percentage of our cars with the odometers disengaged and did not tell the customers. The second went beyond dumb and went all the way to stupid. A few—and I mean a few—cars were damaged in testing badly enough that they probably should not have been sold as new. These are mistakes that we will never make again, period! The only law we broke was the law of common sense. That's unforgivable, and we've got nobody but ourselves to blame. I'm damn sorry it happened, and you can bet it won't ever happen again. And that's a promise.[8]

Does the Offender Have Cause to Apologize?

Causality is the relationship between one event (the cause) and another (the effect). Human beings have an instinctive need to determine *causality*. Before we can apologize, most of us need to understand who did what to whom. The philosophical implications of *causality* can be complicated; for readers who want to understand the calculus of *causality*, I recommend *I Was Wrong: The Meanings of Apologies* by Nick Smith.[9]

A key goal of the apology in establishing causality is to have basic agreement on who did what and what happened after that. In a *Seinfeld* episode called "The Robbery," Jerry returns from doing an out-of-town standup engagement to find his apartment has been burgled. It seems that his neighbor Kramer went into Jerry's apartment to borrow a spatula and then left the door open. Here's how the scene progresses:

Kramer: *Look, Jerry, I'm sorry, I'm uh, you have insurance, right buddy?*

Jerry: *No.*

Kramer: *[looks shocked] How can you not have insurance?*

Jerry: *Because . . . I spent my money on the "Clapgo D. 29." It's the most impenetrable lock on the market today . . . it has only one design flaw: the door . . . must be [shuts the door] closed.*

Kramer: *Jerry! I'm gonna find your stuff. I'm gonna solve it, I'm on the case, buddy, I'm on the case!*

Jerry: *Yeah, don't investigate, don't pay me back, it was an accident.*

The good news is that unless you live in a TV situation comedy, the causality here is obvious. Jerry is being very generous when he says Kramer's action was an accident. It doesn't take a Ph.D. in causality to conclude what kind of outcome can be expected when an apartment door in New York City is left open. In the real world, Kramer would be morally responsible for the robbery as a predictable and direct consequence of his failure to secure Jerry's apartment. Jerry would be within his rights to expect Kramer to replace the lost property.

Just to demonstrate how unsettled causality can get, let's suppose that the answering machine stolen from Jerry's apartment contained a message from Caesar's Palace offering Jerry a last-minute gig to headline a show the following weekend. Because the answering machine was stolen, Jerry does not get the message and loses a lucrative booking. Should Kramer be responsible for that loss as well? In other words, does Kramer have any *moral agency* (as philosophers call it) for the loss of a booking? Where does Kramer's responsibility end and the thief's begin? It's not my goal to answer this question or the

many others that are a result of causality. The point is, when you apologize, you should take care to identify what conduct you are apologizing for and make sure it's your own.

Does the Offender Have Standing to Apologize?

Causality is the first set of clues established by recognition. The second is standing. We accept apologies only from people who have a legitimate standing to apologize. If my sister offends you, you want an apology from my sister, not from me. By the same token, a victim can accept an apology only if he or she has standing by virtue of being personally victimized.

We face questions of standing in our friendships and families where we're tempted to disregard confusions about standing. Here's a memory from my own childhood. I was ten years old. My family and I spent a summer weekend at a resort motel in the Catskill Mountains of New York State. As we were packing up to leave, I turned on the water in the bathtub and put the stopper in the drain. Somehow I thought this would be an amusing prank. About an hour into our drive home, I started to have misgivings. The stunt didn't seem as funny anymore. I asked my father if the motel owner could locate us. "Of course," my dad said. "We had to register with our name and address. Why?" I was mortified, but I 'fessed up. My father turned around and drove quickly back to the motel. The tub had overflowed, but we got there in time to avert what could have been a very expensive mess. Even so, there were damages.

What happened next goes to the issue of standing. When we got back home, my mother wrote a letter of apology to the motel, apologizing for her failure to supervise me and for the resulting inconvenience. She included a check to cover the motel owner's costs for the flood my prank had caused. I apologized to my parents. The costs came out of my allowance for the following year. But I wonder if the motel owner was totally satisfied to

receive an apology from my mother instead of from me. At age ten, I certainly could have been expected to know right from wrong. On one level, only I, as a moral agent, had the standing to provide authentic apologetic meaning. As a matter of parenting, perhaps it would have been better for my parents to have required me to write the letter of apology to the motel owner.

What standing do parents have to apologize for acts by their children? Opinions on this matter vary by age of the child and the culture. If parents fail in their duty to supervise their children and the child does something harmful, it is reasonable for the parents to apologize. The issue of restitution complicates the issue even more. If a child playing baseball breaks a neighbor's window, the neighbor can reasonably expect an apology and restitution from the child's parents. The expectation of restitution doesn't really change whether the damages resulted from an accident or a willful act. The quality of the apology does. An apology for a willful act requires much more contrition than an apology for an accident.

Should Apologies Include Explanations?

In general, explanations burden apologies. The recognition dimension of apology requires laying out the factual details of the offense so that victims can evaluate whether the offense was accidental, negligent, or intentional. But it's almost impossible to add an explanation without getting into intentions, and as we have noted, when victims first consider an apology they don't care about intentions. All they care about are consequences.

Explanations have an unfortunate tendency to serve the needs of the wrongdoer more than the wronged. Few of us can resist offering explanations that do not eventually transition into self-defense or justification. I disagree with Aaron Lazare when he writes in his book, *On Apology*, "Offended parties often regard an apology as unsatisfactory if it does not include an explanation. They view the explanation as part of the debt owed to them."[10]

My experience is that offended parties require explanations when they consider whether to *forgive*. But at the point of apology, explanation is rarely required and often unwanted. I think simple apologies without any attempt at explanation are most effective.

If an effective apology is to include an explanation, the explanation should make the offender look worse rather than better. In this way, the explanation emphasizes the responsibility of the offender and does not appear to be self-serving. In the next section on taking responsibility, I discuss the apology of former U.S. Senator John Edwards, who admitted having an extramarital affair with a campaign worker. In his apology statement, Edwards offered this explanation for his behavior:

> *In the course of several campaigns, I started to believe that I was special and became increasingly egocentric and narcissistic*.[11]

To me, this explanation is welcome because it speaks to a character defect that he acknowledges. The explanation advances the apology because we are aware that it gives ammunition to his enemies.

Strangely enough, the more superficial the apology, the greater the need for an explanation. I call it the *principle of inverse apologetic explanation*: the smaller or more intimate the offense, the greater the need for explanation; the greater or less intimate the offense, the smaller the need for explanation. For example, if I jostle a stranger at the local Starbucks, an explanation is almost mandatory. "Oh, I'm so sorry. I didn't see you." The second part of my statement is the explanation; its absence would be considered a bigger offense than the preceding jostle.

The greater and more impersonal the offense, the less helpful explanation becomes. For example, when President Bill Clinton finally apologized for his affair with Monica Lewinsky, any attempt at explanation would have been rightly viewed as

a revictimization of the intern. When former New York State governor Eliot Spitzer resigned for hiring a prostitute, he wisely chose not to offer an explanation.

With some exceptions, which I'll note shortly, I recommend that offenders hold off on including an explanation with any significant apology until the victim makes a repeated request for one. One exception is for victims of violent crime. Survivors often need some explanation to make sense of the assault and to aid them in healing. Even when a crime is random, it doesn't feel random to the victim. As a result, victims have two fears: that they were deliberately targeted and that they may be at risk of being targeted again. An apology with an explanation often reassures victims that it wasn't personal. This is one of the goals of restorative justice, a program that brings victims and offenders together in a structured setting in which dialogue, explanations, apology, and forgiveness are possible. Surviving family members of a patient killed by a doctor through medical error may also want a full accounting of exactly what happened. The doctor's apology will be enhanced by a detailed explanation and, just as important, what the doctor has learned so the error will not result in pain for another family. Victims and their families appreciate that their loss has meaning.

Public apologies, if they are to be effective, usually require a higher level of moral specificity in the recognition step. "If the offense is not described in enough detail, conflicting interpretations may result, often with destructive consequences," Aaron Lazare says.[12] Many apologizers find it very difficult to achieve the desired level of specificity.

Sabrina Harman Apologizes for Abu Ghraib Abuses

Consider the moral questions raised by the Abu Ghraib prison scandal that so damaged the U.S. military's image. As revealed

by the 2004 Taguba Report, U.S. personnel abused, tortured, sodomized, and murdered Iraqi detainees. Eventually, seventeen soldiers and officers were relieved of duty and seven were charged with dereliction of duty, maltreatment, aggravated assault, and battery. All were convicted. One of them was Specialist Sabrina Harman, who received six months in prison and a dishonorable discharge. At her sentencing for her role in the abuse of Iraqi detainees at the Baghdad-area lockup in late 2003, Harman tearfully apologized:

> *I wish to apologize to any and all detainees. As a soldier and military police officer, I failed my duties. I failed my mission to protect and defend. Not only did I let down the people in Iraq, I let down every single soldier that serves today. I take full responsibility for my actions. The decisions I made were mine and mine alone. My actions potentially caused an increased hatred and insurgency towards the United States, putting soldiers and civilians at greater risk.*[13]

Compared with all the other apologies issuing from Abu Ghraib, Harman's was the most specific. She named the victims (the detainees) that she hurt. She named the values (to protect and defend) that she violated. She took responsibility for her actions. She signaled that she understood how destructive her actions were. On the other hand, her apology might have been even more effective if it had included two additional points. First, her apology should have referenced the civilized world's moral repugnance to torture. That's the supreme value she violated, and she should have said so. Two, she should have been more specific about naming the actions that were so explicitly caught on digital images that led to her downfall.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The recognition dimension of apology establishes that an offense requiring apology has been committed.
- By stating the offense in plain language, offenders signal that they understand what social norm or value they have violated.
- The recognition step answers five questions:
    - What was the impact of my behaviors on the victim?
    - What social norm or value did I violate?
    - Does the offender have standing to apologize?
    - Does the offender have cause to apologize?
    - Should the offender offer an explanation? (In general, explanations burden apologies.)

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CHAPTER 4

responsibility

The key to effective apology is taking responsibility for the consequences of your behavior. The recognition dimension specifies the offenses and violations. The next step establishes that the offender accepts responsibility for them. It lays the moral agency for those offenses squarely and solely at the feet of the offender. What distinguishes the most moving apologies is the integrity that offenders demonstrate when they look deep into their hearts and reckon uncompromisingly with what they find there. In the responsibility dimension there is a focus on making the apology more about the needs of the victim than about redemption for the offender. In fearlessly pushing away all excuses, the apologizer retains undiluted responsibility. Underlying it all is the intention that the offender values the relationship and desires to rebuild it on terms agreeable to the victim.

In crafting an apology, offenders have to take special care to accept full responsibility for their own precise role in what happened. That means fully owning their words, their actions, and their life. They don't try to blame anyone else; they don't try to spin. In practical terms, this means saying what you are apologizing for, admitting to it openly, and accepting moral agency for it without trying to minimize it, making excuses, or blaming anyone else. "Apologizing is fundamentally about taking full responsibility for your own role—no more, no less—in what goes on," blogs Charles Green. "Fully owning your words,

your actions, your life helps everything fall into place. Blame is gone. Wishing is gone. Whining and tweaking and sliming and spinning are all gone when you take responsibility for your own role—no more, no less—in what goes on."[1]

It takes guts to do so. It's never easy to admit a mistake and become vulnerable. It's tempting to layer our apologies for mistreating someone with rationalization, denial, and defensiveness, especially when we experience the victim as somehow deserving of the mistreatment. Perhaps the victim does bear some responsibility for the incident. No matter. You can control only your ability to take ownership of what you did. It may happen that the other party may apologize for his participation in the matter. If so, that's great. But you cannot expect it.

Nor does wholehearted apology give you license to refer to the absence of such an apology. Elsewhere in the book we will have many examples of apologies that fail the responsibility test. But let's begin with one that really nails responsibility.

John Edwards Apologizes for Fathering Child Out of Wedlock

In the last chapter, we considered the apology statement of John Edwards, former U.S. senator and candidate for the democratic nomination for president. On August 8, 2008, Edwards went on ABC's *Nightline* to apologize to the American people. His apology emphasizes responsibility. An excerpt:

> *In 2006, two years ago, I made a very serious mistake. A mistake that I am responsible for and no one else. . . . All of my family knows about this and just to be absolutely clear, none of them are responsible for it. I am responsible for it. I alone am responsible for it.*[2]

I credit Edwards with an apology that embraces responsibility. On the other hand, where's the recognition? The apology is peppered with references to "it" but nowhere does Edwards name what he is taking responsibility for.

Carolina Panthers Receiver Steve Smith Apologizes

I'm not used to authentic expressions of responsibility from professional sports figures. As a rule, professional athletes are eager to hog the spotlight on the field but tend to run from off-the-field responsibility (think Michael "dog fighting" Vick or Mike "ear biting" Tyson). That's all the more reason to appreciate a stellar apology from Carolina Panthers receiver Steve Smith, who broke a teammate's nose on the sidelines at a routine practice. He accepted a two-game suspension and personally apologized to his teammates. His apology included the following sentiment:

> *I will not put myself into a position where I have to defend myself, to state my side of the story. There's no side. There's only one side, which is a lack of judgment on my part. That's really all I have to say. I have no excuse. All I have is the opportunity to gain the respect of my fans, to gain the respect of my family, gain the respect of my co-workers and gain the respect of the organization. . . . I intend to mend the bridges that I've burned and help rebuild the bridge if I need to all by myself.*[3]

Smith's insistence on total responsibility is refreshing. I like the clarity of his position that he will not defend himself, that there's only one side of the story, and that he's in the wrong.

British Author Offered Apology for Winning Prize When He Didn't

It's all too easy to allow responsibility to slip away. Take this eccentric example from England. The Man Booker Prize is the most prestigious literary award in Great Britain. Among British authors, even making the shortlist for the prize confers bragging rights. So for Andrew N. Wilson, author of the well-regarded *Winnie and Wolf*, there was a sweet thrill of achievement when

he received a phone call informing him that the PR firm that manages the Man Booker Prize had announced that *Winnie and Wolf* was on the shortlist.

But it was all an administrative error. The staff of the Man Booker Prize couldn't have been sorrier. A flurry of telephone calls followed and then a messenger on a motorbike came to the home of the author. You've got to admit, a hand-delivered apology is a nice touch. The letter was signed by "Dotty," who as "Chief Executive" had ultimate responsibility for administering the prize. Let's see how she used that responsibility:

> *Dear Andrew, I've just got back from the Man Booker press conference to hear about the really unfortunate mistake Lois, my assistant, has made in telling Random House that* Winnie and Wolf *has been shortlisted for the prize. I am so, so sorry that this has happened. . . . It was a genuine mistake, and we are all deeply upset by it.*[4]

Wilson was doubly miffed. First, for having his hopes so unceremoniously dashed. Second, for Dotty's shameless attempt to shift responsibility. Wilson's review of this "apology" is cutting:

> *How truly shaming of Dotty to blame Lois for the "genuine" mistake. Dotty, described in the letter as "Chief Executive," should have apologised collectively rather than naming the unfortunate Lois who, far from being Dotty's "assistant," is actually the unfortunate person who has full responsibility for administering the dire Man Booker circus.*

Guerilla Marketing Stunt Goes Bad

When an organization makes a mistake in this age of apology, it needs to take responsibility for more than the particular mistake. It needs to understand that the intentional conduct it is being

criticized for is probably not as important as the public and private sensitivities it unintentionally violated. Such was the case of an alternative or "guerilla" marketing campaign for Cartoon Network that went awry.

The marketing campaign promoted *Aqua Teen Hunger Force*, a Cartoon Network show starring fast-food characters with goofy names such as "Meatwad." The campaign featured thin displays, blinking 12-by-14-inch display devices that resemble a circuit board with LEDs, batteries, and protruding wires. At least twenty of the devices were scattered around public spaces in Boston. At night the LEDs were to come alive and animate the characters moving around doing rude things, like giving observers the middle finger. The campaign launched simultaneously in New York, Los Angeles, Seattle, Chicago, and five other cities.

On the morning of Wednesday, January 31, 2007, about two weeks into the ad campaign, a subway worker at Boston's Sullivan Square station noticed one of the displays on a highway on-ramp and alerted the police because he suspected it might be a bomb. Considering the heightened security concerns and measures that followed the events of September 11, 2001, a little concern about unidentified new electronic devices in public spaces was understandable. Pretty soon the police department had sealed off the area. The highway was closed; trains were halted. The bomb squad was called in and detonated the display. TV helicopters circled the area. It was a total media zoo.

This is really a case history in corporate crisis management, but I want to focus on the apology component, which could have been handled more elegantly. When events seem to spin out of control, it is tempting for organizations to circle the wagons. This is a mistake, because it forces the organization to react. It is better to try to get ahead of an evolving situation. That means telling the world what you know, admitting what you don't, and letting everyone see what you are doing about

it. It wasn't until 5 P.M. that Turner Broadcasting Company, the parent of Cartoon Network, issued an apology in the name of Phil Kent, chairman and CEO of Turner:

> *We apologize to the citizens of Boston that part of a marketing campaign was mistaken for a public danger. We appreciate the gravity of this situation and, like any responsible company would, are putting all necessary resources toward understanding the facts surrounding it as quickly as possible.*
>
> *As soon as we realized that an element of the campaign was being mistaken for something potentially dangerous, appropriate law enforcement officials were notified and through federal law enforcement channels, we identified the specific locations of the advertisements in all 10 cities in which they are posted. We also directed the third-party marketing firm who posted the advertisements to take them down immediately.*
>
> *We appreciate the commitment demonstrated by the Boston police department and other law enforcement agencies, as well as the Massachusetts Governor's Office, and deeply regret the hardships experienced as a result of this incident.*[5]

There are several key elements to criticize about this statement. It should have come much sooner in the day, and it should have come from an executive involved in the events. No one believed that the chairman of Turner had anything to do with this minor marketing campaign on behalf of a minor cartoon franchise whose annual revenues represented little more than a rounding error to the Turner Broadcasting enterprise. But if the apology had to come from CEO Kent, he should at least have used "I" instead of "we." People want to hear apologies from an individual, not a collective.

I also think the apology should have made the link to September 11 explicit instead of hiding behind the euphemism "public danger." There are points to be had for saying something everyone knows. On the plus side, the apology is free of any defensiveness, and it does take responsibility, albeit on behalf of the "third-party" marketing firm, which Kent's apology holds at arm's length. It was also good that by Wednesday evening Cartoon Network was running a statement during commercial breaks, expressing deep regret for "the hardships experienced as a result of this incident." A week later, Turner agreed to pay Boston $2 million for policing costs associated with the incident. The head of Cartoon Network was forced to resign after thirteen years as president.

The performance of Interference, the marketing firm, can also be criticized. It's understandable that the company would want to seek guidance from the client on whose behalf it is acting. It also wanted to protect the client relationship. But Interference went out of its way to hide from the media frenzy, even taking down its website. This was precisely the wrong action to take, and probably did its clients no favor, because the media storm then focused on the clients the marketing company sought to protect. What Interference should have done is to apologize immediately for its role, being careful to apologize for nothing else but its own role. Company executives should have been available to the media to answer questions. On Friday, two days after the incident, Interference finally issued this apology:

> *We at Interference, Inc. regret that our efforts on behalf of our client contributed to the disruption in Boston and certainly apologize to anyone who endured any hardship as a result. Nothing undertaken by our firm in any way intended to cause anxiety, fear or discomfort to anyone. We are working with Turner Broadcasting*

and appropriate law enforcement and municipal authorities to provide information as requested and take other appropriate actions.[6]

This is too little, too bureaucratic, too late. A more effective apology would have used the first person singular and been much more personal and contrite. A direct apology along the lines of the following suggestion would have defused the situation quickly; it would have been less of a story in Boston and probably never even become a matter of national interest:

I apologize to the people of Boston and the officials working hard to protect the public. I know we made that difficult job even more difficult by a marketing campaign that, in retrospect, was reckless. I take full responsibility for this incident, and my colleagues and I will work closely with the city to resolve the matter and see that it doesn't happen again.

Our goal was to attract attention on behalf of an animated program that appears on the Cartoon Network. At the center of the promotional campaign were battery-operated LED displays that showed some of the cartoon characters in the program. Two weeks ago, we placed twenty such displays throughout Boston in an effort to attract attention for the program. This was a national campaign, not just restricted to Boston.

In the wake of heightened sensitivities after the events of September 11, it was clueless of us to place electronic devices in public spaces. Of course, the displays are completely harmless. But the authorities couldn't be sure of that, and they acted appropriately to protect the public. We are working with city officials in Boston and all the other cities to remove the displays as quickly as possible and to provide restitution to the city for expenses incurred because of this

mistake. Again, on behalf of myself and my colleagues, I offer my apologies to the people of Boston.

No doubt Interference thought that, as a business, it was finished. But the marketing company didn't lose any customers. Clients didn't abandon it; they even recognized the creativity of the campaign. The company is now more careful. It runs upcoming campaigns through all kinds of filters and scenarios. They also make sure to coordinate with municipal authorities to avoid similar problems. But the whole point about guerilla marketing is the element of surprise. It's important to be able to roll with the punches and ride the wave. Sometimes that includes an apology when a well-intentioned campaign designed to push the right buttons pushes the wrong ones instead.

Australia Apologizes for Mistreatment of Indigenous Peoples

Leaders are apologizing more frequently on behalf of institutions and nations. In 2008, Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd issued an apology for the country's history of mistreatment of its indigenous peoples. His speech of apology was pitch-perfect (excerpts):

There comes a time in the history of nations when their peoples must become fully reconciled to their past if they are to go forward with confidence to embrace their future. Our nation, Australia, has reached such a time.

Until we fully confront that truth, there will always be a shadow hanging over us and our future as a fully united and fully reconciled people. It is time to reconcile. It is time to recognise the injustices of the past. It is time to say sorry. It is time to move forward together.

> *To the stolen generations, I say the following: as Prime Minister of Australia, I am sorry. On behalf of the government of Australia, I am sorry. On behalf of the parliament of Australia, I am sorry.*
>
> *I offer you this apology without qualification. We apologise for the hurt, the pain and suffering that we, the parliament, have caused you by the laws that previous parliaments have enacted. We apologise for the indignity, the degradation and the humiliation these laws embodied. We offer this apology to the mothers, the fathers, the brothers, the sisters, the families and the communities whose lives were ripped apart by the actions of successive governments under successive parliaments.*[7]

Rudd's apology is specific. He uses the singular personal pronoun. He talks about responsibility and reparations. His apology immediately became Topic A in Australia. A song about reconciliation with the Aboriginal minority has become the fourth biggest-selling recording in Australia even though it is available only as a download from the Web. The song, "From Little Things Big Things Grow," begins with a recording of the most powerful words of Rudd's apology: "As prime minister, I am sorry; on behalf of the government, I am sorry."

Later, Australia's Parliament also apologized to the Aborigines for past mistreatment. Note the specificity of what the government takes responsibility for. In addition to the statement, the parliament created programs to help remedy some of the effects of the discrimination. Such action is an important part of pubic apologies if they are to be seen as legitimate.

KEY TAKEWAYS

- The second dimension of effective apology means accepting responsibility for the offense without hint of defensiveness, evasion, or blame.
- In the responsibility dimension there is a focus on making the apology more about the needs of the victim than about redemption for the offender.
- It requires offenders to look into their hearts and reckon uncompromisingly with what they find there.
- Underlying it all is the intention that the offender values the relationship and desires to rebuild it on terms agreeable to the victim.
- In fearlessly pushing away all excuses, the apologizer accepts undiluted responsibility.

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CHAPTER 5

remorse

Once a victim understands that the offender has recognized that an offense has occurred and accepts responsibility, he or she expects the offender to have some remorse. The third dimension of effective apology is designed to signal the offender's contrition. Because there is no way to know whether someone else is experiencing remorse, we rely on a variety of verbal and nonverbal cues. By far the most important verbal cue, without which a statement falls short of being an actual apology, is the phrase "I'm sorry" or "I apologize." There are no suitable alternatives. Body language, facial expression, and tone of voice are also crucial markers of remorse.

Using the words "I'm sorry" or "I apologize" is pretty much nonnegotiable. It is, in fact, the entire reason for the apology, and without such an expression you may as well not bother with the apology at all. It's when we feel remorse most directly that we, as offenders, utter the indispensable phrases "I am sorry" or "I apologize." We will encounter a few cases of effective nonverbal apologies in which remorse is acted out rather than stated, but these are rare.

I think "I'm sorry" are the two most powerful words of any apology. No one really knows why "I'm sorry" is so much more powerful and effective than the seemingly synonymous "I apologize." There are those who say that "I'm sorry" and "I apologize" differ about as much as the Olsen twins. Granted,

the statements can be interchanged, but one delivers the goods more reliably than the other. Maybe it's our instinctive preference in times of stress for the simpler Anglo-Saxon word to the polysyllabic words of Greek or Latin origin. For instance, we can either *chew our food or masticate our comestibles*. "Sorry" derives from the Germanic root that gives us the word "sore," a feeling that, when we are injured, we all can identify with. "Apologize" or apa-logos, from the Greek, originally referred to an account or story in defense or justification (hence the apologist who "speaks or writes in defense of someone or something"). Only in recent years has *apology* come to indicate its modern sense: to *acknowledge and express regret for a hurtful action*.

Remorse is the feeling that we get when we realize that something we did hurt someone and that it was wrong, and we wish we could undo what we did. Remorse is concerned with right versus wrong *action*. A related word, *regret*, is concerned with good versus bad *consequences*. At one time the distinctions between the words had precise meaning. In this chapter, I'm going to try to preserve some of those distinctions because I believe that the appropriate use of "regret" or "remorse" gives an apology some desirable nuance. I also accept that this attempt goes against modern usage and is probably futile, because these days remorse and regret are used interchangeably in most contexts.

In English, remorse is the most apt word we have to describe a feeling of guilt, distress, or shame for taking an action we would not willingly repeat. For example, an offender wrote:

> *I have been convicted of fraud. I am remorseful and ashamed for what I have done.*

Here the word *remorseful* attaches to a specific and destructive action (fraud). The sentence indicates the offender's experience of remorse. Remorse is often experienced as anguish, like gnawing pain arising from a sense of guilt for past wrongs. The

feeling can be unbearable, resulting in belated apologies and deathbed confessions. Other words for remorse are *self-reproach* and *penitence*. Here are two examples of people whose apologies specifically use the word remorse. Perhaps it not a coincidence that neither of the speakers is from the United States.

Remorse for Fraud from Former Saipan Treasury Supervisor

On August 30, 2007, a former Treasury supervisor for the government of Saipan (the largest of the Northern Mariana Islands) received an eighteen-month sentence for fraud. As part of his sentence, the judge directed Francisco C. Calvo to write a letter of apology to his former colleagues. His letter in totality read:

> *I am writing this letter to formally apologize to the public for my unprofessional behavior and actions. We tend to make choices in life and sometimes do not realize if we've made the right or wrong ones. I am remorseful and vow never to repeat those actions again.*

Many people in Saipan found this apology spectacularly insufficient. I think it's the unfortunate second sentence that dooms the apology. Reverting to the second person plural is a naked bid to distance the offender from responsibility. But what interests me about this apology is the last sentence, in which Calvo claims to be "remorseful." For all of this apology's many faults, I think Calvo uses the word in exactly the right sense of experiencing distress for hurting others coupled with a vow never to repeat the action.

South African Stampede Kills Thirteen Children

The second incident, out of South Africa, concerns a stampede at Chatsworth's Throb nightclub that claimed the lives of thirteen children on March 24, 2000. The stampede erupted after

a teargas canister was thrown onto the club's crowded dance floor. Six years later, the person convicted of this reckless conduct, who was serving a nine-year prison term, made a public apology. Claiming to be haunted by the incident, Siva Chetty announced:

> *I want to take this opportunity to publicly apologise to all those who were directly and indirectly affected by the Throb incident. I apologise to the families whose children lost their lives in the stampede. I am remorseful for my actions and am willing to do any kind of community work to make up for what has happened, and to create a more peaceful society for all.*[1]

The quality of remorse has four attributes.[2] First, one feels remorse only with respect to one's own acts. One might regret the acts of another person. This attribute of remorse is the main reason why I believe that remorse is the stronger word to use when apologizing. It's the clearer word to establish personal moral agency. I may regret declining your invitation to attend the party you are throwing. But I don't feel remorse for doing so. Why? Because declining an invitation in most circumstances is a morally neutral event. I may regret that Hurricane Katrina destroyed your beach house, but I don't experience remorse. It wouldn't make sense. I had no moral agency for the storm and a hurricane, for all its destructive power, is not a moral issue.

Third, remorse applies only to past acts. You might appropriately regret having to take a future action, but you can be remorseful only about what you have already done. Because apology concerns itself with past actions, remorse is the more appropriate word. Fourth, remorse necessitates *perspective-taking*. Perspective taking or *mental undoing* is a decision to step outside of one's own experience to imagine the situation from the perspective of the victim. Part of this process requires that offenders shine a bright light on the hurtful things they

have done in the past so they can avoid them in the future. For all these reasons, I think *remorse* is the more powerful word to apply to apologies. It invokes the most direct agency for an event that happened in the past, suggests a mental undoing, and necessitates a commitment to not repeating the conduct for which one expresses remorse.

The following are examples of public apologies in which the offenders struggle with the words "regret" or "remorse."

"Green Bay Press-Gazette" Expresses Regret

The *Green Bay* (Wisconsin) *Press-Gazette* apologized for an article about the death of a restaurant owner that included some irrelevant information about her husband. The executive editor issued the following apology:

> *A story in Tuesday's* Green Bay Press-Gazette *about restaurant owner Julie Metzler's death was wrong to include a paragraph about a court case involving her husband. The information should not have been in the story, and we were rightly criticized by readers who were offended by its inclusion . . . The* Press-Gazette *regrets publication of the information and the pain it caused her family. We apologize for this mistake. John Dye, Executive Editor* [3]

AP Washington Bureau Chief Regrets Email

Ron Fournier, the Washington bureau chief of the Associated Press, apologized for a 2004 email exchange he had with Karl Rove, former deputy chief of staff to President George W. Bush. The email was excerpted in the House Oversight Committee's report on the death of Pat Tillman, the former NFL football player who was heralded in death as a hero by the U.S. Army. Though

he was victim of friendly fire, his death was initially reported as a result of hostile fire. Critics alleged that the Department of Defense delayed the disclosure for weeks after Tillman's memorial service out of a desire to protect the image of the U.S. armed forces. Many journalists found Fournier's emails to be obsequious and unprofessional. For example, in one email Fournier suggested Rove "keep up the fight." In a statement, Fournier acknowledged his error.

> *I was an AP political reporter at the time of the 2004 email exchange, and was interacting with a source, a top aide to the president, in the course of following an important and compelling story. I regret the breezy nature of the correspondence.*[4]

British Businessman Faces Prison for Sex on the Beach

Vince Acors, a British businessman facing six years in prison for having sex on a Dubai beach, issued an apology in a bid for leniency. Under Dubai law, the courts can take into account a defendant's remorse during sentencing, a fact that no doubt influenced Acors to be effusive:

> *I have been accused of engaging in indecent relations in a public place which I deny, although I readily admit that my conduct and behaviour was inappropriate and beyond the bounds of acceptability. Having drunk more than I should during the course of day, a friendly encounter with a female acquaintance became overly affectionate at a time and place when we both should have known better. I am deeply ashamed of my actions and the offence and trouble they have caused. Since being in Dubai I have been welcomed and treated with great warmth and hospitality by the people of this city. I have sadly betrayed that generosity shown to me, but*

> *I sincerely hope that this statement will show my honest and abject remorse and genuine contrition regarding my conduct. My apology to the people of Dubai is both profound and solemn.*[5]

The apology is too defensive, but it nicely integrates the word remorse and hits all the right notes of an effective statement. Unfortunately, the apology failed to fully persuade the Dubai authorities. The two were sentenced to three months in prison.

Regretting an Action You Would Nevertheless Repeat

Sometimes we need to apologize not for the decision but for the way we handled it. In such cases, a statement emphasizing the element of regret allows for a nuanced apology.

What's Good for the Goose Is Good for the Gander

Jack Welch, former CEO of General Electric, describes such an incident in his book *Winning*. He recounts the experience of a manager of a sixty-person unit of a fast-growing company. This executive was approached by an eight-year veteran of her team—Welch calls her Cynthia—who requested permission to work at home on Fridays in an effort to better balance her professional and parental responsibilities. Cynthia had just delivered her second child. A working mother herself, the executive gave her approval because she had confidence that Cynthia, a superstar at the company, would continue to deliver stellar results.

When word got around that one employee was allowed to work from home on Fridays, the executive was approached by another employee—Welch calls him Carl—who requested a similar dispensation. Carl had been with the company for less

than a year and had not distinguished himself. He explained that he wanted Fridays off in an effort to better balance his responsibilities to his career and his yoga practice. The executive denied Carl's request. Carl objected that the executive was discriminating against him:

> *You're imposing your values on me. You're saying that mothering has more value than yoga. But I'm never going to have children. Who are you to say that my yoga is less meaningful in my life than Cynthia's children are in hers?*[6]

Welch reports only that the executive said no and, when pressed, said only:

> *Sorry, but that's the decision I made!*

This use of "sorry" in this context is not an apology at all. Welch suggests that this statement followed a debate on the fairness issue. The executive may have been defensive and even confrontational at Carl's suggestion that she discriminated, but Welch does say that "the confrontation hit the office gossip mill and distracted Carl's coworkers for a week with mini-debates over fairness and values. [Welch's friend] came to regret the fact that she hadn't been more direct in her answer."

Let's take an imaginary look at the approach that Jack Welch might have suggested for how to handle Carl:

> *Carl, I'm sorry I got angry with you. I regret that I participated in a debate over the merits of parenting and yoga. Those issues are irrelevant to my decision to deny your request to work at home on Fridays. The fact is, I made my decision on the basis of your work results. Frankly, you haven't earned the privilege of working at home on Fridays because you haven't demonstrated you can do the job Monday through Thursday. I'm happy to have a conversation with you about your results to date. My decision stands.*

This apology is clear in that it regrets the action (being pulled into a debate) while reaffirming the decision itself and saying why. Some people thought Welch was too hard on GE's employees. Welch would respond that it does Carl no favors to obscure his tentative situation at the company. The main point is that it's possible to apologize while holding to an unpopular decision without getting defensive or engaging in debate on matters not relevant to the point.

Buffalo Bills Running Back Apologizes for Hit-and-Run

The distinction between remorse and regret is worth preserving because it makes apologies more effective. Here's an actual example of an apology issued by Buffalo Bills running back Marshawn Lynch on July 4, 2008. Lynch's apology was to twenty-seven-year old Kimberly Shpeley, who was struck by Lynch's Porsche SUV while she was crossing the street. Lynch left the scene and called his lawyer. He eventually pled guilty to failure to exercise due care toward a pedestrian (a traffic infraction), lost his driver's license for forty-five days, and paid a $150 fine. His apology reflects the passivity of a lawyer's brief.

> *I am sorry that Ms. Shpeley was struck and injured. Please know that I was completely unaware that my car had made contact with anyone until after this investigation had begun. . . . I regret that this matter has taken some time to resolve. If I had known my vehicle had struck a pedestrian, I would have stopped immediately. My greatest concerns and well wishes are of course for Ms. Shpeley. I apologize to Ms. Shpeley for any injuries she suffered.*[7]

What interests me most about this apology is the sentence, "I regret that this matter has taken some time to resolve." Lynch was "regretful" according to his lawyer, and he "feels sorry for

having gone through this." No doubt. The question becomes, what is Lynch regretful for? One suspects that he regrets getting caught. There's much that's off about this apology. It's passive and defensive. But maybe I'm being too harsh. By celebrity athlete apology standards, this is actually pretty good. Lynch starts with the personal pronoun, refers to the victim by name not once but three times, and mentions that she had injuries. But there is room for improvement. Here is the apology I would craft for Lynch:

> *Let me start by addressing Kimberly Shpeley. Ms. Shpeley, I was the driver of the car that struck and injured you. To my everlasting shame, I left the scene. For both of these transgressions, I offer you my apologies. I accept the consequences of my offenses and I promise to learn from my mistakes. To my fans and teammates, I am sorry that I let you down. I am better than this, and I ask only that you give me a chance in the coming months and years to prove it. In addition to the fine I paid, I have donated $5,000 to the driver's education program at West Side High School and have agreed to speak to what can happen when drivers don't pay attention.*

Sharon Stone Regretful for Earthquake Comments

It's always bad form to blame the victim. Actress Sharon Stone found this out the hard way. Following the devastating earthquake in China's Sichuan province on May 12, 2000, Stone suggested the disaster was "karma" for the Chinese government's treatment of Tibet. Her comment sparked immediate criticism. At first, Stone denied the comment and then tried to chalk it up to her well-intentioned political activism. The French fashion house Christian Dior was so appalled by her reluctance to

apologize that it dropped her from all its advertising campaigns in China. Eventually, she was compelled to backtrack and issue this apology:

> *Yes, I misspoke. I could not be more regretful of that mistake. It was unintentional. I apologize; those words were never meant to be hurtful to anyone. I am deeply saddened by the pain that this whole situation has caused the victims of the devastating earthquake in China.*[8]

The lesson? It's best to apologize immediately. I'm also interested in her use of the phrase "regretful of that mistake." What mistake, exactly, can Stone mean? Appearing to blame the victims of the earthquake? Making a political statement that embroiled her in a long-standing political conflict between China and Tibet? Losing her endorsements?

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The third dimension of effective apology, remorse, is designed to signal the offender's contrition.
- Remorse is the feeling that we get when we realize that something we did hurt someone and was wrong, and we wish we could undo what we did.
- Remorse is the most apt word we have to describe a feeling of guilt, distress, or shame for taking an action that we would not willingly repeat.
- "I'm sorry" are the two most powerful words of any apology and must be included.
- Saying "I'm sorry" is often stronger than saying "I apologize."
- Remorse and regret can be used interchangeably, but there are distinct differences between their meanings.

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CHAPTER 6

restitution

Restitution, the fourth dimension of effective apology, is the practical attempt to restore the relationship to what it was before you broke it. Effective apology is more than just words. For serious breaches, the offender must demonstrate a concrete expression of contrition. In other words, it must have some element of action. That element is *restitution*.

Restitution should be a critical part of every apology. Without restitution, it becomes more difficult for offended parties to accept an apology, however well crafted. How could they? The relationship remains unbalanced. The offender continues to benefit to the disadvantage of the victim. It is no wonder that victims and judges alike pay careful attention to what an offender actually does in the way of restitution, because restitution is the clearest expression of the offender's desire to restore the relationship.

Some years ago, an acquaintance I'll call Rory went through a particularly contentious divorce in which he felt victimized by his ex-wife. For many years he felt so bitter toward her that he refused to take her calls and returned her letters unopened. He continued to hold on to bitterness over what he perceived to be her greed in the settlement. With the passage of time and economic success, enough of the resentment faded for Rory to finally open a letter from his ex-wife. He was surprised to see that it was a letter of apology. He gave me permission to quote from it:

Rory, I'm sorry about the way I treated you in the divorce. I know you did your very best during our marriage and I honor that part of you. I continue to feel remorse that we couldn't figure out how to make the marriage work. I now see the fault was mine, too. I have some good memories from the time we were together and I never want to forget that I once loved you with all my heart. I think we made the right decision to end the marriage. I know I could have been more understanding and more generous than I was, and for those failures I apologize. I wish you only the best and hope that we can be in each other's lives for the sake of what we once created.

What would it mean to accept this apology? As for Rory, he had a nuanced reaction to this apology. "I told her I accepted her apology, and that it meant a lot to me to hear her acknowledge the good times we had." Rory told me that he was pleased that on some level his ex-wife agrees she was greedy in the settlement. "We actually have a civil relationship now, but I'm not ready to forgive her," he added.

We can guess the reason he found this apology wanting: there's no restitution, no action. She could have offered to return a portion of the settlement. Or as more of a symbolic act, she could have offered to return an item of property she was awarded in the settlement. I asked Rory what, if anything, his ex-wife could have said or done in the apology to hasten the day when he might forgive her. "Had she offered to return money, I would have been impressed but declined the offer," he said. "Had she offered a token item, I might have taken her up on it." In any case, he would have found the apology much more compelling. Rory believes forgiveness would be a lot easier if his ex-wife's apology had included something—anything—tangible to validate his experience of the divorce.

Some skeptics worry that the restitution step is dangerous because it acknowledges guilt. They may also fear that if they offer anything, the offended party will be emboldened to demand even more. But this is a reflexive attitude that is not supported by the facts. An expression of regret combined with an offer of restitution actually reduces punitive measures and lowers the odds of litigation. Restitution is not cost-free, but it is almost always less costly and destructive to the relationship than protracted litigation.

Insect Sculpture Destroyed

Restitution figured prominently in an apology following a strange assault on an insect sculpture in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. On May 18, 2008, twenty-six-year old Theodore Mottola destroyed a giant insect sculpture installed as part of Overnight Art 2008, a downtown public art project. Witnesses said a man climbed onto the horse-sized ant sculpture and decapitated it. But insect justice prevailed. In due course, Mottola was convicted. He was sentenced to serve twenty-five hours of community service, repay ant sculptor Nathan Walker $500, pay $1,000 in fines for the ant attack, and write a public letter of apology.

Two aspects of this case interest me. First, the restitution. The court recognized that that there were at least two victims of the ant attack, and each was due restitution. One victim was the sculptor. The $500 paid to Nathan Walker was to restore the ant sculpture to its former condition. The other victim was Portsmouth whose citizens sponsored the public art that Mottola damaged. The interests of the public demanded restitution in the form of a fine and community service. It's appropriate that Mottola worked off his community service obligation at a Portsmouth YMCA art auction and other art activities.

The letter of apology also interests me. More judges are ordering defendants to write public letters of apology. They

recognize that such letters serve a public interest. In the ant sculpture attack case, the court actually rejected the first letter of apology as insufficient. The ant attacker's attorney took the blame for the insufficiency of the letter. I give Mottola credit for the second apology, in which he recognizes that he offended two sets of victims:

> *I made a very poor and foolish decision for which I am very sorry. Climbing on the ant sculpture clearly showed a lack of respect for Nathan Walker's work and public art in general. I acknowledge that art is a very important part of our city. It brings the community together, evokes discussion and appreciation for different points of view. Portsmouth's artistic community is part of the reason this city is such an outstanding place to live. I apologize. The national attention given to my thoughtless act will impact me for many years.*[1]

The apology is not perfect. He should have been more specific about what he did; "climbing on the ant sculpture" was clearly the least of it. Nevertheless, the apology helped heal the Portsmouth art community. The sculptor is satisfied with the outcome. A good apology frequently begets magnanimity, which is what happened in this case. Nathan Walker's response:

> *I'm happy it's over. Justice was served. I feel sorry this happened. But this was obviously an error of judgment, and those always have consequences. Hopefully, we'll sit down and have tea sometime.*

The Three Requirements of Restitution

Ideally, the restitution step comes after you recognize what you did wrong, acknowledge the impact on the victim, and say you're sorry. Now the victim wants to hear what you are going to do about it. This is your chance to express in concrete terms,

not just words, what action you propose. In evaluating your response, most victims look for the restitution dimension of the apology to satisfy three requirements.

To Be Made Whole

First, victims want to be made whole, insofar as that is possible. If you spilled coffee on their coat, they want to be reimbursed for the dry cleaning bill. If the coat was ruined, they most likely want the money to replace the jacket. If you borrowed a set of golf clubs and damaged one of the clubs, they most likely want you to repair it. Paying the debt often balances the relationship.

Paying the Uttermost Farthing

The second point victims look for in restitution is a sense of sacrifice. They want to see the offender make a gesture of restitution that goes beyond the bare minimum. The offended party must see in the restitution a generosity of spirit. Stephen R. Covey, author of *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, uses the formula of "paying the uttermost farthing" to signal one's sincerity and humility. The phrase is drawn from the Sermon on the Mount. In the King James translation of the Bible, the passage reads:

> *Agree with thine adversary quickly, whilst thou art in the way with him; lest at any time the adversary deliver thee to the judge, and the judge deliver thee to the officer, and thou be cast into prison. Thou shalt by no means come out thence, till thou hast paid the uttermost farthing.*

The lesson is that you can't restore a relationship you damaged—you can't come out of prison—until you issue a humble and complete acknowledgment of your responsibility for the problem by digging deep in your pocket, literally and figuratively. As for what this means, every offender needs to decide

that on the merits of the specific offense and the offender's own resources. In general, such restitution has to not only restore the victim to the condition he or she was in before the offense, to the extent possible, but to take an extra step. The restitution has to brush up against sacrifice. Apology may be free, but it's not without cost.

To Covey, an example of apology paying the uttermost farthing is:

> *I cut you off in that meeting, when you had made this tremendous preparation. And I'm not only going to apologize to you, but also to the other people who were in that meeting because they could see the way I dealt with you, and it offended them as well.*[2]

The restitution in this case is not money, but the offender's humbling himself by making multiple apologies. Covey elaborates with another story he tells:

> *Once I worked with a young man who was barely getting along in the organization I was leading. I labeled him as an underachiever, and for months, every time I saw his face or heard his name, I would think of him in this way. I became aware of how I had labeled him and how this label had become a self-fulfilling prophecy. I realized that people tend to become like you treat them or believe them to be. I decided that I needed to "pay the uttermost farthing." I went to this young man, confessed what I believed had happened and how I had played a role, and asked for his forgiveness. Our relationship began on a new base of honesty. Gradually he "came to himself" and began to build more internal controls; he then performed magnificently.*

Although this example illustrates restitution, it is also an excellent example of transformational apology. Covey recognizes

that he has unfairly labeled a colleague. He could have simply modified his behavior and treated the colleague more fairly. But instead he humbles himself: he reaches out and apologizes for his failure of leadership. A leader goes the extra mile when he or she acknowledges a leadership failure and asks a subordinate for forgiveness. That's not easy for any executive to do. The transformational quality of the apology took a relationship bound for failure and changed it into one of success. Covey suggests that the transformation came about because the colleague "came to himself." I suggest that the source of the transformation was more that Covey came to himself by recognizing an error, apologizing, and humbling himself.

Used car salesmen generally do not get much sympathy. When Bradford Martin Jr., owner of a used car dealership in Monroe, Connecticut, pleaded guilty for defrauding half a dozen customers (he took deposits without delivering the cars), the state's attorney sought a prison term of one year. Martin apologized:

> *I'm sorry for all the damage I caused to my family and the victims; it certainly has taught me a lesson.*[3]

On his own, he also paid full restitution and then some. In addition to fully refunding the money he stole from his customers, Martin agreed to pay them extra for the "mental anguish" they suffered. Superior Court Judge George Thim sentenced the used car dealer to a suspended five-year prison term, followed by three years of probation and three hundred hours of community service. Now, one could suggest that Martin's restitution was motivated less by doing the right thing than by avoiding jail. And, if so, his strategy worked. But the judge, the prosecutor, and, most important, the victims were satisfied with the apology, the restitution, and the punishment. Few such cases end up with so many satisfied parties.

Commitment to the Relationship

The third point victims look for in restitution is a sense of the offender's commitment to the relationship. When I demonstrate that I value the relationship more than I value being right, frequently it's because of the quality of the restitution I offer. The appropriate level of restitution signals humility. As I've said, humility is not thinking less of yourself but thinking of yourself less often. In the context of apology, it is signaling that you accept all the responsibility for a difficulty, even though the other party shares some responsibility. The power of restitution is that if it is genuinely humble, many victims will at least consider acknowledging their own participation and offer their own apology. Now we have the basis of true reconciliation.

Restitution Without Dollars

Restitution comes in many forms; it does not always involve exchanges of money. What kind of restitution, for example, can you offer for general rudeness or disrespect? Organizational development innovators Glenda Eoyang and Kristine Quade tell a story about a training session derailed by a belligerent and arrogant executive.

An Overdressed Apology

Mike, the new senior vice president, was scheduled to speak to five hundred of the company's top managers during a three-day, off-site leadership retreat. Although the retreat facilitator had told Mike that the attire of the group was casual (to facilitate a relaxed learning environment) and that he should dress appropriately, Mike nevertheless showed up in a suit and tie. As Mike approached the microphone to deliver his remarks, one of the managers in the audience shouted, "Mike, take off the tie!" Soon the audience had taken up the chant, "Take it off! Take it off!"

Obviously rattled and uncomfortable, Mike took off his coat and tie and delivered a halting speech. But his resentment spilled out during the Q&A following his remarks. To one request for clarification, Mike responded, "Dumb question." He responded to another by saying, "I can't believe you asked such a stupid question, but I'll answer it anyway." Mike's performance was a low point of that day's retreat, and the attendees said so in the evaluations which they filled out daily.

Mike cringed when he read the evaluations that evening. He knew he had handled things badly and needed to apologize. But how? He asked the facilitator for time on the final day of the retreat to address the group he had insulted.

When the retreat started the next day, the facilitator announced that Mike wanted to address the group. The attendees tensed up for what they thought might be another display of Mike's anger. They stared in disbelief as Mike—once again, unbelievably, clad in a suit and tie—mounted the stage and approached the microphone. No one said a word. All eyes were on the executive. What could he possibly say?

Stepping away from the microphone, Mike wordlessly surveyed the room, making eye contact with as many of his colleagues as possible. Without a word, he slowly untied his necktie and placed it on a chair. Then he took off his suit jacket and let it join the tie. It was only after loosening his collar button that he moved back to the microphone and spoke:

> *Yesterday I was rude. I did not understand what this meeting was about but that was my mistake. My behavior was wrong and I have affected your process. I am deeply sorry for what I have said and done. I apologize sincerely for the hurt that I have caused. If my apology is not good enough I am going to lay down on the stage and you can walk on me.*[4]

At this point Mike stepped back and lowered himself to the floor, face down.

After about two seconds of stunned silence, the audience rose to its feet with cheers.

Mike's apology was greeted with such enthusiasm because it modeled in a memorable way that he recognized what he did wrong, took responsibility for it, regretted it, and, most of all, learned from it. Every effective apology requires a form of restitution. In this case, Mike's willingness to humble himself served that purpose. By literally disrobing and prostrating himself, he demonstrated not only humility but also an understanding of myth. In mythology, heroes frequently disrobe and let go of the trappings of authority before they find their true calling. There was no question that anyone would take Mike's offer to be walked on literally. But can there be a more dramatic example of how apology can demonstrate confidence, transparency, and accountability?

Apology for Church Donation Jar Theft

Here's an example of how restitution can involve pennies yet make an impact. An Ashtabula, Ohio, woman admitted stealing money from a church donation jar. The judge gave Anna Marie Cothrum an opportunity to reduce her sentence from ninety days to ten days by standing outside the church with a sign that read, "I stole coins from this church." It gets better. She had to spell out the message in pennies. So Cothrum stood in front of the Central Congregational Church in Madison with the apology spelled out in pennies in a chalked-in section of the sidewalk. Some members of the church not only forgave the defendant but stood vigil with her.[5] News reports don't say, but I hope that she then donated the pennies to the church. Now that's restitution.

High School Principal Apologizes for DWI

Sometimes restitution comes in the form of service. After Riverhead (New York) High School principal David Zimbler was arrested for DWI on the last day of classes on June 13, 2008, he quickly apologized. Here is part of what Zimbler said:

> *I made a poor choice on the evening of Friday, June 13th, and I apologize for the distraction it has caused from the business of educating children which is my life's work. I will refrain from sharing the sequence of events that led to the issue at hand because the bottom line is that I made a bad decision. This was not appropriate and I take full responsibility for my error in judgment.*
>
> *I would like nothing more than to erase this evening from existence, but I cannot. I have come to the realization that this will never be the case. Not only do I have to face the Riverhead Community, but also my family, particularly my twin boys, who regard me as their role model. I must live with what happened for the rest of my life . . . As a role model and a mentor, I am prepared to take ownership of my mistake and move forward. Most importantly, I will prove to the community that I have learned from this experience and I am a better man because of it.*[6]

Zimbler had just completed his first year as principal for the district and therefore was still in a two-year probationary period. Had he not issued such a wholehearted apology, I don't think the Riverhead Board of Education would have had the will or the political cover to retain Zimbler in his job. Zimbler's apology plus his willingness to pay restitution translated into a second chance. Restitution in this case meant delayed tenure (an extra

year added to his probationary period), community service (he will have to come to school on Saturdays to monitor students who are serving suspensions), and participation in the district's employee assistance program.

I've followed dozens of similar cases of teachers and principals convicted of DWI. Few conclude as positively as this one apparently has. I draw two conclusions. First, the quality of the apology is critical. Things just work out better for the accused when he or she takes immediate responsibility and publicly apologizes. Second, the transparency of the process contributes to a healing rather than a punitive environment. Most of the cases I've followed have been shrouded in employee privacy (read "secrecy") considerations. In the case of the Riverhead Board of Education, Zimbler waived his privacy, allowing the board to disclose its deliberations. Let me quote just a piece of it.

> *It is after great deliberation that we, as a Board, have come to a decision regarding the recent incident involving Mr. Zimbler, our high school principal. Mr. Zimbler made a poor decision which could have brought physical harm to him or to other motorists. There is no question that we are disappointed and dismayed at his regrettable choice to drink and drive. Fortunately, no one was injured.*
>
> *The Board of Education does not condone Mr. Zimbler's action, but we do acknowledge his acceptance of the resulting consequences, his heartfelt apology, his pledge to learn from his mistake, and to move forward with the important work of educating our students.*[7]

The board statement summarized the work of apology very well: to take responsibility for the consequences of one's action, to apologize, to pay restitution, to learn, and to move forward.

GM's Failed Apology

In December 2008, the CEOs of General Motors, Chrysler, and Ford traveled to Washington, D.C. to ask Congress for a bailout. The detail that made headlines wasn't the plea for $25 billion of public money, but the fact the executives flew from Detroit in separate private jets. The executives—Alan Mulally of Ford, Robert Nardelli of Chrysler, and Richard Wagoner of GM—were roundly criticized at the hearing and then humiliated by the media. Their request for a bailout was derailed. A few weeks later, much chastened, the three returned, this time driving hybrid cars.

It was obvious that the executives owed the country an apology. GM's Wagoner was the first to step up to the plate. In *Automotive News*, GM took out a full-page ad that was widely praised as an apology. The salient part of the ad read:

> *. . . we acknowledge we have disappointed you. At times we violated your trust by letting our quality fall below industry standards and our designs become lackluster. We have proliferated our brands and dealer network to the point where we lost adequate focus on our core U.S. market. We also biased our product mix toward pick-up trucks and SUVs. And, we made commitments to compensation plans that have proven to be unsustainable in today's globally competitive industry. We have paid dearly for these decisions, learned from them and are working hard to correct them by restructuring our U.S. business to be viable for the long term.*[8]

GM's statement is welcome as an expression of humility and acknowledgment that its difficulties were largely self-inflicted, but it's not an apology. The words *apology* or *sorry* appear nowhere in the text. Most significantly, there is no restitution. That's too bad, because a concrete expression of restitution was readily available: Wagoner had agreed to reduce his salary from

$2.2 million in 2008 to $1 in 2009. That's good, but it's been done before. A more powerful expression of restitution would have been for GM to announce that it was grounding its fleet of corporate jets. The company had already announced its intention to do so.

Had GM's statement included a simple apology and a gesture of restitution, the company would have come much closer to the public resources it sought. For Wagoner's failure to issue an effective apology, the only restitution that would subsequently be deemed sufficient would be his resignation. When Wagoner finally issues his apology, it will be his final gesture of leadership at GM. When that time comes, I offer the following statement for GM's consideration:

These failures will now require sacrifice from the entire GM family. As chairman and CEO of General Motors, I accept responsibility for these failures. To the employees, retirees, dealers, consumers, and the American taxpayer who is now being called on to sacrifice for us, I say I apologize. I'm sorry for my arrogance and failure of leadership. I have always insisted that GM executives take responsibility for their failures. I can ask no less of myself. For this reason, I have informed the board of directors that I am resigning from my positions as chairman and CEO of General Motors. I believe GM will learn enduring lessons from its mistakes and will be better positioned not to repeat them. We are proud of our century of contribution to U.S. prosperity and look forward to making an equally meaningful contribution during our next one hundred years.

American Airlines Pension Scandal

Although perfect restitution is rare, it sometimes offers a kind of poetic justice by denying the offender the very reward that

the offense improperly provided. For example, in 2003, former American Airlines CEO Donald J. Carty was criticized for taking the company into bankruptcy while at the same time implementing a program designed to guarantee the pensions and bonuses of the top executives. When the details of this shameless self-dealing emerged, a firestorm of criticism came from the unions, employees, investors, and the board of directors. To his credit, Carty immediately realized his blunder. This is part of what he said in a speech that is in many ways a model of CEO apology:

> *I want to state that we have canceled any and all retention payments for company officers. The retention payments are gone—period. I hope this is a tangible demonstration of my commitment to respect the feelings of our employees and to do what's right by them. I also asked that my 2003–2005 performance share grant be cancelled and the board did so.*
>
> *I hope my apologies, my cancellation of all retention payments, and my commitment to be completely open about these matters—now and in the future—can begin to build a bridge back to the path that allowed us to forge these historic agreements in the first place—a path that promised a new culture of collaboration, cooperation and trust. In closing, I again apologize to our employees and union leaders, and I ask for their forgiveness. I'll learn from this mistake, and I'll be a better person because of it. And more importantly, American will be a better company for its employees.*[9]

Carty's restitution—canceling the retention payments—signals his commitment to the apology and increases confidence that he actually understood why what he did was so offensive.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Restitution is the practical attempt to restore the relationship to what it was before the offender broke it.
- For serious breaches, the offender must demonstrate a concrete expression of contrition.
- Offenders can't talk their way out of a situation they acted their way into.
- Victims look for the restitution dimension of the apology to satisfy three requirements:
    - To be made whole, insofar as that is possible
    - To see the offender make a sacrifice
    - To see a sense of the offender's commitment to the relationship

CHAPTER 7

repetition

The fifth dimension of apology—repetition—provides a measure of reassurance to the victim that the offender will not repeat the offense. This is the step that many otherwise thoughtful apologies omit. But through that omission otherwise good apologies suffer, because all victims may have a conscious or unconscious barrier to accepting an apology. For many, the thought of being revictimized is almost unbearably humiliating. The fear that we may be ensnared a second time by the same person prevents many of us from accepting an apology. This fear breeds a suspicion that is a major barrier to moving forward. (That's too bad, because, as I will show later, accepting an apology does not necessarily mean that we trust the offender. It just means that we acknowledge that the offender has offered an apology reasonably complete in form and substance.)

The most effective apologies include a statement that the offense will not be repeated. A particularly effective phrase is a variant of, "I promise it will never happen again." By the way, it is often effective to end the apology with such a commitment. Communication theory suggests that people remember best what they hear last.

The promise not to repeat the offending behavior is often a stumbling block to apology. Although the intent may be genuine, it's actually very difficult to deliver on the promise. The

apologizer must demonstrate through words and actions that he or she really has changed. The ultimate test, of course, occurs when the circumstances that led to the original offense present themselves. Will the former offender yield to old habits and values? Or will the lessons of the apology control the situation? Unfortunately, human nature being what it is, the past is too often the best predictor of future performance. It takes more than apology to get beyond old habits. It requires a commitment to new values and a constant reminder that we have the ability to learn from our mistakes.

Repetition in Action

Let's consider a few examples of how the promise not to repeat an offense is an integral part of effective apology.

NBC Golf Analyst Johnny Miller Apologizes

During the fourth round of the U.S. Open, NBC golf analyst Johnny Miller infuriated the anti-defamation arm of the Sons of Italy for saying that golfer Rocco Mediate "looks like the guy who cleans Tiger's swimming pool," referring to Tiger Woods. Later, Miller gave more ammunition to those who interpreted his comments as anti-Italian slurs when he said, "Guys with the name Rocco don't get on the trophy, do they?" It took only three days for Miller to issue an apology that was emailed by NBC to viewers who expressed concern:

> *I apologize to anyone who was offended by my remarks. My intention was to convey my affection and admiration for Rocco's Everyman qualities and had absolutely nothing to do with his ethnicity. I chose my words poorly and in the future will be more careful.*[1]

This is an effective apology that satisfied Miller's critics. He acted quickly. He took responsibility for his comments ("I chose

my words poorly"). He was careful to avoid making the apology conditional. Miller understood that people absolutely were offended by what he said. No ifs about it. And he ended the apology with a promise to be more careful in the future.

Apology Hotline

Some otherwise sincere apologies founder on the rocks of repetition. Here's an example of a husband apologizing for a marital offense of such epic proportions that it's hard to conceive of any marriage surviving it. It would take a monumentally courageous man to face a woman he has betrayed so totally. In fact, what we have here is a man without such courage. He left this message on an apology hotline established by Allan Bridge as an art project he began in 1980 and ran until his death in 1995. More than ten thousand people confessed and apologized for misdeeds ranging from pulling the pigtails of schoolmates to serial murders. Bridge published ten issues of *The Apology Magazine*, which included transcriptions of many of the more provocative calls. I include the following transcript here because the offender, although he is clearly repentant and desires to apologize, concedes that, given the same circumstances, he might well repeat the offense.

A Husband's Delayed Apology

This is his apology:

> *This is Rob, and I want to apologize to my wife for something I did seventeen years ago. Seventeen years ago I was only eighteen years old, I was a young man, and I was drafted into the army. I was in Vietnam, and I met this young prostitute, and I didn't have no money to pay for her services, so I gave away my wedding band.*

It was a gold wedding band, and a gold chain with a little cross on it. And I gave her that in lieu of payment. I told her I would come back and I . . . I want the stuff back, and I'll pay her hard cash—"greenbacks"—at that time we called it—if she will, uh, wait for the next day. Came back the next day, I couldn't trace the prostitute down. And lo and behold, I always kept telling my wife this story that I lost it, and, uh, her ring, and uh, I feel bad about that, y'know, because it's been a long time, and uh, I just wanna apologize to my wife for giving our . . . her . . . the wedding band away for the services of a prostitute. Every time I think about it I think about that was a nice looking prostitute. And, uh, but every time I look at the wedding band, it's been haunting me for all these years. So I feel bad about it, and, if I had to do it again, I dunno, maybe I would do it again. OK? Anybody out there wants to punish me for that action, go ahead. Do so. I'm waiting to hear from you.[2]

The offender's commitment not to repeat the offense is undermined when the offender repeats the offense in the apology. If I am apologizing to you for being, say, argumentative, it doesn't advance my cause to get argumentative in the apology:

Ron, I need to apologize for my behavior the other night. I was argumentative and rude and—wait! Don't interrupt me. I'll let you know when I'm done, and don't you dare bring up my drinking. That's none of anyone's business.

The mistake of repeating the offense in the apology happens more often than you might think. An example of this occurred when Isaiah Washington, a former star of *Grey's Anatomy*, got into trouble for using an anti-gay slur in reference to a cast member on the hit TV show. Washington apologized at the Golden

Globe Awards, but repeated the slur by way of denying he'd said it the first time around. He was subsequently dropped from the show, a victim of artless apology.

Howard Rejects Chuck's Apology

It's impossible to accept an apology from someone who persists in continuing the behavior for which he is apologizing. Here's a story of betrayal from my friend Howard. Howard had a serious long-term relationship with a woman. There was talk of marriage, until problems developed and Howard broke it off. Without telling Howard, his best friend Chuck started to court the ex-girlfriend. Howard discovered the relationship when he saw Chuck's car outside the ex-girlfriend's house. Howard confronted Chuck, who reluctantly admitted the relationship. Over the next few weeks, Chuck repeatedly apologized to Howard. The gist of the apology was:

> *Look, Howard, I messed up, okay? But you were, like, over her, right? So why shouldn't I have a chance? I'm sorry, man. I know what I did sucks. I just want us to be friends.*

At first, Howard couldn't articulate what was wrong with this apology, but he knew it wasn't enough. To readers of this book, the apology's defects are obvious. To the extent that Chuck apologized, he apologized for the wrong offense. He is clueless that the real betrayal he should apologize for is not his entering into a relationship with Howard's former girlfriend, but his being sneaky. Moreover, there is a bigger problem that makes accepting this apology improbable. Nowhere in the apology does he take responsibility for a manifest failure of character. Some people believe that a former girlfriend may be fair game. My view is that best friends don't poach each other's romantic relationships, whether they are current or former, without talking about it first.

Chuck's character failure was acting on his self-interest without talking to Howard. This failure, compounded by Chuck's assumption that he can maintain his friendship with Howard and pursue a romantic relationship with Howard's ex-girlfriend, is the offense for which he should have apologized. By my lights, the only way to redeem Chuck's betrayal would be a decision to end the relationship with Howard's ex-girlfriend. Given the magnitude of the betrayal, it's hard for me to see how any other gesture could save the friendship. As it was, Chuck indicated he intended to pursue the relationship with the ex-girlfriend. That's a deal breaker. Howard's response:

> *I'm sorry. I see you're trying to apologize to me, and I appreciate it, but it's not good enough. I hear your words, but I look at your actions. I can't trust someone who acted like you did and defends their actions. I wish you luck, but I can't be your friend anymore.*

Later, I asked Howard under what circumstances, if any, could he conceive of continuing a relationship with Chuck. After all, they were former best friends. How would Chuck have to apologize? A few weeks later, I received an email. This is the apology that Howard suggested would have reconciled the broken relationship:

> *Howard, I acted very badly. Best friends shouldn't betray each other, but that is exactly what I did. Best friends don't mess around with each other's girlfriends, and that's what I did. Best friends don't lie to each other, and I lied to you. I knew it was wrong, and I did it anyway. I apologize from the bottom of my heart. I value you as a friend. I want you to know that I am ready to do whatever I can to earn back your trust and friendship. I understand if you want nothing to do with me. I want you to know that whatever you decide, I have ended the relationship with Linda. It's over. I value my*

friendship with you too much to continue seeing her. I hope you accept this apology and let me demonstrate that your trust in me is well placed.

Offered such an apology, Howard told me he most likely would have accepted it. (That's not surprising, as we generally accept apologies we prepare on behalf of those who hurt us.) Given such an apology, Howard said he would cautiously continue his friendship with Chuck.

North Korea Apologizes for Kidnapping Japanese Citizens

North Korea had long been suspected of being involved in the disappearance of eleven Japanese citizens during the 1970s and 1980s. It repeatedly denied Japan's allegations until 2002, when North Korean leader Kim Jong Il admitted that North Korean agents had abducted the Japanese citizens—and promised that such kidnappings would never happen again. The guarantee against repetition was a key provision of the apology:

This will never happen again. This is truly regrettable and I offer my candid apologies. The perpetrators have been punished.[3]

There is no official text of the apology, but multiple reports have Kim Jong Il leading his apology not with the regret dimension, as one might expect, but with the repetition dimension. I am aware of no other public apology that leads with the promise that the offense will not be repeated. There is little evidence that the leader of North Korea is so experienced in the art of apologetic discourse that he understood that Japan's primary concern was that the abductions cease. Nevertheless, he got the first part of the apology right.

Unfortunately, North Korea's gesture of accountability was quickly defeated by its propensity for deception. On the plus

side, North Korea allowed four of the survivors and their families to return to Japan. However, when the Japanese government pressed for proof of the remaining abductees' deaths, North Korea produced death certificates that were apparently forged. When asked for physical evidence, North Korean officials provided cremated human remains that most analysts felt to be of dubious origin. Whatever good will Kim Jong Il's apology had created was soon negated by the Japanese public's outrage and reinforced the views of many conservative politicians that North Korea should not be trusted. Because of the incompleteness of the apology and North Korea's unsatisfactory follow-up, Tokyo determined that its policy would be based on the premise that all the remaining abductees are alive. The lesson here: to the extent that an apology creates reasonable expectations, it behooves the offender to meet those expectations. Otherwise the apology will only create more ill will.

Most apologies need to be repeated more than once. Twice is okay. Under Jewish law three apologies must be offered to atone for our offenses. In most cases, if three apologies don't achieve the desired effect, I think the offender has met the repetition requirement. Of course, some victims will never accept an apology, no matter how effective or sincere. That's just one of the realities that offenders have to accept.

The point is to try different approaches. A verbal apology may be followed by a written apology. An apology delivered by telephone may be repeated when you next meet the person face-to-face. Apologies must always be reinforced by action. Victims may need to hear, more than once, your commitment to not repeating the offense. The best reassurance, obviously, is for them to see you acting differently in similar situations over a period of time. The victim must see that you have truly repented.

Apology for a Recommendation Never Sent

When I give presentations on apology, I offer the following example as a way to get the discussion going. I ask the participants to put themselves in the place of the aggrieved party and to think about what kind of apology statement they would require. The example concerns two lifelong friends, Barry and Paul. They went to college together and remained steadfast friends as they raised their families. The story begins when Barry's son is a high school senior and applying to universities. His son applies to a particular university with which Barry knows Paul has influence. Barry asks Paul to write a letter of recommendation on behalf of his son. Paul agrees. Some months later, Barry asks Paul if he has sent the letter. Paul assures Barry that he has.

Barry's son is rejected by the university. This decision puzzles Barry, so he makes inquires. He determines that the letter of recommendation that Paul agreed to send is not part of his son's admission file. Barry confronts Paul, who admits that he never got around to sending the letter and, what's more, that he lied about this fact to Barry.

At this point in the telling, I look around the room and see faces distorted with pain and anger. In the ensuing discussion, many participants feel that what Paul did was unforgivable and no apology could repair the relationship. Others are willing to craft an apology for Paul in an effort to save the friendship. At almost every discussion, there is at least one person who believes that, in similar circumstances, he or she would not confront a friend who behaved as badly as Paul did. He or she says that they would not want to risk losing a friendship of such long standing with a confrontation. They would pretend not to know about the broken promise, and they would continue the relationship.

When I ask participants to enter into Paul's heart and craft possible apologies, I see that their anger dissipates. It turns out that there are some things that Paul can say that maybe, just maybe, will salvage the friendship. A good discussion ensues about the limits of apology and forgiveness. Here is one of the apologies that a number of participants regarded as being powerful enough to mend fences, build bridges, and begin to restore trust between Barry and Paul:

> *Barry, I can hardly look at you, I'm so ashamed. I'm just so sorry for letting you down. I was honored that you asked me to write _____ a letter. I think the world of your son, and the letter I intended to write praised him to the skies. I wish I could give you a reason why I never wrote the letter. Even if I did, it would be just an excuse. The fact is, I just kept putting it off until it was too late and then I didn't have the courage to tell you, so I lied. I want you to know I'm guilty of many things. I betrayed you. I put important things off. I lied. I handled things badly. I can only pray that one day you may believe me when I say I love _____ as my own son. Yes, I failed him, as I failed you; that doesn't change what's in my heart. I won't blame you if you tell me our friendship is over. That won't change what's in my heart either. I can't undo the damage I've caused. I'll live with it the rest of my life. I apologize. I promise I will never do anything like this again. To show you that I back up this apology with something more than a promise, I have established a perpetual scholarship in your son's name at the University that will fund the tuition of one underprivileged student to go to college every year. This is a gesture that will allow me to assist college-bound students year after year, even as I failed to do for Steve. Barry, I messed things up really badly and I'm sorry.*

You have been my best friend for years and I can't bear the thought of losing you. Would you please give me another chance? Your friend, Paul.

It's an honest apology, devoid of excuses, improbably generous yet somehow appropriate. I can imagine that Barry cautiously decided to maintain his friendship with Paul. I can further imagine that Barry eventually accepted Paul's invitation to join the scholarship committee. By working together on a project that focused on a deserving student, I can imagine the friendship becoming stronger on a new plane. One of the qualities I admire about this apology is the way it allows Paul to demonstrate his promise to keep his word by attending to the many details of the scholarship fund every year. This is truly an apology that keeps on giving, and I can imagine that it transformed the relationship between Barry and Paul. Raising money and administering a scholarship fund was not even a consideration for them before the estrangement. For that transformation in their relationship to happen, apology and reconciliation had to happen first. It's a perfect example of apology *mending fences, building bridges, and restoring trust.*

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The fifth dimension of apology—repetition—provides a measure of reassurance to the victim that the offender will not repeat the offense.
- A particularly effective phrase is a variant of "I promise it will never happen again."
- The promise not to repeat the offending behavior is often a stumbling block to apology because it requires genuine change in the offender.

A Quick Review of the Five Rs

Before we get to Part III, in which we consider how the five dimensions of effective apology can be fitted together to solve problems in the real world, a quick review is in order. Recognition, the first dimension, requires the apologizer to specify the offenses he or she has committed. Victims need to understand that the offender is apologizing for the right thing. Responsibility, the second dimension, calls for the apologizer to accept personal responsibility for the offenses, without a hint of excuse, defensiveness, or blame. Remorse, the third dimension, calls for the offender to use the words *I'm sorry* or *I apologize*, accompanied by suitable nonverbal cues. Restitution, the fourth dimension, requires the offender to make a concrete gesture that not only restores the victim's situation to what it was before the offense (to the extent possible) but also demonstrates the offender's commitment to the relationship. Restitution requires action: offenders cannot talk their way out of a situation they acted their way into. Repetition, the fifth step, is a commitment on the part of offenders to not repeat the behavior for which they are apologizing.

Every effective apology includes all five of these dimensions explicitly or implicitly. Now let's turn our attention to how to make apologies work in the real world.

APOLOGIZE FOR RESULTS

Nothing is more powerful than your personal practice of apology. Only leaders who demonstrate the courage to love the qualities of transparency, accountability, and humility are able to inspire confidence among people who choose to follow. Tapping into that courage demands more than intellectual commitment and tough decision making. It requires practice, trust, and a measure of faith. Only then can you—like all members of the team—truly join the "we" who will follow your lead precisely because you are able to say you don't know and are willing to apologize when you make a mistake.

This third part of the book describes how to make apology work in the real world. It catalogs the good results gained from applying the principles of the five dimensions of apology. Using dozens of examples from the worlds of business, politics, popular culture, and personal relationships, the next few chapters illustrate when, where, and how to apologize; how to accept (and reject) an apology; and obstacles to wholehearted apology. The book concludes with five apology practices you can start right now. You are ready to put these principles to work.

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CHAPTER 8

when, where, and how to apologize

The words you choose to communicate your apologetic intent are absolutely at the core of any apology. But words are not the only elements of effective apology. Once you have decided to apologize and reflected on what to say, you must make at least three critical decisions. How well you answer these three questions will add to or detract from your planned apology. The three questions are:

- When should you apologize? Should you do so immediately, or is it better to wait?
- Where should you apologize? Should you choose a neutral setting, your setting, or the wounded party's setting?
- How should you apologize? By this I primarily mean what medium (such as face-to-face, letter, email) you should choose for making your apology.

To illustrate how thinking intentionally about each of these points contributes to an effective apology, here's how a consultant colleague handled a huge mistake with an apology equal to the task. Bill Treasurer is founder of Giant Leap Consulting, a leadership consultancy in Asheville, NC. He is a former member of the U.S. High Diving Team. For seven years he traveled throughout the world, performing over 1,500 high dives from heights of 100 feet or more.

Apology, he says, is like a dive from a high place. You really don't know what you're diving into. That's what makes apology at once so mysterious and so powerful.

Virtually everyone has said something they regret immediately. It's that blabberghasted feeling when you realize that the story coming out of your mouth is ill suited to the occasion yet you can't stop. Even now, Treasurer can't bear seeing in print the inexcusable insult that actually escaped from his lips even as every sensible bone in his body was telling him to shut up. (The actual insult is indeed offensive, but in the end it's not critical to our understanding of the situation and the apology that followed, so in the interest of limiting its public exposure, I'll leave the insult to the reader's imagination.)

Treasurer was leading a two-day strategic planning engagement for the top management team of a $200-million family-owned company in the Midwest. The first day's work was hugely successful. Treasurer was in the zone, and the team responded to his enthusiasm and confidence. The energy was still high when the entire team went to a fancy restaurant for dinner. Treasurer was both exhilarated and exhausted. His preference would have been to return to the hotel, plan for day two of the engagement, and get a good night's sleep, but he also understood that this dinner was an extension of the day's accomplishments.

The company's CEO and his wife and son, all executives in the company, were there, as well as the dozen participants. Treasurer was seated across from the CEO's wife. At one point in the conversation, he casually asked how she had met her husband. Treasurer wasn't sure exactly what she said—the room was noisy and he was tired—but he thought he heard her tell a story that was quite interesting; in fact, he could hardly believe his ears. Could she really have said what he thought she said? In a roomful of her colleagues? Must be public information, Treasurer thought—and he didn't ask for clarification. That was

his first mistake. But the howler that flowed from that mistake is what, many months later, still has the capacity to make him squirm with shame.

The next morning, Treasurer and thirteen executives are a couple of hours into the second day of the strategic planning session. Again, it's going great. The team has really gelled, and the ideas are flying fast and furious. It's not a time for interruptions, yet that is exactly what happens when the CEO pops into the conference room. Treasurer is irritated by the interruption. And then the CEO makes a joke at Treasurer's expense.

To be effective, consultants need the respect of clients. That's principle one. Treasurer experiences the CEO's interruption and teasing as a challenge to his competence and authority, and the alpha male CEO probably intends it as such. Treasurer can't let this challenge go unanswered if he wants the consulting to go well. But that doesn't excuse what comes out of his mouth. He turns to the CEO. "At least I didn't . . ." and he repeats for all to hear what he thought he heard Mrs. CEO say at dinner the previous evening.

Absolute silence follows. The CEO turns on his heels and abruptly leaves the room. Treasurer calls a break. As he leaves the conference room, the CEO is waiting and pulls him into an empty office. "What the hell was that about?" he demands.

Treasurer tries to explain himself. It's no use. The CEO must think he is crazed. Of course, Treasurer had heard it all wrong, and he was accusing the CEO and his wife of an activity that was not only fiction but technically illegal in fifty states. Treasurer apologizes to the CEO and the participants.

"I couldn't believe that I would say something so indelicate," Treasurer told me. "I was so shocked at myself. I have a good reputation, but this was the biggest gaffe I ever made." He understood that a more complete apology was required, if not for the CEO's sake then for his own. There was only one way to do that, and that was to humble himself before the CEO.

Treasurer requested a lunch meeting, and he flew to the CEO's city for the apology. He had thought carefully about what he wanted to say. What he didn't expect was that as soon as he started his apology, the CEO would hold up his hand and say, "That's fine. No need to apologize. We need to get beyond this and move on." It's not unusual for victims to brush off an apology. It's often as uncomfortable to receive an apology as it is to offer one. (See chapter 9 for insights on how to accept an apology.) But Treasurer did need to apologize, if not just for the CEO, then for his own sake:

> *Please, I need to say this. I need to look you in the eye and tell you how mortified I am, and how I get that what I said was totally inappropriate on every level. I am truly sorry. If we ever work together again—and I can totally understand if you decide that our professional relationship must end—I promise I will be more thoughtful. To demonstrate how remorseful I am, I intend to deliver the next scheduled consulting session at my expense. Again, I apologize, and I ask for your forgiveness.*

The CEO told Treasurer that he was forgiven and they should forget about it. The conclusion of the story validates the power of effective apology: Giant Leap Consulting has continued to work with the client and has even been awarded more sizable contracts. Treasurer says his apology to the CEO was perhaps the most important conversation he's had in the six years that Giant Leap Consulting has been in business.

Treasurer's apology is a model in many ways. He apologized verbally on the day of the offense and then followed it up with a private apology. He offered appropriate restitution. His phrase "I need to look you in the eye" is an active and intensely personal use of language. Moreover, the person to whom he apologized would be impressed by someone's willingness to get on an airplane to deliver an apology in person. Woody Allen

says, "Eighty percent of success is showing up," and apologizing in person is almost always the strongest option. Sometimes it isn't an option, and then you need to consider other modes of apology (telephone, letter, and so on). But now let's examine each of the three considerations in turn.

When to Apologize

When is the best time to apologize? Should you apologize right away or is it better to let some time pass? In general, apologies are most effective when they are offered immediately or soon after the offense. As General Douglas MacArthur once put it, all military defeats can be summarized in two words: "Too late." One good rule to remember is that the less serious the incident is, the more immediate the apology must be. So if you accidentally spill something or step on someone's toes, the apology should come immediately after the incident. But as the incidents become more serious, sometimes a cooling-off period is useful.

If you need to apologize and you're in doubt about timing, it's good to ask yourself whether it would be more compassionate for the victim if you apologize immediately or wait. In the Giant Leap Consulting situation, Treasurer handled the issue of timing by offering two apologies: one immediately after the offense and then a more formal apology some weeks later. In the period between the offense and the formal apology, Treasurer used the time to reflect with his advisors on the meaning of what had happened, think about the business implications of his behavior, and consider his response in light of compassion for the client he had offended. The timing of the apology should be guided by the interests of the victim instead of the interests of the offender. This is not an easy calculation for offenders to make by themselves, and that is why I suggest offenders get some guidance from a neutral party.

Rushed Apologies

Some apologies have a rushed, "let's get it over with" quality. If the primary motivation for an immediate apology is the offender's convenience or desire to minimize discomfort or expense, then the victim is not well served and the apology will not be effective. In some cases, an offender may hurry to offer an apology before the victim understands the full meaning of the offense. Sometimes the apology comes even before the victim is aware of the offense. This does not show compassion for the victim. These rushed apologies take one of two forms:

The preemptive strike apology is actually a form of damage control. The goal of the offender is to get out in front of the situation by apologizing before the victim has time to assess the full extent of the offense. Offenders often trot out the preemptive strike apology when what they are apologizing for is just the tip of the iceberg and they would prefer that the victim not look any more deeply into what lurks, still hidden, beneath the surface. Clues that you are dealing with a preemptive strike apology are offenders who say they don't want to "wallow in," "drag out," "dwell on," or "beat to death" a situation.

The drive-by apology, like its cousin the drive-by compliment, is delivered on the fly, requires little effort, and is over almost before the recipient fully realizes he or she has received one. In his article "The Pathology of Apology," Scott Libin describes the exercise:

> *Often, the drive-by apology is shorter than the title I've given it: "Sorry!" is sometimes the full text. You're lucky if there's an "I'm" attached. This is appropriate when you accidentally jostle someone while not watching where you're walking. It's a lousy way to express remorse that goes any deeper.*[1]

Generally speaking, the amount of time spent delivering an apology ought to have some relationship to the amount of

thought that went into it. Two or three syllables spat out in a split second make it seem the speaker is trying to get a distasteful task over with as quickly as possible, just to put it behind him.

Delayed Apologies

Sometimes apologies follow by months or years the incident to which they refer. Sometimes sufficient time has to elapse for the offender to understand what he or she did and to develop the strength of character to finally acknowledge culpability. I experienced the power of a delayed apology.

Delayed Apology for Disrupting Men's Group

I was in a men's group for many years. Every week, a group of eight men got together on a houseboat to talk about our lives, our work, and our relationships. One of the men worked as a corporate pilot. Erwin flew around the world but always made it back for our weekly meetings. He often talked about the arguments he had with his girlfriend, who complained about his frequent absences.

Lance, another member of the group, began an affair with Erwin's girlfriend. He used the confidential information that Erwin shared in the group to get close to the woman. It was a betrayal of Erwin and the entire group. When the affair came to light, there were angry recriminations. Erwin, of course, left the group. Who could blame him? Lance tried to explain, but what came out of his mouth was more rationalization than apology. The other men kicked him out of the group. We tried to move on, but the damage was done. The men's group disbanded. Some years later, I received a letter in the mail:

> *The last few years have been very hard on me. I am carrying a great deal of shame. I know it's far too late for apologies, still I need to let you know how truly ashamed I am of the decisions I made. I don't have the words to*

convey how badly I treated the entire group, especially Erwin. The group showed me nothing but respect and honor. I answered with contempt and disregard for anyone's needs but my own. I have grown a bit since then and I think I'm a little more aware of the shadow forces that drove me. None of that is an excuse. I see even more clearly now the dimensions of the terrible course I took. I know that I cannot undo what I did. I hope the part of you that once honored me can honor the part of me that is truly filled with remorse. I'd give anything to be in a group like we had once again. I promise I would take better care of it. I'm sorry for everything but once having been in the company of such good men. That memory sustains me.

I found I could accept this apology. I discerned a measure of hard-won self-awareness on his part. I imagined that Lance's life had been very difficult. I appreciated his reaching out. He didn't ask for a response, so I didn't give him one. Sometimes an apology is complete without the relationship being restored.

Delaying Apology to Control Emotions

An offender may be averse to a big emotional scene and delay the apology in the expectation that the victim has cooled down. This is an understandable reaction—hardly anyone is comfortable with anger—but it prolongs the situation and, even worse, it generally backfires. It is legitimate for victims to be able to express painful emotion to the people who hurt them. If the offender's ultimate goal is to heal the relationship with the wounded party, a willingness to absorb a degree of painful emotional expression is part of the deal.

Offenders cannot control the wounded party's emotions. But they can and must be in control of their own. It's entirely

legitimate for offenders to be embarrassed, humiliated, angry, or upset by what they did. It's important that they get a handle on their feelings, because until they attain a measure of emotional equilibrium they really can't issue a compassionate apology. Sometimes this takes time; if so, that's a legitimate reason for delaying an apology. The only proviso is that when the offender finally does apologize, he or she should be willing to be honest with the victim about the reason for the delay. Don't make excuses. Here are some suggestions:

- *Our relationship is important enough that I thought I should wait until I could figure out why I acted so badly.*
- *I was too upset to trust myself with an apology; I think I have some perspective now.*
- *I was so confused, I wasn't sure how to apologize, and I very much wanted to get it right.*

Assuming the delay is reasonable, the wounded party will probably be grateful that you took the time to work on the apology.

Some apologies follow offenses by years, decades, or even centuries. There are many reasons why we are witnessing more of these long-delayed apologies. In the public sphere, a greater willingness by individuals, institutions, and societies to confront the sins of the past has led to a spate of such apologies. Technology also plays a role. As archives of public records, newspapers, and broadcasts go online, mistakes and errors that were formerly inaccessible or impermanent are now archived for instant global access. In the past, if someone on TV said something offensive, the event could easily be denied. Now, with YouTube and other Internet media outlets, everything is up for global grabs with the click of a mouse. Evidence of the misdeed can zip around the world within minutes. By the same token, apologies can go viral, as we will see.

Guilt is a heavy burden. When we know we've made a mistake and refused to apologize, something in human nature

rebels, even in the most hardened of hearts. Maybe we've told ourselves that someday we'll make it right. Most of us can rationalize our behavior for just so long before we are compelled to act by the passage of time and too many funerals of people to whom we owe apologies. After a certain number of years, the weight of unconfessed guilt may be unbearable.

People are also living longer, and they have more time in their senior years in which to reflect on their misdeeds. This is important, because there is something in human nature that recoils from the prospect of dying without having confessed offenses that hurt other people. There are many stories about the power of deathbed confessions. Whether out of guilt or a desire to make amends, people at the end of their lives often decide to unburden themselves of their sins.

How much delay is too much delay? In her book *The Art of Apology*, Lauren Bloom offers a provocative question about timing: "Will delaying my apology make it more effective and, if not, what am I waiting for?"[2] Here are a couple of examples of long-delayed apologies and how powerful they can be.

Delayed Apology for Loss of Contact with Best Friend's Family

Harvey and Nick were best friends all through high school and college. Harvey was crushed when, just days after graduation, Nick died in an airplane crash. Harvey admits he handled the grief badly, withdrawing from any contact with Nick's parents and siblings. Fifteen years later, Harvey has an overwhelming sense of guilt for abandoning a family that in many ways he had felt closer to than his own. Harvey is established, with a good career and marriage, and little boy, Nick, named in honor of his friend. Now he wonders how to make contact with his best friend's family and whether he should tell them that he named his own son in their son's honor.

I suggested that he send a letter of apology with a photograph. This is the most compassionate way to contact a party

after a long delay. It gives the family a chance to reflect on the letter without feeling pressured by a phone call or visit. It's easy to overthink this situation and get sentimental or dramatic. My suggestion was to keep the letter honest and direct. This is what Harvey wrote:

> *I am sorry for my silence all these years. After Nick's death, I thought I was alone and so I was. I'm filled with remorse to think that my absence added even the slightest weight to the burden you were already carrying. I am happy now with a good job and a wife I hardly deserve. My brightest news I save for last. I have a son. He is three years old and his name is Nick. I honor your son's memory every moment. My sweetest hope is my son will embrace the qualities that made Nick so beloved by all who had the privilege to know him. I want my son to know that friends endure and we're never totally alone. I hesitate to send this letter after so many years. But I know what Nick would have said to me. When it's too late to apologize, that's when you're really alone.*

Delayed Apology Can Backfire

Not all long-delayed apologies are desirable. If you feel the need to apologize for something you did years ago, make sure that the apology emphasizes compassion for the victim. This is a calculation you are not qualified to make by yourself, because the very pull to apologize often blinds you to the possibility that the victim will experience your course of action as intrusive. For this reason, before you contact the victim, talk to your friends, counselor or minister, even a lawyer. Sometimes confession to a third party is more appropriate than an apology. And sometimes, as the next story shows, a long-delayed apology can land you in a world of trouble.

Delayed Apology Lands Offender in Jail

Many people who work the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous eventually get to Step Nine, which calls for making amends, whenever possible, for the offenses one committed while under the influence. Former UVA student William Nottingham Beebe got to Step Nine.

In 1984, while a student at the University of Virginia, Beebe assaulted a fellow student at a fraternity party. Alcohol figured prominently in the assault. The assault was not taken seriously by either the university or city police, and no charges were filed. Twenty-one years later, Beebe's conscience and desire to get his life under control prompted him to apologize in an unsolicited letter to the woman he assaulted:

> *In October, 1984, I harmed you. I'm sorry. My prayer is that you be free and happy in your life.*[3]

Along with a letter expressing remorse, Beebe enclosed his business card. Elizabeth Seccuro, the survivor of the assault, entered into an email dialogue with her assailant. In these lengthy emails, Beebe provided details about his recollection of the events of the night in question and why he did what he did. One of the goals of restorative apology is to bring victims and offenders together in a structured setting for the purpose of answering the victim's questions. Beebe's experience reveals the perils of entering into such a dialogue without the structured setting.

In December 2005, Seccuro turned over Beebe's letters and emails to Charlottesville police and filed a complaint. Beebe was initially charged with criminal sexual assault, a charge that carried a potential life sentence. In November 2006, Beebe accepted a plea bargain. He received a ten-year sentence, all but eighteen months of which was suspended. He served six months in prison before being released.

This case raises profound questions about apology, fairness, forgiveness, and redemption. This is not the place to resolve these issues. My point is that apology always has a cost. Perhaps Beebe felt the ultimate cost he had to pay was too high. Perhaps he felt the guilt and shame he was experiencing every day were burdens he could no longer bear. Maybe we can never know what the ultimate costs of an apology will turn out to be. You owe it to yourself to have a clearer picture of what the costs might be before you issue a long-delayed apology.

Where to Apologize

As I've mentioned, apologies are usually most effective when made face-to-face at a time and place determined by the victim. Bill Treasurer understood this. He could have made his formal apology via phone call or letter, but he knew that to be commensurate with the gravity of the offense, his apology had to be offered in person. It is in the face-to-face apology that transformation really starts. Delivering an apology in person signals that the wrongdoer takes the apology seriously enough to put his or her entire being into it. Showing up is critical in apology. Although it is preferable to show up, it's not always possible. If that's the case, another form of apology is usually better than no apology at all.

Apology challenges the wrongdoer to answer the question: Who are you when you show up? The emphasis is more on the you than on the apology itself. Are you prepared to own the responsibility? Are you willing to let go of your privilege and approach the person to whom you are apologizing to as a peer? Or are you holding some power in reserve in case things get too uncomfortable? Only the truth sounds like the truth. If it's not the strongest apology you can make, why not? What are you afraid of? What part of being right do you still cling to?

Showing up is, in the fullest sense of the term, the most important aspect of delivering an apology in person. But there are other advantages, as well. As we all know, the words that we speak represent only a fraction of the information we communicate. Sometimes the most authentic element of what we communicate is not *content*, but *process*. By process, I mean the sum experience of the mostly nonverbal ways in which we present ourselves to each other. Think back to high school for a minute. A substitute teacher walks into the room. How long did it take you to decide whether that substitute teacher had anything of value to offer? If you said thirty seconds, that's about right. The teacher didn't need to say a word, but his or her process spoke volumes. What did you notice? Body language, bearing, posture, facial expression, tone of voice, use of silence—all provided remarkably accurate clues about a stranger.

Delivering an apology in person is often the best assurance that an apology will be accepted. As the apologizer enters into dialogue with the person receiving the apology, he or she gets feedback on how the process is working and makes adjustments. On the other hand, what makes face-to-face apology so effective is also what makes it so scary. The offender is up close and personal with the victim. You get the full brunt of the injury and painful emotion you caused. There's no buffer between you and the wounded person, and once you've started you have to see it through. There's no graceful way to exit the apology until the wounded party is done.

Just a couple of housekeeping points about face-to-face apology. Don't ask the victim to come to you. Let the victim know you want to apologize and go to him or her. Try to be flexible, so the time and place of the apology is convenient for the victim. Extending yourself in this way is part of the reparations process. Also, leave yourself plenty of time. You don't know how long the apology will take. You'll ruin the apology if you plead another engagement that forces you to withdraw before the victim is ready.

Telephone Apologies

When a face-to-face apology is impractical, the telephone (followed by a personal letter) is often the best alternative. Although you lose the benefit of being able to see the other person's body language, and the victim has only your voice to gauge your sincerity, we have become pretty good at listening to tone of voice for clues. A telephone apology is also appropriate for occasions that you want to treat more casually. Sometimes the telephone is the only alternative. Very rarely, using a telephone call for an apology addressing a significant injury may be the best way to go, but such circumstances are rare.

The need for an immediate apology may require a phone call even for serious offenses. The recipient of the apology may be halfway around the world or may be right next door but refusing to be in the same room with you. Another advantage: a phone apology allows you to consult your notes as you speak, something you can't do in face-to-face apologies. It defeats the purpose of face-to-face apology to use notes.

Letters of Apology

Before the telephone was invented, there developed a rich tradition of apologies delivered by letter. Sadly, letter writing has come to be seen as somewhat quaint. But that almost works in favor of apologizing via snail mail. Receiving a handwritten letter is such a rare occurrence these days that a letter of apology often has a very desirable impact. Moreover, it can be retained as a memento of the apologizer's thoughtfulness. Finally, it gives the victim time to reflect on the apology in a way that a telephone call may not.

A letter of apology is ideal when it follows an in-person apology. The benefit in this case is that a letter reinforces the personal apology. Victims also appreciate having a permanent record of the wrongdoer's contrition. If the apology is about correcting the record, having a written apology that corroborates

the victim's version of events can be very valuable. For example, if you wrongly took credit for the work of a colleague, a face-to-face apology followed by a letter along the following lines would be most welcome:

> *I wanted to express in writing some of the sentiments I gave you in person this afternoon. I apologize for taking credit for the idea that properly belonged to you. It was wrong of me to do so, and I am very sorry. I understand my conduct injured you by diminishing the reputation and standing you have earned in the organization. There can be no excuse for what I did, and I offer no excuse. Again, I apologize. I will never take credit for another person's work again. I intend to work very hard for the day when I will have the right to ask for your forgiveness. Until then, please accept my apology and the sincerity with which it is offered.*

Letters of apology don't have to be well written or even grammatical to be effective. In Albany, New York, fifteen-year-old Jermayne Timmons was charged with the murder of Kathina Thomas. In a letter from jail to the victim's mother, Timmons penned a heartbreaking apology in which the halting diction and wretched spelling added a measure of pathos to the tragedy:

> *Dear The Mother of the 10 year old girl. I didn't have any tention to hert your child. I can't say I know how you feel, but I can say I'm very sorry. I am so sorry that the gun I shot is the gun that could have takeing your Baby Girl away from you. That bullet was not supose to hit her. All I want to say is that I am sorry. Please accept.*[4]

Virtual Apologies

I don't recommend email apologies except for minor offenses or when the offense involved online activity. For example, if Tom

offends Betty by something he wrote in a blog, then an apology by email is appropriate. Even then the risks of misunderstanding are high. The instantaneous nature of email also contributes to thoughtless behavior, the full flower of which can be seen in email (or online forum) flame wars.

An email or instant message apology is acceptable if it is followed up by an in-person, telephone, or letter apology. Sometimes email is the only practical way to apologize quickly to a number of people. But in general, email is the cheapest way to apologize; victims know it and apply the appropriate discounts. If you want your apology to matter, consider other media.

The latest wrinkle is for offenders to post video apologies on the Web—primarily YouTube, but on many other video sites, as well. A quick search of YouTube for "public apology" reveals over a thousand videos. Many appear to be genuine attempts at communicating apologetic intent. Some judges even mandate apology videos in their search for a way to humiliate defendants or to deter particular activities. We will encounter one of these activities in Chapter 11 concerning a "fire in the hole" incident at Taco Bell. Look for YouTube to become a more common medium for corporate apologies, as well.

Maple Leaf Foods Apologizes for Deadly Food Contamination

Corporations that understand the viral power of apologies are already using YouTube and other video sites. For example, when a plant of Toronto-based Maple Leaf Foods was confirmed as being involved in the August 2008 outbreak of *Listeria*, a deadly food-borne bacteria, the company swung into action. It shut down the plant and recalled all twenty-three of its products, not just the one implicated in the contamination. The company website became a clearinghouse for the latest information on the contamination, presented without spin or evasion. A company spokesperson did interviews in a wide range of media. Maple Leaf Foods also ran TV spots and took out newspaper

advertisements. CEO Michael McCain held a news conference and posted an apology on the company website, which was immediately posted on YouTube. On the video, McCain explained what had happened and what the company would do to prevent it from happening again, and he issued an unreserved, personal apology:

> *Tragically our products have been linked to illness and loss of life. To Canadians who are ill and to families who have lost loved ones, I offer my deepest sympathies. Words cannot begin to express our sadness for your pain . . . Our best efforts have failed and we are deeply sorry. This is the toughest situation we have faced in 100 years as a company. We know this has shaken your confidence in us. I commit to you our actions are guided by putting your interests first.*[5]

Twitter Moms Take on Big Pharma

Earlier I mentioned that an apology can go viral in much the same way as evidence of misdeeds. By *going viral* I mean a message taking on a life of its own by virtue of the Internet and the ease by which people can pass along a message to other people. A perfect example of how a company can suffer—and benefit—from the viral aspects of the digital world occurred when McNeil Consumer Healthcare, the maker of the painkiller Motrin, released an ad that a handful of mothers believed poked fun at motherhood. The lighthearted ad promoted Motrin as relief to the tired, aching backs of mothers who carry their babies in slings. These mothers launched a torrent of negative "tweets," or postings, via Twitter, a social networking and microblogging community that limits messages to 140 characters. Within twenty-four hours the digital world was filled with Motrin rants. Within forty-eight hours McNeil pulled the ads in question.

The response of McNeil was immediate and personal. Kathy Widmer, McNeil Consumer Healthcare VP of Marketing, offered a personal apology and made herself prominent in the media and blogs. The company was smart to ensure that their chosen spokesperson was a mother herself. She lost no time in sending an apologetic email to the company's critics. In the email, she introduced herself as the executive responsible for the ad and a "mom" of three daughters. "We believe deeply that moms know best and we sincerely apologize for disappointing you," she wrote. She ended the email with a commitment to remove the offending ad from both digital and print media. She also posted a video version of the apology on McNeil's website. Both the apology email and the apology video immediately went viral.

The lesson for companies is that although the digital world is capable of turning small mistakes into big headaches, it feeds on conflict. Without the conflict (cover-ups, denials, and defensiveness), critics quickly move on to the next thing. Within two weeks, the Motrin controversy had run its course. The problem for McNeil is that the issue may be history, but the facts are as close as a Google search. If it runs afoul of consumers again, forgiveness will be more difficult to attain a second time.

How to Apologize

Apology is an important conversation. You should have a very clear idea of what you want to say. That means practice. Write down what you intend to say. The point is not that you'll read the apology, but that the act of writing will help organize your thoughts. I recommend you try the apology out on a trusted friend before you actually take it to the victim. Getting a second opinion about an apology is always a good idea. Then start simplifying. If the apology is too complex to fit on a 3×5 index card, the message needs to be simplified.

Take Time to Prepare

Take the time to think through what the other person is likely to say, not as a strategy to refute the points they raise, but so that you can listen more effectively. Apology is not a competitive debate. No one "wins" an apology. Enlist a disinterested friend and try a little role-playing. Play yourself and let your friend take the role of the victim. See what happens. Then switch roles. You be the victim while your friend offers the apology you crafted. The more prepared you are with what the victim might say, the better. Being prepared simply gives you the best shot at not ruining a good apology with a thoughtless reaction.

The Victim May Cry

When there is tension in a relationship, the buildup of emotion can be intense. When you apologize, that tension is suddenly released. Some victims may be so relieved or grateful that they start crying. If that happens, your best response is to relax and wait. Don't crowd the victim by offering a hug (unless the victim reaches for you; more on this follows), don't withdraw, don't make a big deal of it. The release of emotion is part of the victim's healing process; you should welcome it. Don't do anything to distract the victim. Some people think that if they stop the crying, they will stop the pain. Exactly the opposite is true. Try to keep in mind that the tears are not about how you hurt the victim but about his or her healing. Once the tears have subsided, the victim will be clearer and much more able to be in the moment with you. And now a word of caution: the victim's tears can be contagious. That emotional release may prompt a similar reaction from you. There's something sweet about the image of the apologizer and the victim dissolving into tearful hugs as the outpouring of emotion melts away old grievances. But if you are clear that the apology is about the recipient, you will delay your own tears until the victim is done and has had a chance to hear your apology in full. The time for *your* tears is *after* your apology is accepted.

How About Touching and Hugging?

Both are fabulous tokens of reconciliation, but only when initiated by the recipient. Let the recipient of the apology determine the physical boundaries. Your goal is to keep a respectful distance, not remote but not invasive either. Be open to getting closer, but don't act on it until the other person invites closeness. It's wonderful when an apology ends in hugs all around, but the open arms must come from the recipient.

Should You Bring Gifts?

In many cultures there is a tradition of linking apologies and gifts. You may recall scenes in TV and movies of people presenting flowers, perfume, chocolates, and jewelry as tokens of their contrition as they apologize. For apologies to family members and intimate friends, appropriate gifts may help communicate how sorry you are and how much you value the relationship. But even in such cases, gifts may be misunderstood. The trouble with gifts is that it's impolite to reject them, and that complicates the apology, which the victim should be at liberty to accept or reject. Here's another problem with gifts: an appropriate gift is always a guess, and maybe you'll guess wrong. In general, I suggest you take the energy you were going to put into the gift and put it into the apology itself, with special emphasis on what you propose to do for the restitution.

There is one situation in which presenting a physical object with the apology makes sense. That's when you broke or lost something that belonged to the victim. For example, if you borrowed and lost a pair of gloves, it's entirely appropriate that your apology be accompanied by a pair of replacement gloves. Notice, however, that the gloves in this context are not a gift. They are part of the restitution. By the same token, making amends can take the form of "gifting" the victim with a service (washing and waxing the victim's car) or your time (babysitting the victim's children). If you are apologizing for missing a lunch date, you can include an I.O.U. certificate for lunch. If your

mistake caused a colleague to be on-call when it was your turn, offer to take the colleague's next scheduled on-call duty. Better yet, offer to take two on-calls. Any time you can directly link the restitution with the offense, you have a better chance of your apology being accepted.

In professional apology settings, gifts are almost always a bad idea, because all gifts have a social subtext. Let's say you want to apologize to your supervisor. Everyone likes flowers, but do you really want your supervisor to be wondering how your gift of flowers is different from the flowers he or she receives from a romantic interest? Even if the supervisor is clear, do you want him or her to be wondering what your coworkers make of the gift? None of the traditional gifts associated with apology (such as flowers, candy, liquor, wine) are appropriate in a professional setting.

If you insist on giving gifts when you apologize to a professional colleague, just make absolutely sure that the apology comes before the gift. If you don't, the gift will be received as an offer of compensation or, worse, a bribe. There's not always a bright line drawn between a gift and a bribe. Your apology is doomed if it appears that you are trying to buy the wounded party's forgiveness. And the more substantial the gift, the greater the risk that it will be perceived as a bribe.

When Bill Treasurer apologized, he knew that a gift would be inappropriate. His offer of restitution—providing the next training session without cost—signaled how much he valued the professional relationship. In any case, any gift he offered would have run up against the code of ethics of the CEO's company. Many corporations have rules restricting the gifts employees can receive from vendors and other groups seeking business with the company. It's embarrassing for everyone when the recipient has to return a gift. The idea behind these rules is that gifts sometimes undermine an employee's critical judgment. So it is with gifts and apology.

Perhaps the best option for those who, against all advice, insist on giving a gift is to offer a token gift. An acquaintance from my advertising agency days accompanied an apology for blabbing too much by presenting with his apology a Pez dispenser—a joke referring to the fact that Pez candies issue, like an overabundance of words, from the mouth of the dispenser. If the gift can make the recipient of the apology laugh and remind him of the close relationship he once had with the offender and hopes to have again, the apology is well served. Again, you need to know the recipient of the apology well.

Nonverbal Apologies

Not all apologies require words. In certain cases, a nonverbal apology may be stronger than any sequence of words.

Willy Brandt Drops to His Knees in Sorrow

In the public sphere, perhaps the most eloquent illustration of the power of the nonverbal occurred on December 7, 1970, when West German Chancellor Willy Brandt visited Poland. He attended a commemoration of the Jewish victims of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising of 1943. The world saw the leader of the German people, apparently overcome with emotion, drop to his knees before the commemoration monument. It was a spontaneous act of apology and repentance, arguably more powerful than any words Brandt might have uttered. This example demonstrates how words often fall short of the task of carrying the most profound apologies. We must note that the apology was so effective because it flowed from compelling evidence of Germany's ample remorse for the war. Germany had apologized and billions of Deutsche marks had already been given in the name of the German people to the people of Poland and Israel.[6]

Here are two more illustrations of how effective nonverbal apologies can be. The first is from my daughter Rachel.

Undergraduate Apologizes for Taking Friend's Chocolate Syrup

Rachel is an undergraduate at the University of Massachusetts. She told me about a time when she decided she needed a milk shake. She had the ice cream but no chocolate syrup and no transportation to get to a store. So Rachel rode her bike to a nearby house where one of her college buddies, Mark, lived. She knew he had a bottle of chocolate syrup. He wasn't home, but one of Mark's housemates told Rachel she could take the syrup, and he would tell Mark when he came home. Predictably, the housemate forgot to pass along the message. So when Mark wanted the syrup, it was gone, and he was angry that Rachel had taken his property without permission. After midnight, Rachel's cell phone chimed with this text message:

YOU have my chocolate syrup!!

Rachel immediately sent back a text message apologizing. Her message:

My bad. I'll make it up 2U.

If this were the total apology, I'd say it's a bit terse, even by the standards of texting. But Rachel wasn't quite through. The real apology would come. When Rachel knocked on Mark's door the next day, not only did she return the bottle of chocolate syrup, but she silently presented Mark with a frosty chocolate milk shake. Rachel reports that Mark accepted the apology and consumed the restitution on the spot, which was sufficient evidence to Rachel that her apology was accepted.

In *Wisdom of Our Fathers*, the late Tim Russert includes a story of nonverbal apology. It concerns a young girl, who every

Father's Day, would buy her father a bag of white pistachios. The father and daughter developed elaborate rituals around the pistachios, hiding the nuts and empty shells, each trying to outwit the other. Fast-forward to her twenty-fifth birthday, when she and her father have a bitter falling out. The daughter and father have no contact with each other for many years. Then she gives birth to a child. "As a new parent, I could not imagine feeling anger and disappointment sharp enough, or pervasive enough, to ever cast off my child," she said, deciding to reach out. When the next Father's Day rolled around, she mailed her estranged father a bag of white pistachios. No note, just the pistachios. In short order, she received a package. No note, just the empty shells. "But I smiled, and I imagined he did too," she concluded.[7] Russert doesn't tell us what happened next, but we are invited to believe that out of a nonverbal gesture, an exchange of apologies and eventual reconciliation is possible.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Determine when to apologize. In general it's better to apologize immediately, but sometimes it is useful to delay the apology.
- Determine where to apologize.
- Decide by what medium to apologize: face-to-face, telephone, letter, email.
- Practice the apology.
- Write down what you intend to say. If you can't fit it on an index card, the apology needs to be simplified.

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CHAPTER 9

how to accept (and reject) an apology

Janet and Ed were coworkers in a fast-food restaurant. One night they were closing up and Janet decided to play a trick on Ed. When Ed entered the walk-in freezer, Janet shut the door. She thought it was funny. But as she pulled the door handle, nothing happened. The door was locked tight and she didn't have the key. To her horror, she had trapped Ed in the deep freeze. She heard Ed banging on the walls. Janet didn't know what to do. She knew that she would get fired for this stunt, but she had no other choice but to wake up the store manager. It was an hour before he could get to the store with the key to the freezer. Meanwhile Janet was crazy with worry and remorse for a joke that had gone very bad. When the manager arrived, the first thing he told Janet was "You're fired!" Then he unlocked the freezer and pulled the heavy door open. They went in expecting the worst. But the freezer was empty and Ed was nowhere to be found.

In fact, Ed had escaped from the freezer by a little-known service door that led to the parking lot. Then he had simply gone home. He thought he was just continuing the joke that Janet had started. He had no idea about the panic Janet had gone through or the fact that she had lost her job. Later, Janet called Ed to apologize. She had thought long and hard about what she wanted to say.

Ed, I am sincerely sorry for locking you in the freezer. I know that people have died from being locked into freezers. I can't believe I put you in that awful position and exposed you to that risk. I've learned my lesson. It was a terrible lapse in judgment and I feel terrible about it. I accept that I was fired. I just hope I don't permanently lose your respect. Again, I apologize.

Ed's response?

Don't worry about it.

Can you feel Janet's frustration? Here Janet has accepted accountability and lost her job. Now she screws up her courage to apologize, and the apology is dismissed. How is she to take Ed's response?

Lowering the Stakes

Accepting an apology respectfully—wholeheartedly—is the flip side of offering one. It's easy to understand why otherwise thoughtful people respond to apologies by dismissing them. No matter how these responses are defended, what we have here are attempts to minimize the situation, to lower the stakes. The apology conversation can be uncomfortable. The person who is apologizing is often tense. It's natural to want to turn down the heat and perhaps make it easier for the apologizer. Someone close to you wants to take responsibility for a behavior he or she believes has hurt us. Sometimes they've had to push through substantial fear or embarrassment to get to this point. They simply need to apologize.

A response such as "Don't worry about it," or "It's okay" is a slap in the apologizer's face. Well, it's not okay. If it were okay, the person wouldn't have asked you to receive the apology. I call these responses "apology busters." Apology busters come in two varieties. Apology busters of the first variety are an attempt

to diminish the need for the apology (*Don't worry about it; it's nothing*). The second variety signals that the victim intends to continue the conflict by escalating the argument (*You call that an apology?*). Here's a list of apology busters, ranked from benign to inflammatory:

- There's nothing for you to apologize about.
- You have no need to apologize.
- It's okay.
- Don't worry about it.
- It's cool. Forget it.
- It's nothing.
- I've heard that one before.
- How do I know you won't do it again?
- Yeah, well you ought to be sorry!
- Forget it. I'll never be able to trust you again.
- It's too late now!
- I'll forgive you this time, but you better never let it happen again.
- Fine. But I'll never let you forget what you did to me.

Apology busters at the bottom of this list may be momentarily satisfying, but they are not in the victim's interest. In fact, busting an apology allows the apologizing offender to occupy the moral high ground and requires the former victim to apologize. It's never wise to answer a genuine offer of healing with even more resentment.

There's a better way to accept an apology. I suggest that the default position when someone offers you an apology is to be generous. You should embrace generosity of spirit not primarily for the apologizer's sake (although he or she will be greatly relieved) but for your own. It's tempting to exploit the momentary position of power vested in you by an apology, but you lose more by busting the apology than by accepting it.

Accepting an Apology

What does it mean to accept an apology?

> *When I accept an apology it means that the part in me that honors our relationship honors the part in you that honors our relationship.*

I accept an apology when I acknowledge that to some degree of effectiveness an offender has voluntarily admitted being in the wrong; taken responsibility for hurting me; expressed remorse in a direct, personal, and unambiguous manner; offered suitable restitution; and promised not to do it again. Accepting an apology means I acknowledge that on some level the offender shares my legitimate moral right to be angry as I cling to the position that the offender did not have a right to hurt me. When I accept an apology, I acknowledge the possibility that the offender places more value on our relationship than on being right.

Accepting an apology indicates my willingness to work toward restoring our relationship. It's a commitment to a process, not an outcome. It may take time, and it may never happen, but I'm willing to walk with the offender on the path to a restored relationship. Accepting an apology is not a reconciliation of the heart. It is simply reaching the conclusion that the offender no longer owes me anything for whatever it was that he or she did. Accepting an apology is like granting a pardon to a criminal. The crime remains; only the debt is forgiven. Bottom line: I can accept an apology in good faith without making a decision one way or the other about forgiving the apologizer.

The full acceptance of an apology means that the injured party will no longer carry that hurt and anger and will not refer to it again. It emphatically does not mean that the party will pretend the offense never happened, nor does it commit him or her to going back to the pre-offense condition. That is not realistic and may be impossible. Accepting an apology does mean that

the parties commit to forging a new relationship based on a new understanding of the values that mutually commit them.

Focus on the Big Picture

I don't think it makes sense to hold out for a perfect apology before you will consider it. In this situation, like so many others, the perfect is the enemy of the good. Insisting on a perfect apology is an impossible standard. Focus on the elements of the apology that are responsive to your requirements and let the small stuff go. You don't have to see eye-to-eye to walk hand-in-hand. You just have to want to go in the same direction.

Craig Silverman, author of *Regret the Error*, reports on media corrections, retractions, apologies, clarifications, and trends regarding accuracy and honesty in the media. For Silverman, accepting an apology means that the offender discerns (1) that what he or she did was wrong and (2) why it was wrong. "It's a starting point, where we can work toward fixing the relationship," he says. "I don't need the other party to agree with me. What I want is evidence that they understand my perspective, a promise that the situation won't happen again, and some expression of how we'll work through this."[1]

Listen Actively

Listening is not easy under the best of circumstances, and when someone is apologizing to you it's seldom the best of circumstances. With rare exceptions, you know exactly what the offender is apologizing about. You've been hurt. And you're legitimately angry and upset. Now someone with whom you are angry asks you to participate in a process that carries a high risk of discomfort. It's emotionally demanding for both parties. These are hardly ideal conditions for listening.

Yet if you value the relationship at all, a relaxed, open attitude will make things go much better. You really want to hear what the offender has to say. Too many opportunities for

reconciliation are lost because the recipient of the apology doesn't give the offender a chance to apologize. Listening carefully to the offender's apology is really the only way for you to determine whether the apology is satisfactory. That means listening to what the offender says and, just as important, what he or she chooses not to say. Listening also requires paying attention to the apologizer's nonverbal messages: posture, gestures, tone of voice, and other clues to what psychologists call *affect*. Finally, listening calls for you to be attentive to the feelings and reactions you have in response to what the offender is telling you.

Few of us know how to listen well. We get impatient. We get caught up in waiting for the opening in the conversation when we'll get to have our say. We've stopped listening because we're too busy formulating our response. And—this is probably the biggest pitfall to listening—we feel threatened when the apologizer's perception of events is different from our own. It's so hard not to interrupt a narrative that diverges from our own. So keep in mind that listening is not the same as agreeing. It's for all these reasons, as I have suggested elsewhere, that apologizers ask those to whom they are apologizing to take turns.

Listening, like apology, is transformational, if we let it be. Most of us—how can I put this diplomatically—think we are more wonderful than we really are. Real listening requires a willingness to not only take heed of what the person we mistreated says about us, but also to agree, on some level, with their assessment of us. Do we have the courage to embrace the fact that we are capable of doing the things for which we need to apologize instead of splitting off that part of us with excuses and rationalizations? Real listening is a willingness to let the person we mistreated challenge and transform our perspective of ourselves.

When offenders are willing to be changed by the plight of the person they mistreated, something radical happens between

the parties. In essence, offenders learn something critical about themselves as they acknowledge that this understanding is possible only because of the new relationship between the parties, created by the process of apology.

Tips for Accepting an Apology

Okay, let's say you've listened to the apology. Now what?

That's easy. Take five seconds to think about what you have just heard. Really consider whether the apology appears reasonably complete in form and sincere in delivery. An apology doesn't have to be technically perfect. We shouldn't require more perfection of others than we require of ourselves. Do you feel less resentment for the offender? Can you feel his or her compassion for you? Don't overthink it, but trust your instincts. If the apology feels right, then you look the person in the eye and say:

I accept your apology.

Then stop. Of course, that's not the end of it, but that's the way to start. These four little words—I accept your apology—indicate something profound. The words signal that you did in fact feel hurt by the other person and you understand that the person realizes he wronged you and is offering an apology. Accepting the apology does not mean you think what the other person did was okay, that you'll forget it happened, or that you forgive him. It doesn't even mean the relationship can continue. It simply indicates you acknowledge that the offender has made a gesture to repair the relationship he has strained and you respect the effort as a first step. "To accept an apology acknowledges my understanding that your desire is to rebuild the relationship," says Rabbi Nina Mandel of Congregation Beth-El in Sunbury, Pennsylvania. "The apology doesn't have to be perfect for me to accept it. It just means you are committing to further engagement in the relationship."

I accept your apology. Those four words are all you really have to say. You can add an expression of gratitude about how much you appreciate the apology or how relieved you are that the person has apologized, but those four words are really the crux of the matter. A more informal way of making the same point is "Apology accepted." Try it. The sigh of relief you hear is the apologizer finally letting go of the breath he or she has been holding in. Here are a few more tips that will make accepting an apology easier.

Listen for the Agreement. Listen with generosity. It's unlikely you will agree with every detail of the apology. What's important is to listen for what you do agree with, even if it's embedded in a bit of defensiveness or rationalization.

Don't Steal the Thunder. You may be so relieved at having the other party apologize that you want to take responsibility for your participation in the difficulty. That's fine, and you'll have your turn to apologize. It's just simple decency not to interrupt the apology you are being offered to offer one of your own.

Express Gratitude. After you accept the apology, it's good to thank the apologizer for doing something that's difficult.

> *I accept your apology. I appreciate your coming to me like this. It took courage.*

Don't Gloat. I know the most difficult words to resist saying are, "I was right and you were wrong," but it's just bad form to kick someone when he or she is contrite.

Don't Attack the Motives of the Apologizer. Don't question the apologizer's motives unless you are ready for him to question yours. Focus on what the apologizer

does. It's legitimate to question the content and form of the apology, but it's simply futile to speculate on another's motives. Even if the apology is manifestly self-serving, it is generally wise to hear it out. As I've suggested, listening differs from agreeing. When it's your turn, you can . . .

State Your Differences. There's a difference between criticizing and stating your differences. You may be able to have a productive conversation if you say, "Okay, I hear you. Here's the piece I don't agree with . . ." At this point, it may be possible to actually have a conversation that will lead to an understanding both parties can live with. But the conversation will be much different if you respond to the apology with, "Are you crazy? That's not what the issue is, and you know it." All that generates is an argument. In any case, you can state your differences immediately after the apologizer is finished, or you may ask for time to think about it.

Stop a Nonproductive Apology. On the other hand, you don't have to sit still for an apology so ill-considered that you feel revictimized. The apologizer is entitled to his or her apology, but not if it is at your expense. It's fine to put your hand up and say, "I need for you to stop. I hear that you want to apologize, but I feel diminished listening to it." Then either set up another time to meet, request that the offender put the apology in writing, or simply leave. You can briefly state why the apology is not responsive to your needs, but it serves no purpose to argue about the apology.

Announce Consequences. In accepting an apology, you are justified in expecting the offender to avoid repeating the behavior that required an apology in the first place. Depending on the situation, you are entitled

to be clear about what the consequences will be if you are revictimized. For example, if the offender has apologized for being late to work and made a commitment to being on time, you can say, "I hope you can honor your commitment. If you are late again, however, I need you to know that I cannot protect you."

Let It Go. One of my friends complained that whenever she apologizes to the man she lives with, he becomes historical. "You mean 'hysterical'?" I suggested. "No," she said. "I mean historical. He trots out everything I did wrong in the last twenty years." If you accept the apology, "letting it go" means that you agree that the subject of the apology is now off limits. That means you don't get to bring it up the next time you are angry or disappointed. You don't gossip about it. And you genuinely work to let go of any resentment that may remain. Now, there's one big caveat to all this. The offender has to be on good behavior. The offender must honor the promise he made in the apology not to do it again. If he does not honor that promise, then all bets are off and factoring in the initial offense is fair game.

Reciprocate If You Have Something to Apologize For

Every once in a while, we are true victims in the sense that we have absolutely no responsibility for what happened. If we are the victim of a random pickpocket, for example, or if a drunk driver damages our parked car, there can be little doubt that the perpetrator owns 100 percent of the responsibility. But if we're candid, we'll admit that for most of the difficulties in which we find ourselves, there is rarely one pure villain and one pure victim. In most cases, it takes two or more people to

cocreate a difficulty. It doesn't take away from the offender's apology to acknowledge your own contribution to the conflict and apologize for that.

Student Couple Exchanges Apologies

Here's an example of how reciprocal apologies can defuse conflict in relationships. A married couple, Brad and Theresa, are both graduate students working at Purdue University. Their responsibilities include teaching introductory-level classes in their respective fields. Theresa gets upset at Brad on a regular basis. Whenever someone asks him what he does for a living, he answers "I teach at Purdue." Brad's response strikes Theresa as presumptuous and false, hinting at the professorship he is pursuing but has not yet earned. At one party, overhearing Brad answer the question in his customary way, Theresa interrupted the conversation and corrected him in public. When they got home, Brad and Theresa had a big fight. The resolution to the fight was a reciprocal apology:

> Brad: *You're right. I was trying to inflate my importance. For a graduate student to say that he teaches gives a false impression. I'm sorry and I won't do it again.*
>
> Theresa: *I'm sorry, too. It's wrong of me to get so upset by something that really has nothing to do with me. I'm your wife, not your mother. I'm ashamed that I corrected you in public. I apologize. In the future, if I have something critical to say, I'll wait until we're alone.*

Visible Versus Invisible Disabilities

In many cases, an offense flows out of a misunderstanding or escalation of events in which both parties play a part. I

witnessed just such a misunderstanding at a highway rest stop bathroom. A man in a wheelchair entered the men's room and expressed frustration that the single handicapped-only stall was occupied. When, after a few minutes, a seemingly able-bodied man emerged from the stall, the man in the wheelchair lit into him for using the one handicapped stall when there were other stalls he could have used. The other man looked stricken and without a word raised his shirt. He had a colostomy bag taped to the right side of his abdomen. The man in the wheelchair turned red and said, "I apologize. I didn't know." The other man said, "I'm sorry, too."

Accept the Apology and Terminate the Relationship

There is no reason why you cannot accept an apology and also terminate the relationship. Accepting the apology signals the acknowledgment of a need to move forward, but not necessarily together. As a rabbi, Nina Mandel is in the forgiveness business, but she is clear that accepting an apology and forgiving the offender doesn't mean that trust or the relationship can be repaired. "I hear you are trying to make amends," she might say to the offender. "I accept your apology, but I am not able to go on in our relationship."

Letting go of hatred and resentment and embracing a measure of compassion for the offender does not endow the offender with the integrity that the offender lacks. By accepting the apology—even forgiving the offender—injured parties signal that they no longer resent the offender. They may even have benign feelings for their former tormentor. But they are also clear that they no longer want that person in their life because they cannot trust the offender not to hurt them again.

What If I Wasn't Offended?

Sometimes, you will be asked to consider an apology for an incident that didn't offend you. Maybe you don't even remember what the apologizer is talking about. The best response? Just smile and say, "I accept your apology." It's the cleanest way to put closure on a conversation that is obviously important to the other party. You may not have anything invested in this matter, but the other person does. He or she feels a need to apologize. Why embarrass them? The apologizer gets something off his or her chest, and there's no cost to you. Of course, in some cases, you may be dealing with a chronic apologizer, someone who apologizes inappropriately. Even so, accepting the apology and then refusing to engage any further may be the best strategy.

I'm Not Over It Yet

You are never obliged to accept an apology at the time it is offered. Maybe you're not sure about some aspect of the apology you've just been offered. Maybe you're too hurt or upset to enter into an apology conversation right now. Sometimes you just need more time to process the apology. If so, a good way to keep the doors open is to use this phrasing:

I appreciate the apology, but I'm not over it yet.

The "it" here is deliberately ambiguous, although presumably it refers to the offense that prompted the apology. This formulation works a lot better than statements that question the character of the apology or, worse, the motives of the apologizer. The recipient is absolutely entitled to ask for time to consider the apology. What's not useful is to confuse legitimate requests for time with criticism of an apology you're not ready to consider. I do not recommend critical delaying phrasings such as these:

- *That's all you have to say? Let me think about it.*

- *I can't deal with you yet. I'll get back to you.*
- *I'm not sure I can accept your apology. I need time to think about it.*
- *You have a lot more to apologize for. Come back when you get it.*
- *Not nearly good enough.*

Instead, try phrasings such as:

- *I need some time. I hope you can be patient with me while I deal with this.*
- *I appreciate your coming to see me, but it's too soon for me. I want to talk to you but I need a few days.*
- *Give me some time to settle down, and we can talk. I'll let you know when I'm ready.*
- *I appreciate your coming to see me, but I'm just not ready to discuss what you did just yet. I need a couple of days to think clearly.*
- *It's good of you to take responsibility. I'm just not over it yet. Let me call you next week and we can pick it up when I'm thinking more clearly.*

All these recommended phrasings have one factor in common. They locate the need for a cooling-off period not in the character of the apologizer or the quality of the apology, but in the recipient's need for time.

Alternatives to Rejecting an Apology

If you receive an apology that you cannot immediately accept, you have three alternatives:

- Ignore the apology.
- Ask for time to consider it.
- Ask the apologizer to try again.

The first alternative is passive-aggressive. Someone who extends an apology deserves a response. The second alternative is appropriate when you feel too much in the grip of resentment or

need more distance to properly assess the impact of the offense. The third alternative is my preference. Taking this step demonstrates remorse and forbearance and signals that you value the relationship. The following example illustrates what I mean.

Apology Deemed Insufficient when Friend Borrows Gucci Bag, Sells It

Jennie asked her friend Susan if she could borrow her expensive Gucci handbag. Jennie returned the handbag the next day. Some months later, Susan was using the handbag and a strap broke, so she took the bag to the Gucci retailer for repairs. The technician told her that the store couldn't help her because the bag was a cheap knock-off, a counterfeit replica. Susan confronted Jennie. Jennie eventually confessed that she had sold the original and substituted the knock-off. Jennie tried to apologize to her stunned friend:

> *Susan, I'm so sorry I betrayed you. It was a terrible thing I did. I needed the money and I didn't know what else to do. I didn't think you'd find out. Look, I'm terribly sorry. I'd like to return your bag, but I can't do that. I'll tell you what. I got $500 for it. I'll give you what I sold it for. I hope you can forgive me.*

Susan was stunned by this apology. She had paid over $1,000 for the Gucci handbag, and her friend was offering less than half of that. Susan realized she had only Jennie's word for what she had in fact sold it for. This is Susan's response to Jennie's apology:

> *I'm trying to accept your apology, Jennie, but I'm having a hard time. What exactly are you apologizing for? That I found out? If you needed money, you could have asked me. Instead you stole from me. It took me a long time to save for that bag. And now you have the gall to offer me $500. What you sold it for is not my problem. If you really*

valued my friendship, you would replace what you stole. Until you do, I don't see how we can have a relationship.

I think it was appropriate for Jennie to reject Susan's apology, such as it was. Notice that it was a rejection of the apology in its present form, not a termination of the friendship. Jennie recognized that Susan expressed remorse (although it wasn't specific enough) and offered restitution (although it was insufficient and insulting). Jennie left the door open for Susan to perfect the apology and prove herself a trustworthy friend.

How to Reject an Apology

What if the apology you're offered is totally self-serving and insulting? Or what if the apology is more or less reasonable, but you are just too rattled to continue the relationship? What if you are just not ready to forgive, and you don't know if you ever intend to be? In these cases, you have the option of rejecting the apology. Just be aware that rejecting an apology is a dead-serious social gesture. It is akin to spitting in someone's face. It almost always has the consequence of terminating the conversation and whatever remains of the relationship.

Because it is such a deal-breaker, think carefully before you take this step. Before rejecting the apology (and any future for the relationship), carefully consider whether what you really desire is a better apology. Of course, some apologies are so manifestly defective that they really must be rejected for the sake of your own sense of integrity. And you have the absolute right to end relationships that no longer contribute to your well-being. My only advice is to let some time pass before making such a momentous decision.

The good news is that the rejection of an apology is very rare. In fact, though I've interviewed hundreds of people for this book, only a handful could tell me a story of rejecting an apology, and each of the people told me that they later came

to regret their decision. People have, of course, rejected non-apologies, but that's another matter. Here we're talking about what to do when someone offers you a reasonable apology.

For most of us, the real issue is not the fact that the apology we are offered is so categorically unsatisfactory that we have to reject it. The real issue is that we ourselves are not ready yet—we're still too angry or hurt—to deal with the apologizer or the apology. In that case, what we need to do is delay the response to the apology. And in the case of an apology that is too hollow for you to accept, I suggest you make the rejection gently but firmly, without anger. When you refuse to accept a manipulative apology, you refuse to surrender to being manipulated or pacified, and you hold the other person more accountable. Here are a few suggestions:

- I'm sorry. I cannot accept your apology. I will not be in a relationship with someone who would treat me the way you did and then be unwilling to give me a decent apology.
- I cannot possibly accept your apology. Why, you're unrepentant. You basically say you would do the same thing again.
- If you believe that I simply misunderstood you, then I would rather not have an apology from you.
- Only if you believe you did something hurtful to me would I want an apology from you.

A Moral Act

Accepting an apology is in many ways as moral an act as extending one. Someone has come to you with hat in hand to tell you that she or he is sorry for hurting you. You now have a decision to make. Your position has more power than you may realize. How you use—or abuse—that power reveals something about your character, even as the offender's apology reveals something about theirs.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Accepting an apology means acknowledging the offender has voluntarily admitted being in the wrong; taken responsibility for the offense; expressed remorse in a direct, personal, and unambiguous manner; offered suitable restitution; and promised not to do it again.
- Accepting an apology respectfully—wholeheartedly—is the flip side of offering one.
- When I accept an apology, it means that the part in me that honors our relationship honors the part in you that honors our relationship.
- Accepting an apology indicates my willingness to work toward restoring our relationship.
- Avoid apology busters such as "You call that an apology?" or "There's nothing for you to apologize for."
- Reciprocate if you have something to apologize for as well.

CHAPTER 10

apology and forgiveness

Some people think accepting an apology is the same as forgiving the offender. This chapter argues that apology and forgiveness are distinct and should be treated as such. As I indicated in Chapter 9, accepting an apology is a commitment to a particular process. Forgiveness is an entirely different process that ultimately cannot be determined by the presence or absence of an apology. As complicated as apology is, forgiveness is arguably even more so. This book is about apology, not forgiveness, but because the two are inextricably linked, this chapter will describe how they respond to different human needs. I will also touch on the related terms *repentance* and *reconciliation*.

I have already defined apology as an acknowledgment of an offense followed by an expression of responsibility, remorse, and restitution, and a promise not to repeat the behavior. It's an *interaction* between at least two parties: the offender, who makes him- or herself vulnerable and risks rejection or retaliation, and the victim, who may be unwilling to admit being hurt, reluctant to participate in a conversation, or averse to giving up the grudge. Both parties are required to participate in the dialogue.

In contrast, forgiveness is a unilateral process. It's a process whereby the victim relinquishes grudges, forgoes fantasies of revenge, and surrenders feelings of hatred or resentment directed at the offender. In some cases, the feelings of hatred

are replaced by attitudes of compassion, generosity, and even love. Forgiveness requires a shift in both heart and mind, an emotional and cognitive leap that is entirely voluntary and independent of the offender. Here's how British philosopher Joanna North defines forgiveness:

> *When unjustly hurt by another, we forgive when we overcome the resentment toward the offender, not by denying our right to the resentment, but by trying to offer the wrongdoer compassion, benevolence, and love; and as we give these, we as forgivers realize that the offender does not necessarily have a right to such gifts.*[1]

Forgiveness calls for us to give up something to which we have a right, namely our anger and our resentment. That's why I do not believe offenders—however sincere, contrite, and well-intentioned they may be—have a right to request, much less demand, forgiveness. Forgiveness is the moral, private action of one individual that starts as an unseen decision within the human heart. Although it is undeniably easier to forgive a repentant offender who has apologized, one does not depend on the other. We have the power to forgive anyone, including unrepentant and unapologetic offenders. Indeed, it may be in our best interest to do so.

Forgiveness is vital to the victim. When victims forgive, they release themselves from life-draining resentment and pain. They are not liberating their injurer; rather, they are liberating themselves. The offender doesn't even have to be aware of the forgiveness for it to be effective.

The power of forgiveness is exclusively the victim's to harness. The power of forgiveness to free the injured party from the deadly entanglements of anger and hate is a power reserved for that person alone. To take the position that an offender must apologize before forgiveness can be offered is to cede all of the power to the offender. The victim's scope of action is then limited by what the offender does or doesn't do. This

is unworkable on every level. We have the power, in our own hands, to forgive even if there has been no repentance, no apology offered. Author Anne Lamott says forgiveness is "giving up all hope of having had a different past." The same sentiment applies equally to apology. When we apologize we end our struggle with history.

Disgraced Governor George Ryan Apologizes

It's easy to conceptualize the relationship between apology and forgiveness. It's much harder to live it. A prime example of the difficulty is the case of former Illinois Governor George Ryan, who in 2007 was sentenced to prison for a variety of offenses including stifling an investigation into a driver's-licenses-for-bribes scandal during his tenure as Illinois secretary of state. In November 1994, a part fell off a truck belonging to a driver who had secured one of those illegal licenses. The part hit the gas tank of a van that exploded, killing the six children of the Reverend Scott Willis and his wife Janet. The deaths of the Willis children came to symbolize Ryan's corruption. Ryan maintained his innocence even after he went to federal prison.

In December 2008, he issued an apology. The timing of the apology coincided with an attempt on the part of his supporters to obtain a pardon or commutation before president George W. Bush left office. This is the text of Ryan's apology:

> *I must say something that I have known in my heart has been a long time coming. And that is a truly heartfelt apology to the people of Illinois. It has been a difficult journey for me to get to this point, as I truly believed in my service to the people, but it was less than my best, and for that I am sorry.*
>
> *I want to make things right in my heart with God, with my family, and with those that I have hurt. As a former public official, a husband, a father, and a grandfather,*

I apologize. Even though I cannot undo my mistakes, I hope I can restore some faith in your hearts and minds by opening up and sharing these thoughts. And even though it took time for me to come to this place, in the end my goal is to do the right thing, no matter how tardy or flawed.

I sincerely hope that by coming forward today, my words in some way might help in the healing process of restoring the people's faith in their government and others that want to serve. In addition to damaging the public's trust and confidence in government, I realize my mistakes had other implications and tangible effects on my constituents and the citizenry. I know that Reverend and Mrs. Willis suffered such effects—an unimaginable pain and loss—from mistakes made in my administration, both by me and others on my watch. My heart has and always will go out to the Willis family. They, like all of the people of Illinois, deserved far better than I gave them.[2]

I was a citizen of Illinois during Ryan's tenure as governor. I felt personally betrayed by his dishonesty. Given his apology, I considered the question confronting every citizen of Illinois: am I ready to forgive George Ryan, and if not, why not? I will give you my response to this question in a minute, but first I'd like you to go through an exercise that might help you cement what you have learned thus far about effective apology. The exercise is to analyze Ryan's apology in the context of the five elements of effective apology and to consider whether this particular apology advances his goal to secure a measure of forgiveness and a possible commutation of his prison term. What's the weakest point in this apology and how would you fix it? Please take a moment to reread what George Ryan wrote and how it squares with the consequences of his crimes.

Everyone will have a different perspective. My own view is that what Ryan offered is just a few details short of a model

public apology, and it's for those shortcomings that the apology was most criticized. I appreciate his acknowledgment that the service he delivered was less than his best. I also appreciate that he mentioned the Reverend and Mrs. Willis. I detect no defensiveness, just resignation. Ryan seems to accept that apology means giving up the struggle with history. That said, his apology falls down on the recognition dimension by labeling as "mistakes" what should properly be called "crimes." This is a glaring mistake that I hope all my readers detected. I would have preferred Ryan to be much more specific about what offenses he was apologizing for.

Most people looked to Scott and Janet Willis for clues about what to make of this apology. That's only natural, as the Willises paid the highest cost for the consequences of Ryan's conduct. Everyone wanted to know if the Willises were willing to forgive.

"That [apology] put us in a difficult position," Janet Willis told the *Chicago Tribune*. "We were kind of caught. Do we say, 'Yes, we forgive him,' and they get what they want without any accountability? Or do we say, 'No,' and then we're treated as prideful and angry. The burden was put on us. And because Ryan was vague and unclear, we were left in a no-man's land."[3]

Because Ryan was vague and unclear. That's exactly the perception Ryan's apology needed to avoid. And because it wasn't clear, the Willises, who clearly desire to forgive Ryan, found themselves pulling back. Ryan's best shot for a commutation was an unequivocal gesture of forgiveness from the people his actions damaged the most. President Bush left office without acting on Ryan's request. No one can know if the quality of Ryan's apology could have made a difference. One thing is certain: Ryan will have plenty of solitude in which to consider the possibility.

Is it cynical to so patently link an apology with a desired outcome? Perhaps. We live in cynical times. But apology must

stand on its own merits. And now the answer to the question I put off. Am I now willing to forgive Ryan? Yes. I do so for my sake. My anger is over. I pardon him from further moral liability to me. I am willing for us to be reconciled with each other. I believe he has been punished enough. As someone who has called on Ryan to apologize (I sent him a couple of letters advising him to do so), I recognize his apology as one step toward repentance. I accept his apology at face value.

At the December 2008 news conference at which his apology was announced, a reporter asked Ryan's attorney Jim Thompson (himself a former Illinois governor) why Ryan's words should not be greeted with cynicism when Ryan had professed his innocence so many times in the past. Thompson's response cuts to the heart of the matter. "Look, you're free to read this with all the cynicism you want," he said. "If people do that, I hope they're not the same people who've been for the last year demanding an apology and then, upon receiving it, are cynical about it. That's a trap from which no one could escape."[4]

How Do I Ask for Forgiveness?

It's tempting for apologizers to request forgiveness. My advice is to avoid the temptation. Asking someone whom you have offended to forgive you is like asking for a gift after insulting them. It's simply bad timing. Moreover, doing so is presumptuous. Concerning forgiveness, it is better to let the victim offer it. Give the victim sufficient time to consider your apology; let the recipient be the judge of how much time is sufficient. He or she will probably want to see whether you're really sincere and will keep the promises you make. Your apology will be more effective if you don't require the recipient to make a decision about forgiveness that, in all fairness, you don't have the standing to request.

If you absolutely have to make a reference to forgiveness, I suggest a statement that sets up a future time when you will have earned the right to ask for the forgiveness you seek. Make it a statement instead of a direct request. Here are three apologies that directly ask for forgiveness, each with a suggestion for how the request can be made more effective:

Direct: *I ask for your forgiveness.*
Indirect: *I intend to work hard to regain your trust so that someday it may be possible for you to forgive me.*

Direct: *Will you forgive me?*
Indirect: *I don't deserve your forgiveness right now. I hope that starting right now my behavior will show you that I am sincere and that one day you will be able to forgive me.*

Direct: *For the sake of our friendship, can I have your forgiveness?*
Indirect: *My unforgivable conduct has badly damaged our friendship. Nevertheless, I hope that at some point I can demonstrate to you that you can trust me again. At that time, I hope you can forgive me.*

The Belle of Amherst Apologizes for Mocking Women

Here's how the poet Emily Dickinson finessed a request for forgiveness in an apology she sent in 1860 to Samuel Bowles, the editor of Massachusetts newspaper the *Springfield Republican*. During a rare visit to the Dickinson home in Amherst, Massachusetts, the proto-feminist Bowles championed the role of such women as Florence Nightingale in public life. Dickinson apparently scoffed at the idea. That night, appalled at her behavior as a hostess, Dickinson wrote Bowles the following:

Dear Mr. Bowles,

I am much ashamed. I misbehaved tonight. I would like to sit in the dust. I fear I am your little friend no more, but Mrs. Jim Crow.

I am sorry I smiled at women.

Indeed, I revere holy ones, like Mrs. Fry and Miss Nightingale. I will never be giddy again.

My friends are very few. I can count them opon my fingers, and besides, have fingers to spare.

I am gay to see you—because you come so scarcely, else I had been graver.

Good night. God will forgive me—Will you please to try?

Emily.[5]

What moves me about this apology is how the poet treats the issue of forgiveness. She doesn't directly ask Bowles to forgive her; she asks him to try, as if forgiveness, like grace, is easy for the Divine alone, but for the rest of us, forgiveness is a struggle.

Cathleen Webb Apologizes to Gary Dotson for False Accusation of Rape

Asking for forgiveness along with the apology threatens to make the apology more about the offender than the victim. Consider the case of Cathleen Crowell Webb, a woman who falsely accused Gary Dotson of raping her. Dotson served six years in prison before Webb recanted and Dotson was released. This is Webb's apology:

I'm so sorry for what I did to you and your family, especially Gary and his name, and how I took six years away from him, and I really want your forgiveness, especially Gary's forgiveness.

To me, Webb's asking for forgiveness weakens the apology by culminating with a plea for her redemption rather than keeping the focus on compassion for the victim. An apology should be about the victim and his or her needs. To her credit, Webb, who died May 15, 2008, wrote Forgive Me, a book about the incident published in 1985, and reportedly gave Dotson more than $17,000 in proceeds from its sale.[6]

Apology for Driving Accident Injuring 10, Killing 2

An example of an apology that appropriately addresses forgiveness flows from an incident that occurred in Madison, Indiana. On July 2, 2006, Michael Bowen drove his car into a crowd at a regatta along the Ohio River, injuring ten people, two critically. After serving a prison term, Bowen sent this apology to the community:

> *Dear People of Madison:*
>
> *I know this letter comes to you way too late to ask for forgiveness from those injured or yourselves, but with that said, I still wish to say to you and anyone else affected, that from the depths of everything I am, I apologize.*
>
> *I made a tragic mistake that caused pain to many innocent people. I was an arrogant teenager who thought he was invincible and that lifestyle caught up with me.*
>
> *I spent one year in prison but those injured will carry that for life. Like I said, I can't bring myself to ask for forgiveness, but know that there isn't a day that passes in which I don't wish I could change what I've done, just to take back some of the pain I inflicted.*
>
> *I hurt so many people physically and mentally by means of my own recklessness and for that I am truly sorry.*
> *—Michael Bowen*[7]

I think there's a lot to admire about this apology even though, as news reports suggest, many of Bowen's victims found his apology unsatisfactory. For those who found his apology productive, I think one reason is that Bowen explicitly refused to ask for forgiveness. He accepts responsibility, he demonstrates understanding of his situation ("I was an arrogant teenager"), and he exhibits remorse for the suffering he caused others rather than the suffering he experienced. To me, Bowen's apology displays empathy by emphasizing compassion for those he has injured rather than forgiveness for himself.

Forgiveness Without Apology

No one doubts that it's easier to forgive a repentant offender who offers a genuine apology, demonstrates contrition, completes acts of restitution, and has behaved correctly. It would be wonderful if such apologies accompanied all our injuries. Forgiveness wouldn't be so wrenching. Unfortunately, life doesn't always work like that.

I have conducted a number of workshops in prisons, and my experience ratifies the experience of most people who work in the criminal justice system. Few individuals convicted of a violent crime acknowledge that they have injured anyone. Indeed, it's so rare for an individual convicted of a violent criminal offense to take responsibility for the crime and apologize that when it happens the event is often newsworthy. Some offenders may believe that the alleged victims deserved whatever they got. Still other offenders may feel they were justified in acting as they did. In other situations, the offender may be infirm, dead, or otherwise unavailable to apologize. Even when apologies are forthcoming, they are rarely perfect. What is the injured party to do then? Forgiveness cannot wait for

an offender to act. If it did, the injured party's ability to move forward and heal from the offense would be utterly dependent on what the offender chooses to do. Linking the survivor's process of healing to the offender is part of the victimization. The only reliable path out of victimization is for survivors to free themselves of the resentment and animosity that mark them as victims.

Not all students of forgiveness are satisfied with this unilateral perspective. They argue that forgiving those who refuse to apologize violates their own sense of universal justice and morality because it demands nothing of the offender. They argue that forgiving an offense without an apology is tantamount to reinforcing immoral behavior. They further insist that just as the offense involves two parties, the process of forgiveness must impose obligations on both the offender and the injured party. By this logic, the victim's hostility for the offender should be forsworn only when the offender takes certain steps that render continued anger inappropriate. This includes an acknowledgment of responsibility for the wrong, a commitment to become the sort of person who does not do such things, an expression of regret to the victim, and some sort of accounting of how that wrongdoing does not express the totality of the perpetrator's character. In the absence of these steps, the victim could legitimately withhold forgiveness until the offender demonstrates being worthy of forgiveness.

Accepting an apology is more an act of reconciliation than of forgiveness. Forgiveness, we have seen, is the moral action of one individual that starts as a private act, an unseen decision within the human heart. Reconciliation is the act of two people coming together following separation. A person may forgive and not reconcile, but one never truly reconciles without some form of forgiveness taking place. That forgiveness may be scorned, but the gift retains its inherent value.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Apology and forgiveness respond to different human needs.
- Apology is an act of two people coming together. Forgiveness is a unilateral process.
- Forgiving an offender is easier when he or she has apologized, but an injured party does not require an apology in order to forgive.
- Forgiveness calls for us to give up something to which we have a right, namely our anger and our resentment. Forgiveness may be scorned, but the gift retains its inherent value.
- Accepting an apology does not necessarily require forgiving the offender.
- Asking someone whom you have offended to forgive you is like asking for a gift after insulting them.

CHAPTER 11

obstacles to wholehearted apology

Ego is usually the main obstacle to getting apology right. The ego is the organized part of our personality structure that provides, among other things, the defensive function. To the extent that apology makes us vulnerable, apology threatens the ego. Though we may want to offer a wholehearted apology, our egos frequently dial the apology back. In extreme cases, we end up doing the old bait and switch. We advertise a genuine apology but deliver something less authentic. The problem is not in the dispatch, it's in the delivery. This chapter is about recognizing how the defenses mounted by our personalities can get in the way of our efforts to apologize.

Wholehearted apology doesn't make us as vulnerable as we may fear. It's actually in our interest to approach apology with an emphasis on compassion for the wronged party instead of the protection of our own narrow interests. There's nothing wrong with acknowledging that apology doesn't come naturally or easily. We have to work at it. In other words, we must first understand how our good apology intentions get sidetracked.

Apologies can be divided into three categories. The first category is *wholehearted apology*. These are apologies that recipients find immediately satisfying. The second category is halfhearted apology. These derive from the ego's need to hold something in reserve. With a halfhearted apology, the offender

seeks to reap the benefits of apology without earning them. People see these as *almost* apologies. It's not always clear what these statements are lacking, so victims begrudgingly accept them, but the relationship ends up suffering. Non-apology is the third category. These take the form of apologies but are not apologies at all, in the sense that what they offer with one hand they take back with the other (that's why we also call them *back-handed apologies*). If we understand the many ways in which apology statements can be subverted, we can avoid backsliding when we apologize. The table plots the elements of these three categories against the five dimensions of apology.

Comparison of Wholehearted Apology, Halfhearted Apology, and Non-Apology

Apology Dimension	Wholehearted Apology	Halfhearted Apology	Non-Apology
Recognition	Specify the offense Concede the facts	Hint at the offense Argue the facts	Defend the offense Dispute the facts
Responsibility	Accept responsibility	Share responsibility	Sidestep responsibility
Remorse	Express personal remorse	Posture impersonal remorse	Withhold remorse
Restitution	"Pay the uttermost farthing"	Offer words without action	Question the motive of the apology-seeker
Repetition	Explicitly pledge to not repeat the offending conduct	Offer an incomplete pledge to not repeat the offending conduct	Commit to repeat the offending conduct

Wholehearted Apology

Wholehearted apology is the most meticulous and conscientious expression of apologetic meaning. Let's review wholehearted apology in terms of the five attributes of effective apology. Wholehearted apology:

- Includes a detailed factual record of the events related to the offense, specifying the offense in plain language without a hint of defensiveness. If there is more than one offense, the apology names each one, taking care not to combine separate offenses. The apology also identifies the moral code or principle that the offender violated. The apology reaches for agreement among the parties about what the facts are, and concedes the facts, if necessary. (Recognition)
- Accepts undiluted moral responsibility for the offense on behalf of the offender. (Responsibility)
- Categorically expresses regret for the conduct, communicating that the offender believes he or she made a mistake and that he or she wishes that the mistake could be reversed. (Remorse)
- Takes practical responsibility for the offense. The offender undertakes to provide remedies, in the form of monetary payment if appropriate, and redress in an attempt to restore victims to the condition they enjoyed before the injury. In undertaking this redress, the offender operates on the principle of generosity, even sacrifice. (Restitution)
- Signals that the offender has learned the error of his or her ways and expresses the commitment that the offender will reform and forbear from reoffending and will demonstrate this commitment by resisting temptations to reoffend. (Repetition)

Representative Geoff Davis Apologizes for Calling Barack Obama "Boy"

In April 2008, the heated competition for the Democratic presidential nomination flared even hotter when Representative Geoff Davis called Senator Barack Obama "boy" during a Northern Kentucky dinner. Davis was quoted as saying:

> *I'm going to tell you something: That boy's finger does not need to be on the button. He could not make a decision in that simulation that related to a nuclear threat to this country.*

The image of a white man—younger than his target and, as a U.S. representative, occupying a position lower in status than that of a U.S. senator—calling Obama "boy" was inflammatory. The word "boy" is considered extremely offensive by many African Americans, as it was used by Southern whites in the Jim Crow South to assert a claim of racial superiority. To Davis's credit, he recognized this history and immediately hand-delivered a wholehearted apology to Obama's office:

> *My poor choice of words is regrettable and was in no way meant to impugn you or your integrity. I offer my sincere apology to you and ask for your forgiveness. Though we may disagree on many issues, I know that we share the goal of a prosperous, secure future for our nation. My comment has detracted from the dialogue that we should all be having on legitimate policy differences and in no way reflects the personal and professional respect I have for you.*[1]

This is a perfect example of how a quick apology successfully defused what could have been a very divisive conflict. Because Davis immediately apologized in so wholehearted a manner, the incident failed to become a crisis. In the 2008 election, at a time when voters swept thirty incumbent Republicans out of Congress, Davis handily defended his seat.

Hugh Grant Apologizes on The Tonight Show

British actor Hugh Grant showed the world the advantages of wholehearted apology. In June 1995, the tousle-headed actor was arrested for engaging in oral sex with a Hollywood prostitute. In such cases, many celebrities with a brand to protect go into crisis mode. But instead of hiding behind publicists, going into seclusion, giving excuses, and blaming the media, Grant showed that fans will embrace a celebrity who offers a candid apology. With his characteristic tongue-in-cheek stylishness, Grant apologized right away. He went on every talk show possible, he apologized to his girlfriend, and the public applauded him.

He started by appearing on *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*. Leno started the interview by asking, "What were you thinking?" The words Grant chose were direct, but what really worked for him were nonverbal signals. Grant allowed himself to appear awkward and contrite and thoroughly embarrassed:

> *I think you know in life what's a good thing to do and what's a bad thing, and I did a bad thing. And there you have it.*

Later, on *Larry King Live*, Grant said:

> *I could accept some of the things that people have explained: "stress," "pressure," "loneliness"—that that was the reason. But that would be false. In the end you have to come clean and say "I did something dishonorable, shabby, and goatish."*

This disarming performance worked. The apology helped transform Grant from a marginal British character actor to a genuine international movie star. Former New York Governor Eliot Spitzer, who had his own encounter with a prostitute, could have learned something from Hugh Grant. I'll discuss Spitzer's apology in the next section.

Halfhearted Apology

What halfhearted apology gives with one hand, it takes back with another. It's like someone safely on shore who throws a drowning man twenty feet offshore a fifteen-foot rope and cannot understand why the drowning man is unsatisfied. "Why are you so upset?" the man on shore yells. "I met you more than halfway." Halfhearted apology adds insult to injury. It's actually worse than offering no apology at all, for in the guise of offering healing it redoubles the offense.

Let's look at halfhearted apology in terms of the five dimensions of effective apology. Halfhearted apology:

- Hints at the offense at the heart of the injury and argues the facts. There is no attempt to corroborate the factual record. The offender interprets the facts on the basis of self-interest and mitigating moral culpability. (Recognition)
- Attempts to share responsibility, implicating the victim with the offender, or fracture moral agency. (Responsibility)
- Shades the issue of personal regret, veering into an expression of general sympathy that obscures the offender's direct causation of the offense. (Remorse)
- Resists taking practical responsibility for the offense beyond words. The offender does not undertake to provide significant remedies, in the form of either money or other redress that requires sacrifice. (Restitution)
- Generally disregards the issue of repetition. If the apology does reference the issue, the promise is general and indefinite. (Repetition)

Many of the apologies we offer tend to come out as halfhearted apologies. Because we make common mistakes, the effect of the apology is quite different from our intention. Halfhearted apologies may be common, but the good news is

that there's usually a simple way to rescue them. Here's how you do it: just stop after the apology. That's all. Just apologize and then shut up. Almost without exception, halfhearted apologies start out fine and then are sabotaged by a wholly unnecessary follow-up. So quit while you're ahead.

How to Avoid the Telltale Signs of Halfhearted Apologies

Halfhearted apologies tend to sneak up on us, so we must be vigilant. Here are the most common categories of halfhearted apologies and how to recognize them:

The Explanation Apology

I'm so sorry I didn't phone when I said I would. I got another call.

Translation: Please understand that I consider someone else more important than you.

Better: *I'm so sorry I didn't phone when I said I would.*

Listen for an explanation, which almost always turns into an excuse and hardly ever satisfies the wounded party.

The It's-Not-What-I-Meant Apology

I'm sorry you took it that way. It wasn't what I meant.

Translation: I think it's too bad that you had difficulty understanding me correctly."

Better: *I'm sorry I wasn't more careful to be clear about what I meant.*

Listen for the phrase "it's not what I meant" or "I didn't intend it that way." Genuine apology concerns itself with the consequences of our behavior, not our intentions.

The Counterattack Apology

I'm sorry I didn't phone when I said I would. Have you been feeling insecure about your relationships lately?

Translation: Maybe you're upset about my not calling because the real cause is your own insecurity, not anything I did.

Better: *I'm sorry I didn't phone when I said I would.*

This is an attempt by the offender to deflect his or her responsibility by shifting responsibility to the victim. A genuine apology accepts 100 percent of the responsibility for the offender's participation.

The I-Want-To Apology

I want to apologize for acting like such a jerk. So, do you accept my apology?

Translation: Maybe if I say I want to apologize the victim will think that I really did.

Better: *I apologize for acting like such a jerk.*

Listen for the phrase "I want to apologize." Frequently the intention to apologize is there, but it's little more than an intention. The apology itself is missing in action.

The "Stuff Happens" Apology

I'm really sorry for what happened. It was a mess.

Translation: The whole thing was out of my control.

Better: *I'm really sorry.*

Listen for a variant of "stuff happens." Former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld used the phrase in response to criticism that the United States did not do enough to prevent widespread looting in Iraq. "Stuff happens" is an attempt to sidestep responsibility by suggesting that it isn't anyone's fault. The goal

is to obscure the fact that the offender started the chain of events that spiraled out of control.

The Devil-Made-Me-Do-It Apology

> *I'm sorry. I say stupid things when I'm drunk, but I don't mean any of it. It was the beer talking. I don't know what got into me.*
>
> Translation: It wasn't really me that said those stupid things. It was someone I barely recognize who deserves the blame.
>
> Better: *I'm sorry. Getting drunk is no excuse.*

Look for mention of an addictive substance or supernatural force. On the most superficial level it's an attempt to blame the offense on the addiction. *The booze . . . it was the booze talking*, as if the responsibility lies with the substance. On a deeper level, this attempt to evade responsibility represents nothing less than an attempt to split the offender into two parts. First there is a blameworthy part that gets to absorb all of the responsibility. Then there's a blameless part that disassociates itself from the derelict behavior. It is with this blameless part that the apologizer identifies. The goal in this fractured agency apology is to suggest that the apologizer, speaking on behalf of the "good" self, did not actually commit the harm. The new honorable self has left the old rebellious self behind to take the blame.

The Indirect Apology

> *On behalf of the CEO, I would like to apologize.*
>
> Translation: The CEO considers this matter too insignificant to worry about.
>
> Better: *The CEO will be making a statement today at 2 P.M. . . .*

The only appropriate person you can apologize on behalf of is yourself. Any apology that starts, "On behalf of the CEO . . ." is an apology that can properly be discharged by none other than the CEO. The indirect apology satisfies no one. Even if there is a very good reason why the appropriate person isn't offering the apology, you can represent that at some future point the appropriate person will apologize directly; in the meantime the offender has authorized you to express how sorry he or she is. Note: It is appropriate for individuals to apologize on behalf of the *institutions* they represent. In most cases, the apology should come personally from a senior executive.

The Blanket Apology

For anyone offended by what happened, I can only say it's unfortunate and I'm sorry it happened.

Translation: Whoever you are, whatever you're upset about, I really don't care.

Better: *I intend to apologize privately to all of the parties I offended. Until then, please know that I am very sorry for my behavior.*

Look for clues such as "anyone" and "all." When you can't tell who's doing the apologizing or identify any specific objects of contrition, you have a blanket apology.

The Apology in Advance

There are so many people to thank. I apologize in advance for anyone I fail to appreciate.

Translation: I can't be bothered to remember the people who make me look good.

Better: *There are so many people to thank. Please bear with me as I'm going to do my very best to appreciate everyone who contributed.*

The very essence of apology supposes accepting responsibility for an event that has already taken place and promising not to repeat the behavior. Apologizing in advance is just moral laziness.

Passing-the-Buck Apology

I'm sorry for the inconvenience. My secretary is normally very reliable.

Translation: Don't blame me; it was my secretary's fault.

Better: *I'm sorry for the inconvenience. Here's how I'd like to make it up to you.*

Any apology that includes a name other than your own is suspect. Appearing to apologize but blaming someone else is the lowest form of apology. It's a despicable apology that shifts responsibility to someone else, especially when it's someone lower in status. Either you accept responsibility or you don't.

New York Governor Eliot Spitzer Resigns

On March 12, 2008, New York Governor Eliot Spitzer issued a statement following allegations that he had hired a prostitute. After a short preamble, he said:

> *I am deeply sorry that I did not live up to what was expected of me. To every New Yorker, and to all those who believed in what I tried to stand for, I sincerely apologize. . . . Over the course of my public life, I have insisted, I believe correctly, that people, regardless of their position or power, take responsibility for their conduct. I can and will ask no less of myself. For this reason, I am resigning from the office of governor.*[2]

Spitzer's apology may appear wholehearted. He says he is sorry, he accepts responsibility, he offers restitution in the form of an immediate resignation. What else can we ask for? The first thing that makes this a halfhearted apology is that Spitzer misses the mark on recognition. By failing to explain what he did with an appropriate degree of specificity, the listener is left to speculate about what conduct, exactly, merits the apology. The term he earlier gives for his apology—"private failing"—will not do. For any public official, much less a governor who came to authority on a platform of ethical behavior, to hire a prostitute—in violation of the law—is a public matter of the first order. An inability to acknowledge this admittedly unsavory fact undermines the effectiveness of the apology.

Had Spitzer sought my advice, I would have suggested he articulate what he is apologizing for and why he believes what he did was wrong. Crafting a wholehearted apology would have required the addition of just a few extra lines:

> *I specifically apologize for violating a solemn oath I gave to my wife and to the public. I hired a prostitute, which is illegal in New York State, morally wrong by every value I hold dear, and destructive to the lives of everyone associated with the practice. By secretly supporting an industry I have publicly denounced and by violating the rule of law, I have betrayed the citizens of New York, as well as my marriage, my wife, and my children.*

No doubt Spitzer, a lawyer himself, and his team of advisors were reluctant to be specific lest the apology be deemed a confession if he is charged with a crime. As we will see, there is evidence that this fear is much exaggerated and that, in fact, detailed apologies often reduce the odds of criminal sanction. Despite its halfhearted character, Spitzer's apology appears to have taken the wind out of the sails of his political enemies. In November 2008 the Justice Department announced that Spitzer would not face federal charges related to this incident.

Video Apology Follows Taco Bell "Fire in the Hole" Incident

Wholehearted apologies are delivered face-to-face. Halfhearted apologies are often mandated by court order, composed—and sometimes delivered—by attorneys, and hardly ever offered directly to the victim. That's the complaint a Florida fast-food worker had about a YouTube apology posted by two teenage boys who threw a 32-ounce soft drink at her as a prank.

In July 2007, Jessica Ceponis was working at a Florida Taco Bell when two teenage boys, ages fifteen and sixteen, pulled up to the drive-through window. They ordered a 32-ounce soft drink. Ceponis filled the cup and handed the driver the drink. Then the paper cup, brimming with liquid, flew back through the window, hitting her in the jaw, and soaking her uniform with soda. She heard the boys laugh and yell, "Fire in the hole!" as they drove quickly away.

Ceponis was a victim of a "fire in the hole" assault, a prank that some young people videotape and post on websites such as YouTube. Ceponis didn't know that she was a random victim of a certain kind of practical joke; she assumed it was a personal attack. At first she got depressed. And then she got angry. After she discovered that "fire in the hole" pranks often made their way to the Internet, Ceponis took off her soaked Taco Bell cap and put on a detective's hat. In due course she found that not only had the miscreants posted their video, but one of the boys had also provided a link to his own MySpace page. Pretending to be a fan of "fire in the hole" videos, Ceponis sent the boy an email and communicated with him until she had the names and addresses of both boys. Then she picked up the phone and called the police.

Both boys were charged with assault as juveniles and were ordered to perform one hundred hours of community service, pay Taco Bell for the costs of cleaning up the mess, and post an

apology video on YouTube. This the boys did. In the apology video, the boys issued this apology in voiceover over a highly stylized reenactment of the incident:

> *On October 2, 2007, my friend and I were charged in juvenile court. We take this opportunity to apologize to the victims and take full responsibility for our irresponsible behavior.*[3]

Did the apology fit the crime? Ceponis doesn't think so. It's easy to see why. Although the boys mouth the right words, the script itself appears to have been negotiated by lawyers, not the boys themselves. Their faces were never shown. Ceponis never received a direct apology.

To be fair, the boys were prosecuted as juveniles, which meant their identities are protected by law. No apology video mandated by the court could identify them. Moreover, the lawyer for one of the boys said that they wrote personal letters of apology, which the lawyer claimed to have personally handed to the state's attorney handling the case. That the letters were never forwarded to Jessica Ceponis is entirely believable. On a segment on *The Today Show* on NBC, the lawyer, Tony Hernandez, spoke directly to the victim:

> *I would like to take this opportunity on behalf of the family and my client to apologize to Jessica; what you went through is absolutely unacceptable.*

Ceponis nodded as he spoke, but she still wanted to hear the apology, in person, directly from the boys who assaulted her. It's a limitation of our juvenile justice system that defendants who want to apologize to their victims are prevented from doing so by rigid privacy considerations.

Yes, Jesse Jackson's Apology Was Lyrical, But Was It Effective?

In 1984, Jesse Jackson, a candidate for president, referred to Jews as "Hymies" and New York City as "Hymietown." Both terms are disrespectful and offensive to Jews, especially in light of the fraught history between African Americans and Jews in America. Jackson danced around the issue, but at the Democratic Party convention in San Francisco that summer, Jackson delivered a powerful speech that included a most lyrical apology. Or was it? Can you find an apology here?

> *If, in my low moments, in word, deed, or attitude, through some error of temper, taste, or tone, I have caused anyone discomfort, created pain, or revived someone's fears, that was not my truest self. If there were occasions when my grape turned into a raisin and my joy bell lost its resonance, please forgive me. Charge it to my head and not to my heart. My head—so limited in its finitude; my heart, which is boundless in its love for the human family. I am not a perfect servant. I am a public servant doing my best against the odds. As I develop and serve, be patient: God is not finished with me yet.*[4]

It pains me to criticize such lyricism. There is no reason why apologies cannot wax poetic and still be effective. But the lyricism must not be a substitute for specificity. In this statement—at best, it's an implied apology—Jackson does not name any specific offense he might have in mind or identify any victims he offended. Two big fat conditionals start the first and second sentences. Although Jackson asks for forgiveness, nowhere does he actually say he apologizes for anything. Elegant as it is, the statement is more a progress report on Jackson's moral and spiritual development than an apology.

Non-Apology

A non-apology may have the form of an apology but has no apologetic meaning. Apology-like statements that are non-apologies come in a variety of forms. They can be tricky to recognize because they often appear in the guise of apologies. In the most common form of non-apology, the offender says that he is sorry not because of anything he did, but rather because an aggrieved person is requesting the apology, expressing a grievance, or threatening some form of retaliation. Regardless of their form, all non-apologies either deny that a mistake has been made or admit that there was but refuse to acknowledge responsibility for those mistakes.

An increasing body of research shows that well-timed apologies actually decrease the probability of litigation. Thirty-four states have enacted laws excluding expressions of sympathy after accidents as proof of liability. Most state and federal jurisdictions now recognize that apology is a public good that actually decreases the pressure on court dockets.

Let's look at non-apology in terms of the five dimensions of effective apology. Non-apology:

- Rejects the proposition that there was an offense for which the apologizer has standing. It disputes the facts and defends the actions of the offender. It has no interest in establishing agreement for a factual record. (Recognition)
- Sidesteps accepting responsibility except in the most impersonal, noncausal way. It rejects the proposition that the offender violated a moral value or principle. (Responsibility)
- Avoids expressing personal remorse. It may offer impersonal expressions of sympathy and regret. (Remorse)
- Rejects providing restitution. To demands of restitution, non-apology responds by questioning the motives of the victim. (Restitution)

- Suggests that in the same circumstances the offender will follow the same course of offensive conduct. (Repetition)

"Mistakes Were Made"

The classic construction of a non-apology is "mistakes were made." For economy of language, passivity, and evasion of responsibility, you can't beat this phrase. Politicians, in particular, have a hard time resisting this rhetorical device, whereby a speaker acknowledges that a situation was handled poorly or inappropriately but seeks to evade any direct admission or accusation of responsibility by using the passive voice. The statement frames the acknowledgment of "mistakes" in an abstract sense, with no direct reference to who actually made the mistakes. It's as if the mistakes made themselves. There is nothing new about this phrase. Here are a few examples of this device from 1876 to the present:

In a December 5, 1876 report to Congress, President Ulysses S. Grant acknowledged the scandals engulfing his administration by writing:

> *Mistakes have been made, as all can see and I admit it.*[5]

President Ronald Reagan used the phrase in the 1987 State of the Union address while discussing what came to be known as the arms-for-hostages scandal within the Iran-Contra affair. He said:

> *And certainly it was not wrong to try to secure freedom for our citizens held in barbaric captivity. But we did not achieve what we wished, and serious mistakes were made in trying to do so.*[6]

Following the deaths of seventy civilians in Afghanistan in October 2006, NATO's International Security Assistance Force commander General David Richards addressed reporters in Kabul. He was quoted as saying:

> *In the night in the fog of war, mistakes were made.*[7]

Pete Rose "I'm Just Not Built That Way"

Pete Rose, the former Cincinnati Reds baseball player and manager, is the poster boy for non-apology. Fourteen years after he was convicted of gambling on baseball games, after more than a decade of denying and stonewalling, Rose finally admitted that the charges were true. He went on to say:

> *I'm sure that I'm supposed to act all sorry or sad or guilty now that I've accepted that I've done something wrong. But you see, I'm just not built that way. So let's leave it like this: I'm sorry it happened and I'm sorry for all the people, fans, and family it hurt. Let's move on.*[8]

Even though he technically used the words "I'm sorry," nobody accepted Rose's apology as either effective or sincere. And why should they? From the first sentence to the last, Rose's statement is combative. When he finally gets around to expressing the apology, the best he can do is refer to some nebulous and passive "it" and say he's sorry for all the hurt it caused. The actions that Pete Rose took are conveniently absent.

Some weeks later, after much jeering, Rose came closer to the mark when he said this:

> *I would like to apologize to the fans for abusing their trust.*

"I would like to apologize" may sound like an apology, but it is no more an actual apology than saying "I would like to lose weight" will make you suddenly slimmer. What Rose offered is an intention to apologize, which is a good start but far from an apology itself. Pete Rose had a reasonable chance to redeem himself, but he blew it. Rose's desire to be elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame will be frustrated not so much by his gambling—that could be forgiven—as by his refusal to take responsibility and apologize.

The Limits of "I'm Sorry"

I have said that the two words "I'm sorry" form the most powerful apology phrase in the English language. That's true, but for all its power, the phrase "I'm sorry" doesn't work unless it is accompanied by all the other tokens of effective apology. This requires that we pay attention to what comes before and what follows. The phrase needs to be linked to a framework that coordinates recognizing the offense, taking responsibility, expressing remorse, offering restitution, and promising not to do it again. When "I'm sorry" loses its apologetic specificity, it is because we have unconsciously allowed it to take on one of several non-apology meanings.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The ego is usually the main obstacle to getting apology right.
- In wholehearted apology, the kind that recipients find immediately satisfying, the offender:
    - Offers a detailed factual record of the events related to the offense, specifying the offense in plain language without a hint of defensiveness
    - Accepts undiluted moral responsibility for the offense on the offender's own behalf
    - Categorically expresses regret for the conduct
    - Takes practical responsibility for the offense
    - Signals that the offender has learned the error of his or her ways and promises not to do it again
- In halfhearted apology, the offender:
    - Hints at the offense at the heart of the injury and argues the facts
    - Attempts to share responsibility
    - Shades the issue of personal regret

  - Resists taking practical responsibility for the offense beyond words
  - Disregards the issue of repetition
- In non-apology, which may take the form of an apology but has no apologetic meaning, the offender:
  - Disputes the facts and defends the offender's actions
  - Sidesteps accepting responsibility except in the most impersonal, noncausal way
  - Avoids expressing personal remorse
  - Rejects providing restitution
  - Suggests that in the same circumstances the offender will pursue the same offensive conduct

CHAPTER 12

the best apology possible: ten apology do's and don'ts

One of the key values I have tried to communicate in this book is that apologies need to go all the way. An apology is not a test you study for. You don't get credit for partial apologies. In fact, a halfhearted apology usually makes the situation even worse. Defending a less-than-wholehearted apology will get you nowhere.

There are unlimited ways to botch an apology, but the vast majority of pitfalls fall into ten common categories. If you keep these ten do's and don'ts in mind your apologies will be much more effective.

1. Don't Include Ifs or Buts

Adding the word "if" or any other conditional modifier to an apology makes it a non-apology.

I certainly apologize if I offended anyone.

If my remarks were out of line, I'm sorry.

If anyone found my remarks offensive, I certainly apologize.

The word "if" is the nastiest qualifier in the context of apology. It always reduces the effectiveness of the apology. The word "if" makes the offense conditional; it says the offense may

or may not have happened, that it depends more on the sensibilities of the victim than on the responsibility of the apologizer. This is infuriating for the victim, for whom the offense is very real.

Adding the word "but" is just as bad. The word "but" is a way for us to deflect some of the responsibility of the offense from ourselves. Guess who's the lucky beneficiary of the responsibility we are so generously willing to share?

I am very sorry, but you started it.

I apologize, but I wouldn't have said A if you hadn't said B.

I am willing to apologize to you, but you need to apologize to me first.

Here are two examples of conditional apologies. In 1995, the O. J. Simpson murder trial riveted the country. Presiding over the trial was a Japanese American judge named Lance Ito. On a radio talk show, former New York Senator Alphonse D'Amato used an exaggerated, stereotyped Japanese accent familiar to most children to mock Judge Ito. D'Amato's first apology was conditional:

If I offended anyone, I'm sorry. I was making fun of the pomposity of the judge and the manner in which he's dragging the trial out.

Not surprisingly, this effort impressed nobody. Fierce criticism continued, as much for his original comments as for his failure to apologize. The second time, the senator got it right, reading this apology from the Senate floor:

As an Italian American, I have a special responsibility to be sensitive to ethnic stereotypes. I fully recognize the insensitivity of my remarks about Judge Ito. My remarks were totally wrong and inappropriate. I know better. What I did was a poor attempt at humor. I am deeply

sorry for the pain that I have caused Judge Ito and others. I offer my sincere apologies.[1]

Senator D'Amato's new apology is in many ways a model apology. It takes personal responsibility, it specifies the moral violation, it names the offended party, and apologizes with grace. The phrase "I know better" may sound defensive, but it signals that the senator shares in the values of fair play and nondiscrimination. By adding this phrase, D'Amato reaffirmed that the values that governed the relationship in the past will continue to govern it going forward.

The second example is not so graceful. On October 17, 2003, six people died in a fire at the Cook County Administration Building. Chicago Fire Commissioner James Joyce came under attack for the following remarks he made at a news conference after the fire:

I don't think there's anything we would do differently. Would we be smarter next time? I'm sure we would be.

This was one of the deadliest fires in recent Chicago history. There was reason to suspect that best practices were not followed. Given the gravity of the situation, Joyce's comments were criticized by the families of the victims as being inappropriately defensive, nonchalant, and incoherent. It's illogical to be "smarter next time" yet not do anything differently. The pressure mounted for an apology, and Joyce responded:

If the families of those who died took my words spoken Friday to mean I wouldn't change the result of this tragic fire, I apologize.[2]

With this "apology" Joyce dug himself in even deeper by making his remarks conditional. Moreover, Joyce seemed to be apologizing for something that no one accused him of—the implication that he couldn't change the "result"—six deaths—of the Cook County Administration Building fire. When you've taken full ownership of your responsibility, when you don't trail your

apology with excuses or mitigators like so many brooms sweeping up behind an elephant—then you have truly apologized.

2. Don't Be Passive, Be Active

The passive voice is another way of avoiding responsibility. So instead of saying "I made a mistake," the apology comes out "Mistakes were made." Which apology would you rather get?

It's easy to tell if an apology is in the passive voice. Look for the verb in the apology. If the verb doesn't pop out—if it's some form of the verb *to be*—that's a good clue you're in the passive voice. That's because hiding the action (or the moral agency) is what the passive voice is designed to do. Here are some passive apologies and how to make them active:

Passive: *I'm sorry you were hit.*
Active: *I'm sorry I hit you.*

Passive: *I am sorry that this misunderstanding happened at all, and I regret its escalation.*
Active: *I am sorry that I misunderstood. I apologize for escalating the event.*

Passive: *There should not have been any physical contact in this incident.*
Active: *I should not have hit you. I regret that I overreacted. I apologize.*

Here's an example of a dubious passive-voice apology and how it can be improved. Katie Hnida was the first woman to score in a NCAA Division I-A football game. In February 2004, Hnida accused teammates at the University of Colorado of molesting and raping her five years earlier. Colorado football coach Gary Barnett denied her accusations, adding:

> *She was awful! Katie was a girl. And not only was she a girl, she was terrible, OK? And there's no other way to say it.*

It takes work to pack so much into offense into so few words. He's reflexively defensive, sexist, blaming the victim, condescending, and entirely clueless about how sexist his comments were. There were immediate calls for Barnett to apologize. He replied with passive platitudes:

> *I sincerely regret that yesterday a portion of my remarks were either misinterpreted or aired out of context and I apologize for answering that question in a matter where I must have come across as insensitive.*[3]

Barnett was suspended for his comments and unwillingness to apologize. He left his coaching position at Colorado the next year. I believe an apology could have saved his job. For a more effective and entirely active-voice apology, I turn to an alternative apology crafted by *Chicago Tribune* columnist Eric Zorn.

> *I spoke out of frustration at the accumulation of these recent allegations of sexual misconduct related to our football program, and I recognize now that Ms. Hnida's level of talent was both a wholly inappropriate thing for me to comment on under the circumstances and completely irrelevant to whether her very serious charges are true or not. I apologize to her and to her family for pain my remarks caused them.*[4]

3. Don't Joke

Apology is not a laughing matter. Apology is serious business, and the more you treat it as such, the more effective you will be. Yes, we all know that humor can help defuse a tense situation, but it's better to let the apology itself do the defusing.

Dreamhost Apology Criticized for Not Being Serious

Dreamhost, a Web hosting company, learned the hard way that although there is a time and place for humor, apology is prob-

ably not one of them. In December 2007, the company made a mistake in its year-end billing. To fix the problem, company cofounder Josh Jones repeated the billing. That's a standard fix, but in this case, Jones made a second error. Instead of entering December 2007, he entered December 2008. As a result, the credit cards of thousands of Dreamhost customers were charged for services they hadn't yet received.

To his credit, Jones understood the mistake and quickly took steps to make it right. He immediately issued a full apology. The problem was his attitude. Like many Internet companies, Dreamhost has a corporate culture that rewards informality, spontaneity, and tell-it-like-it-is good humor. Jones' message to his customers was in that tradition, written in a breezy style, happily assigning blame to his fingers, which he described as "excessively fat." For good measure, he added a still from the movie *The Office*, a cult film about shenanigans at a dysfunctional high-tech company. On some level, he even understood that the apology was too goofy, because he apologized for it in the apology he emailed each customer:

> *. . . of course, I'm very very sorry, we're very very sorry, and I'm sure you're very very sorry this happened. I really am. I understand the sort of problems that an unexpected large charge to your credit card (or worse yet, your debit card) can cause. If the tone of this blog post seemed a little light, I apologize I don't mean to offend and I realize how serious an issue this is. I've been up since 3:50 A.M. trying to undo the damage and maybe I'm a little shell-shocked.*

The apology had all the necessary elements. It was timely. Many customers received the apology and credit before they even saw their credit card bills. Jones explained what the problem was, how the company fixed it, and how Dreamhost would make sure it never happened again. Jones took personal

responsibility. He offered restitution. The company agreed to reimburse customers for any bank or credit card fees triggered by its mistake. If a customer lost confidence in Dreamhost because of this issue, the company would release it from its contract. In terms of restitution, the apology went beyond the call of duty.

So why were hundreds of customers so angry? Dreamhost's billing foul-up didn't attract much outrage by itself. The angry comments were reserved for the tone of the apology.

In retrospect, it's clear where Dreamhost went wrong. By appearing to take the problem and the apology less than seriously, the company signaled that it was cavalier about its customers' money. Customers are rightly worried when their credit card accounts are raided. What they want is reassurance, not levity. To many customers, Dreamhost's apology was disrespectful.

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4. Don't Assume

One of the worst phrases to inject into an apology is "I know just how you feel . . ." No one wants to accept an apology from someone who arrogantly thinks he or she knows how the victim feels. The only conclusion the victim can draw is that the offender takes the victim for granted. It is much better to go into the dialogue with an open, eager-to-learn attitude. A palm-up gesture helps reinforce the point. Instead of pretending to know, plead ignorance; instead of assuming, ask. Here are a few common apology traps about making assumptions and how to rephrase them:

I know exactly how you feel.
Better: *I can't imagine how you are feeling.*

If I were in your shoes, I'd be devastated.
Better: *I wonder how I'd feel if I were in your shoes. I just don't know. How do you feel?*

I've been in exactly your situation.
Better: *I want to understand how you are experiencing this difficult situation.*

5. Don't Ask, "What Can I Do to Make It Right?"

Your apology will usually be much more effective if it is accompanied by a concrete offer of restitution. Don't ask the victim to tell you what you can do to make it right. The victim needs to hear what you consider to be an appropriate offer. Negotiation 101 teaches us never to make the first offer. But apology is not a negotiation. You and the victim don't get to come at this from two opposing sides and compromise somewhere in the middle. You want to start on the same side. You have decided that you have wronged someone and have decided to make it right. Do what is fair without asking. No, do even better than fair. Be generous.

6. Take Turns

To ensure this will happen when offering a significant apology, I recommend that the apologizer start with something like this:

I need to apologize to you. This is not easy for me, so can I ask that you hear me out and then I'll listen to what you have to say?

What you want to communicate by this is that (1) you have something to say, (2) it's not easy for you to say it, (3) it will make the process easier for you if the other party hears you out, and (4) you will return the favor. In any kind of conversation, many of us stop listening because we are busy formulating our response. Having this agreement increases the chances that the recipient will actually listen to you.

7. Begin the Apology with "I"

The best way to begin an apology is with the word *I*. Why? Because an apology is about an individual taking personal responsibility. Starting an apology with the word *you* tends to make people defensive, especially if they are nervous. So instead of "You have caused pain and I have caused pain. Let's end the fight. I'm here to apologize," try "I apologize. I have caused you pain. I value our relationship. I would like to end our fight and be friends again."

8. Use the Recipient's Name

No sound is sweeter to us than the sound of our own names. Using the person's name reinforces the entire mission of the apology, which is to repair the relationship.

9. Don't Ramble

Rambling is risky. Say you're sorry, stop, and listen. Repeat as often as necessary. We often do a good job apologizing, but then we keep talking. When we do, we run the risk of diluting our responsibility with excuses.

10. Don't Argue

It may well be that the person you apologize to will not see events your way. That's okay. Just listen. An apology is not the place for argument or for attempting to change someone's point of view.

Keeping these ten steps in mind will keep your apologies focused on the goal of making things right so the recipient of the apology can envision the beginnings of forgiveness and continue the relationship on a new, perhaps stronger, footing.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Ten Apology Do's and Don'ts

- No ifs or buts
- Use the active voice
- Don't joke
- Don't assume
- Don't ask, "What can I do to make it right?"
- Take turns
- Begin the apology with "*I*"
- Use the person's name
- Don't ramble
- Don't argue

CHAPTER 13

talking about apology: frequently asked questions

When I give talks about effective apology, I always give participants an opportunity to ask questions. People are endlessly curious about apology. Once people get comfortable with the mechanics of effective apology, the conversation quickly turns to its more philosophical aspects. This chapter collects the most frequent of these questions in one place. The answers I offer are intended to spark even more questions. At the end of the chapter, I provide a list of additional questions that discussion or book groups may find helpful in developing a deeper understanding of apology.

Q: Can I apologize on behalf of somebody else?

A: *Normally, you should apologize only for your own behavior. That's what gives someone standing to apologize. However, if you are in some way responsible for the offender's behavior—if you are his or her supervisor, for example—it may be appropriate to apologize, even if the offender also does so or does not. Still, be clear that you can apologize only for what you are responsible for. Thus you can apologize for not training the employee correctly or failing to exercise reasonable diligence.*

Q: Should the senior executive always be the individual to offer an apology on behalf of an institution?

A: *The top leader (the CEO, for example) is not necessarily the best individual to extend the initial apology. Sometimes the institution is better served if a responsible individual closer to the offense acknowledges the problem and expresses regret. Another benefit is that if the apology by someone at a lower level is somehow insufficient, the CEO can take another approach. If the CEO offers the apology and it is rejected, there is no one with more authority that the organization can call on.*

Q: Is it appropriate to apologize in advance for a situation I'm afraid I'll mishandle?

A: *No. Put your effort into avoiding mishandling the matter. It's better to do your best, and if you fail, let your apology be for the mistake you made inadvertently. Apologizing in advance ("I have so many people to thank, let me apologize in advance if I forgot to mention your name . . .") is just a lazy way of avoiding responsibility. Worse, it can appear to give us a pass to do bad acts ("If I hurt anyone's feelings, I will just say I'm sorry").*

Q: I regret offending someone many years ago. I haven't seen that person since, and I don't expect to, but it still bothers me that I didn't apologize. Should I apologize now, and if so, how should I do it?

A: *If you are still carrying this incident around, it's time to put it down. A short apology in the form of a note is the best way to go. Here's one approach:* Dear _____, I am writing to apologize for the harsh way I talked to you when we last met. It's been on my mind ever since. I want you to know that I immediately regretted my conduct and I'm sorry. *Now, put the note away for a few days. Show it to a few friends. Really think about whether it should be mailed. Sometimes just writing it*

out is enough. If you conclude that compassion for the victim more than redemption for yourself guides your apology, then by all means mail it.

Q: I'd like to apologize for a very serious mistake I made many years ago. Should I send a delayed apology?

A: *In resolving this issue, ask yourself, "Whose interests am I serving?" Be honest. A key clue is if you desire to have a renewed relationship with the other party. If you cannot answer this question affirmatively, please think carefully about offering a delayed apology. If the apology is designed to assuage your conscience but offers nothing meaningful for the victim, do not involve the other party. Take your apology to a priest, therapist, or friend instead. If you're still not sure, ask this question: is it possible that your apology will revictimize the offended party? Delayed apologies may help heal old wounds. Just be sure that you do not introduce new wounds into the relationship. Also be thoughtful about the possible consequences your apology may expose you to (see chapter 8 for the cautionary tale of William Beebe).*

Q: Should an apology distinguish between an offense of commission and an offense of omission?

A: *This is another way of asking whether doing something wrong is more or less offensive than not doing something right. Is withholding the truth as bad as lying? Is letting someone die as bad as killing? Which is worse: failing to give a coin to a beggar or stealing his cup? In most cases, we have good reasons for preserving the distinction between sins of omission and commission. Omissions may result from ignorance, whereas commissions usually do not; commissions usually involve more malicious motives and intentions than the corresponding omissions; and commissions usually involve more effort, itself a sign of*

stronger intentions. For all these reasons, the law usually treats omissions and commissions differently. Yet effective apologies generally should not discriminate between offenses resulting from acts of commission or omission. It's almost impossible to make such distinctions without appearing defensive or shifting responsibility.

Q: Can you give a few examples of apologies for offenses of omission?

A: *Here are two. In 2005, the U.S. Senate formally apologized for failing to pass legislation that would have made lynching a federal crime. Such a record of inaction, claimed one of the resolution's sponsors, constituted a "stain on the United States Senate."*

In 2004, on the fortieth anniversary of the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, a Kentucky newspaper, the Lexington Herald-Leader*, featured a prominent apology for its failures in covering the 1960s civil rights movement. The notice accompanied a series of stories and decades-old black-and-white photographs. The newspaper's apology, in its entirety, was: "It has come to the editor's attention that the* Herald-Leader *neglected to cover the civil rights movement. We regret the omission."*

Q: Is accepting an offender's apology the same thing as forgiving the offender?

A: *No; forgiveness is often related to apology, but it is something else entirely. Forgiving someone who has hurt you may be easier when the offender apologizes, but an apology is not required in order to forgive.*

Q: When I apologize, should I ask for forgiveness?

A: *In general, no. Not in the first apology, anyway. Before you can legitimately ask for forgiveness, you must first demonstrate repentance by concrete actions over a*

period of time. What you can *do is state that you intend by your behavior to start a process that in the long term will allow you to rebuild trust and earn forgiveness.*

Q: How can I know if the apologizer is sincere?

A: *You can't. Only time will tell. Ideally, all apologies should flow out of sincerity, but worrying about something we have no control over is useless. One may never be certain of intent; one can only go on the wording of the apology and future conduct.. The apologizer's words combined with nonverbal clues will give you some evidence. Look to actions. Only an apology acts like an apology. Trust your instincts.*

Q: Does every apology require payment of money?

A: *Every apology requires some form of restitution, a concrete signal of remorse in which the offender gives up something of value. You can't talk your way out of a situation you acted your way into. The payment of money is just one of the forms it takes; as we saw in chapter 6, there are many others. Reparations are often the dominating feature of apologies. They signal that the offender wants to make amends, repair the relationship, undo the damage, allow the victim to "save face," or otherwise give satisfaction. The payment of reparations acknowledges responsibility and remorse. Reparations often take the form of money or replacement of a damaged object, but they can also be intangible. Apologies often fail if the offer of reparations is perceived to be insufficient. At a minimum, the offender must abandon any unearned benefits or privileges resulting from the offense. If the offender stole something, the property or its value must be returned to the rightful owner. If the offender damaged a car, the car must be restored or replaced at the offender's expense.*

Q: I want to make amends. Why shouldn't I ask the person I offended what I can do to make it right?

A: *There are three reasons it's not a good idea for offenders to ask victims to specify the restitution. First, many victims honestly don't know what they want. Second, what if the victim asks for something you are not prepared to offer? Now you have the makings of disappointment and an argument. Third, the onus is on the offender to determine the appropriate restitution. The victim needs to know what you consider to be appropriate restitution in order to properly evaluate your apology. If your offer of restitution is rejected, then you can ask the victim what he or she considers appropriate restitution.*

Q: Are negotiated apologies effective?

A: *They can be. A form of public apology, a negotiated apology is a carefully worded statement offered by the offender to the victim(s) intended not only to express apology but to publicly legitimize the grievances of the victim(s). Negotiated apologies often address a number of key points, including the following:*

- *Who should apologize to whom*
- *How much responsibility the offender accepts for the injury*
- *The specificity with which the offender acknowledges the offense*
- *Whether mitigating circumstances are named*
- *How much shame, humiliation, or regret, the offender must communicate*
- *The amount of reparations or restitution the offender will bear*
- *The timing of the apology*
- *The extent to which the parties agree to reconcile*

Q: Aren't doctors terrified of admitting medical errors and apologizing, because if they did, lawyers would use their apology against them in court?

A: *The fear is there, but it's generally unwarranted. Thirty-four states currently have laws preventing attorneys from using doctors' statements of regret against the defendants. The fear is baseless for another important reason: the last thing a plaintiff's lawyer wants to introduce in court is evidence of a contrite physician who issued an apology. Lawyers prefer to show juries doctors who clam up, appear cold and unfeeling, and deny any responsibility. Lawyers know that unrepentant doctors are red meat to many juries. In the eyes of defense lawyers, contrite hospitals and doctors who accept responsibility, express sympathy, and offer restitution simply make for lousy meal tickets. Lawyers will frequently not even take on medical error cases for which doctors have apologized, because they know that juries view such defendants with sympathy and thus their awards, if any, are lower.*

Q: Can you apologize to yourself?

A: *Sure, but what does it mean? Apologizing to yourself is like tickling yourself. Try it. You can make all the tickling motions you want, but where's the payoff? The response is missing. When it comes to apologizing to yourself, the same thing happens. You can make the motions, but there's something missing. The reason is the same for both tickling and apology: the element of surprise is missing. It's the element of uncertainty—of not knowing whether our apology will be accepted or rejected—that gives the apology its power. You can say "I'm sorry" to yourself, but it's hard to know what apologetic meaning you actually communicate. In most*

cases, when you apologize to yourself, what you are actually doing is forgiving *yourself or making a resolution to behave better.*

Q: Can I apologize to my dog (cat, parrot, pot-bellied pig)?

A: *You can signal sadness, contrition, or regret. You can offer restitution in the form of a treat. You can promise your pet you'll do better. But apology requires a moral partner with the liberty to accept (and refuse to accept) the offering. Do animal companions who depend on us for their every need have the autonomy to refuse our apology? If by apology we mean an intentional statement that autonomous parties can embrace and reject by choice, it's hard to see how humans can meaningfully apologize to pets. You can certainly promise or resolve not to do whatever you regret doing.*

Q: What are some questions that book clubs and other groups interested in a dialogue on apology can use as a starting point for conversations?

A: *I invite readers to recall incidents in their own lives or from stories they have heard and craft their own answers. These questions serve as a launching pad for further inquiry about apology. Any of the preceding FAQs may be used to invite further inquiry, as well.*

- What is your earliest memory of apology?
- When was the last time you apologized?
- How can you tell if an apology is sincere?
- What does it mean to accept an apology?
- When you accept an apology, are you condoning the offense?
- Must you accept the apology if you're not absolutely sure the offender is sorry?
- Is apology a gift? If so, how?

- Does accepting an apology mean forgetting the offense occurred?
- When, if ever, should an apology be rejected?
- Have you ever rejected an apology?
- There is this in apology—*a bird can get home faster on a broken wing.* What do you think this means?
- Are there offenses so profound that an apology is powerless?
- Is it inconsistent to tell a person you accept his or her apology but then say you are terminating the relationship?
- Does a victim always share some responsibility for the offense?
- Are there truly innocent victims?
- Is it ever too late to apologize for something one did in the past?
- If someone apologizes to us, are we required to let the person make amends?
- Can you meaningfully apologize in advance?
- Is it necessary to accept an apology if you forgive the offender?
- What's the relationship between accepting an apology and forgiveness?
- Is it meaningful for someone to apologize for an offense for which the person has no responsibility?
- Is it meaningful to apologize to yourself?
- Can you meaningfully apologize to a pet?
- What are the particular meanings of apology in other cultures and languages?
- What's the difference between *empathy* and *sympathy*?
- What are some books, stories, poems, songs, movies that explore the meanings of apology?

The Author's Answer to the Poetry Festival Question

Q: In chapter 2 you said you regretted not apologizing to Tom. Did you ever attempt to send him a belated apology?

A: *I thought about it, but I decided not to. What would I have said? "Dear Tom, I've felt bad about my behavior at the poetry festival. I'm writing to apologize. I saw something and failed to speak up. My silence, I now realize, represented a critical failure of human decency. I apologize. I wish you only the best. Oh, and by the way, I'm publishing this incident in my newest book."*

You see my problem? I'm not capable of writing a note of apology and then announcing that I'm publishing the story. I do not consider an apology ethical if I do not mention my book. Nor am I prepared to ask Tom's permission to publish an incident that happened to me. I have not used his real name, and I've disguised other details. I wish I felt more confident that I did the right thing. At the end, all I can do is my best, leaving open the possibility that I might make a mistake. It's not apologizing in advance to remember that if my best is not sufficient, I can take responsibility for my mistake and apologize.

CHAPTER 14

what can I do now? five apology practices

Throughout this book I have characterized apology as a practice, so it is fitting to suggest a number of ways in which you can actually practice apology—and improve your apology skill and effectiveness. The more you practice apology, the easier it gets and the more effective your apologies and relationships become. My goal here is to provide you with some practical tools that will enable you to make relaxed and confident apology a daily part of your life (as needed). There is more to practicing apology than being vigilant for mistakes and then saying the right words, although that's a good start. In summary, practicing apology requires:

- Challenging ingrained attitudes about power and accountability
- Dealing with the emotions of apology
- Cultivating a disposition favorable to personal transparency

Most of all, practicing apology demands a commitment to the truth and the steep climb to self-awareness that the truth dictates.

In Chapter 1, I identified a number of obstacles to apology. The obstacles are framed in a variety of ways: "My followers need me to be strong"; "The situation will be worse if

people are rattled when they see I'm fallible"; "They will never let me live it down"; "It's too risky to apologize." All of these objections assume that an apology is a bargaining chip that can be exchanged for some concession. The unchallenged assumption is that we live in a punitive world. One of the main goals of practicing apology is to challenge this assumption—the fear that our apologies will be turned against us. That can happen, but it's also possible that an apology will help to restore our strained relationships, build integrity, and make us more—not less—secure.

If you take the courageous step of acknowledging you made a mistake and apologizing, you not only transform the relationship with the person you hurt, but you also transform the relationship with yourself. Humility is the first dividend. Self-respect is the second. When you do the right thing, you will feel better about yourself, and others will feel better about you as well. Apology drains away self-recrimination and resentment, freeing up the parties to make decisions in the service of cooperation and growth. Practicing apology makes genuine healing possible.

Five Apology Tools and Techniques

Society continues to send out deeply confused messages about apology. Because the obstacles to apology are durable and their influence pervasive, a disciplined set of practices is necessary to incorporate effective apology into your life. Here are five tools and techniques you can use to integrate a new attitude toward apology in day-to-day activity, at work and at home, and with coworkers, family, and friends. By taking on these five practices, you can enlarge the scope of apology in your life and get in touch with opportunities to engage with apology in new ways. I present these five practices in no particular order; they build on and reinforce each other.

1. Keep an Apology Journal

One of the best ways to encourage any activity is to pay attention to it on a daily basis. I suggest you keep an apology journal in which you catalog your daily and past interactions with apology. The goal is to be alert to the interactions that create opportunities for apology, whether you actually act on the opportunities or not. So if someone bumps into you and apologizes (or fails to), make a note of what happened and how you felt about what transpired. If you were late for a meeting, what did you do about it? At the restaurant for lunch, what did the server say about mixing up your order? What did you say in response? Did you have cause to apologize to your spouse? Your kids? They to you? You'll find that if you're alive to opportunities for apologies, you'll find them everywhere.

The journal doesn't have to take a lot of time. The main point of journaling is the decision to attend to a subject on a predictable basis. There is no right or wrong way to do it. You don't need an expensive journal book or a fancy pen. Lots of people type their journals in their notebook computers or PDAs. I suggest you not worry about spelling or grammar. You can even dictate your entries. You can journal, as I do, at the end of the day, or do it in the morning or at lunch. It helps some people to develop a daily routine. The important point is to establish a daily habit of paying attention to apology-inspiring events. The act of writing has a magical way of organizing good intentions into concrete action. It'll keep you honest. Journaling, in essence, helps you create meaning out of the apologies you offer and receive.

It may be discouraging at first. In the beginning it may be hard to find anything apology-related to write about. If so, just write about that: how hard it is to find anything to write about. Just write, "No apologies today." Apology will come into sharper focus the more you write. Experience with journaling is pretty

clear: becoming aware of the role of apology in one's life actually leads to more apology. As your personal focus sharpens, you will be more likely to notice apology where it is manifest and where it is yet to be revealed.

You may find that you're getting angry because people are insufficiently apologizing to you. If so, journal about the kinds of apologies you want. Make up the fantasy apologies that would allow your resentment to drain away. Or you may feel bad about yourself because you remember how you mistreated someone or discover that you really are as stingy with apologies as your partner asserts. In either case, write out the apologies that could be delivered by a more generous version of you.

Keeping an apology journal may feel dangerous. I know one person who keeps his apology journal under lock and key. He is terrified that someone will read it and discover all the terrible things he's done. Secrecy is the price he pays when he refuses to apologize. He lives in dread of discovery, and as he hides from others, he hides from himself. I hope that eventually he will be ready to let the secrecy go. When he is ready to make amends, he will find that, apology by apology, a heavy burden will be lifted from his shoulders. He will discover that apology frees him from the burdens of secrecy and fear of discovery. He will be ready to right his wrongs, restore his relationships, and reconcile with himself. He will realize that the lock and key were never really necessary in the first place.

Entries in an apology journal can take a variety of narrative forms, from journalistic to impressionistic to poetic. Do whatever works for you. For myself, I've found that keeping an apology journal has allowed me to be less self-righteous and consider other points of view. To illustrate, here's an excerpt from my apology journal. Note that I write in the present tense even about things that happen in the past. Just a couple of words of explanation: Anna Beth is my wife. I refer to her as AB. The material in brackets does not appear in the journal:

AB and I are to represent [synagogue] Beth-El at an interfaith service for GLBT [Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender] Awareness Month. We are assigned three readings, including [the Israeli poem] "Everyone Has a Name." I hate the way the poem ends: "Everyone has a name given to him by the sea and given to him by his death." I think the poem would go better if it ended on a note of hope and pride instead of a reminder of death. So I rewrite the last stanza. It's pretty good. I'm pleased with the image of tolerance and pride.

I assume that AB would be okay with my editing. Wrong. She absolutely refuses to have anything to do with it. Fine, I'll read it myself. No way. Wait, it doesn't have anything to do with you. She's adamant. It's wrong and she won't allow me to do it. I give her my reasons but she won't budge. I fume for a while and then listen to AB say three things. First, my position is disrespectful to the organizers. When I organize and assign readings, don't I expect them to be read as written? Second, my position is disrespectful to the author of the poem. How would I feel if someone "improved" something I wrote? Third, we still live in a world where GLBT people are sometimes killed when they come out of the closet ("say their names"). She convinces me, and I'm ashamed. I apologize for my arrogance. We read the poem together, as written, to an appreciative congregation.

2. Before Apologizing, Stop to Ask Yourself Three Questions

Every time you have an opportunity to apologize, ask yourself three questions:

- What is the transformation in me that is required right now?

- What courage is required of me right now?
- What is the price I am willing to pay?

I am indebted to Peter Block, who formulated these questions in his book *The Answer to How Is Yes*.[1] He proposed these questions in an entirely different context. Block was responding to the perennial cry of managers: "How do we get those people to change?" Block's answer is that focusing on "those people" is doomed to failure. Any attempt at coercion will backfire; demands will be met by resistance. Like it or not, there is really only one way to create change: through the example we set by our own transformation.

What is the transformation in me that is required right now? We live in a culture that sets us up to pay attention to what other people are doing. We are encouraged to think the solutions are out there and that other people must have the power. This question invites you to accept that, as Gandhi said, you must be the change you want to see in the world. The example of your own transformation is the only source of real power and change. The question carries within it the hopeful message that real change may be within reach. Perhaps you will affirm that you have had a role in creating the situation in which you find yourself. It's seductive to occupy the victim role, to define your way out of the need to be accountable. It's challenging to face your own culpability and to accept responsibility and all it entails.

What courage is required of me right now? Perhaps you are not as courageous, thoughtful, or smart as your resumé suggests you are. Just remember that the question has nothing to do with the courageousness, thoughtfulness, or intelligence that you posture to the world. It has everything to do with how courageously you can take a good look at yourself and accept what you see. Only then do you have an opportunity to make changes in yourself

What is the price am I willing to pay? It's tempting to consider only the costs that apologizing opens you up to. Those

costs may involve money, property, vanity, loss of influence, even jail. But there are the costs of not apologizing to consider as well. Those costs include guilt, shame, fear of being exposed, loss of self-respect, anxiety, strained relationships, and health issues. I encourage you to be generous. That means a humble and complete acknowledgment of your responsibility for the problem. It also means making no effort to justify, explain, defend, or blame in any way. Now turn your pockets inside out and do whatever you can to make amends. That means you do not do just the minimum required to restore the victim, but you go beyond the minimum to demonstrate sacrifice.

3. Reverse the Nouns

Another way to expand a spirit of apology is to increase your capacity to show empathy. To show empathy, as we have seen, is to emotionally put yourself in the place of another. One dramatic way to model that ability is to reverse the nouns; in other words, to substitute the other person's name with your own to see how doing so informs one's perspective. For example, one way we can consider how citizens of Iraq might experience the United States' involvement in their country is by reversing the nouns and imagining Iraqi forces occupying the United States. Or let's take an example that can occur in any workplace. Let's say that Susan is upset at Robert because Robert calls her "Sue" at office meetings despite her request that she be addressed as "Susan." Robert is upset that Susan has corrected him in public on this point. If Robert were to reverse the nouns, he would ask himself, *How would I feel if a coworker ignored my request to be addressed as "Robert" and insisted on calling me "Bob"? I might feel it was disrespectful and condescending. If I were a woman, I might even feel the conduct was meant to disempower me.* For her part, Susan could also take advantage of the reverse-the-noun exercise: *How would I feel if a coworker corrected how I said his name in public? I might become defensive and even*

choose to persist in my behavior so as not to appear like I could be pushed around. Would I be more cooperative if I were approached in private?

The ability to empathize is directly dependent on your ability to feel your own emotions and identify them. From that foundation, the reverse-the-nouns exercise is a good way to begin to explore how, from the perspective of the reversed noun, your cherished perspective now appears questionable, whereas the perspective you had dismissed now begins to look a whole lot more valid.

4. Make an Apology List

Most of us have a list of people we have mistreated and need to apologize to. It's not written down anywhere, but if we are totally honest, we will admit that we carry that list around with us wherever we go. The people whose names are on that list may be alive or they may be dead. Any unfinished business claims a slice of our humanity and keeps us from practicing apology and doing the important work to shorten the list. One good way to encourage apology is to make a list. That's the first step in a process that will allow us to lighten our load.

An apology list is a chronicle of all the people you have mistreated, betrayed, offended, cheated, let down, or otherwise wronged, especially those to whom you have not made amends. With the list of names, include a short description of exactly what you did and why it was wrong. It's not easy to compile such a list. We don't like to be confronted with evidence that contradicts our generally positive opinion of ourselves. But to create a platform that encourages a spirit of apology, you must be candid in preparing the list. Alcoholics Anonymous ("we made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves") and most other twelve-step programs require a similar step.

Most people find the task overwhelming at first. Here are a few suggestions for making the process manageable. Start with

the most recent incidents and work backward. Focus on the people with whom you have significant relationships: family, friends, colleagues, and so on. Pay special attention to those relationships in which you had relatively more power than the victims (such as employees, students, mentors, children) as well as relationships in which the reverse was true (bosses, teachers, parents). Keep the list matter-of-fact. Avoid judgments and rationalizations. Above all, don't blame someone else for what you did. What the other person may or may not have done to you is not the issue here. It doesn't matter if the other person started it. Only what you did counts. Use the most direct language possible in naming what you did. If you lied, say so. Don't call it "withholding the truth." Don't minimize your wrongs, but by the same token, don't make them bigger than they are. The apology list is your opportunity to take responsibility for what you did.

For some people, such a list comes easily; they find it liberating. Others have a hard time thinking of anyone they wronged; they may be unsure if what they did was actually wrong. If that describes you, here's a simple preparatory step to making the apology list. Make a list of all the people who have mistreated you. Include a short, nonjudgmental description of exactly what they did. An item that reads, "Joe Miller—what a creep!" is not helpful. An item that reads, "Joe Miller—took credit for the report I wrote" is. So make a list of all the ways you've been mistreated by others. Now go over the list item by item and consider whether you've ever treated another person in a similar way. Have you ever taken credit for someone else's work? Have you ever bullied anyone? These are the clues for your own apology list.

When you have the apology list of people whom you have mistreated, you can begin the work of apologizing to them one at a time. You get to choose who will receive apologies. It may not be possible or desirable to apologize to everyone you've hurt. That's OK. Healing yourself starts with facing what you

did in terms of the people you have damaged. Apology has the power to restore your peace of mind, lay down the burden of guilt, repair estranged relationships, and promote your health, but first you must acknowledge the harm you caused others, and you must say you're sorry. There are no shortcuts to getting peace of mind except doing the work, one relationship at a time.

5. Invite the Grievance

It's good to apologize when an apology is requested. More virtuous still is the unsolicited apology that you deliver because you recognize that you messed up. Give yourself extra points if it's likely that the other person might not have found out about what you're apologizing for. But for my money, the noblest apology of all is the apology that flows from the grievance you invite. Not all grievances are expressed. For various reasons, people are sometimes unwilling to acknowledge how offended they are. But none of this erases the offense, which may be very real and justifies a real apology. This is the apology that you offer when you invite the grievance. Inviting the grievance is the practice of asking someone if you have offended him or her so you can consider whether an apology is appropriate.

I'll give you an example of what I mean. Some years ago, I was on the board of a charitable organization among whose membership was a close friend. At one point, the board went on a weekend retreat to do strategic planning. Part of our work was to evaluate the performance of the organization's paid staff and key volunteers. The participants agreed that our conversations at the retreat would be confidential and that our formal recommendations would be communicated by the president of the board.

Within days of the retreat, I noticed that my friend Keith started behaving oddly. The weekly lunches we were having suddenly stopped. Keith always seemed to have a conflict. He

also pulled back from his activities for the organization. I experienced what interactions we had as cold and formal. I could see Keith was withdrawing from the organization and that that our friendship was at risk. I was confused because he insisted nothing was wrong when I knew there was. He was acting as if he were angry at me. I knew my only recourse was to invite the grievance.

After a number of attempts, I managed to persuade a reluctant Keith to meet me for coffee. I started by telling him that I appreciated our friendship and his service to an organization we both valued. I told him how I noticed that our relationship was deteriorating and how that confused me on a personal level and interfered with the work of the organization. Then I asked him one form of the question associated with inviting the grievance: "Keith, have I offended you?" (The other forms of the question is, "Are you angry with me?" or "Are you upset at me?")

Keith looked down at his coffee cup for a minute, and then said, "Did you really say that I'm not a 'big picture guy?' You may be on the board, but you're no better than me. I thought you were my friend." I could hear the hurt in his voice.

It took me a minute to figure out what must have happened. At the board retreat, Keith's name came up as a possible future board member. To that, I offered my opinion that Keith wasn't yet ready for board membership because, while he was a superb tactician, in my view he wasn't ready to lead the organization through the strategic fundraising challenges faced by the organization. One of my fellow board members at the retreat was a blabbermouth. Word of my comment had gotten back to Keith and he was justifiably angry and humiliated.

I had a decision to make. Should I try to explain? What Keith heard was not exactly what I said. In any case, did I really have anything to apologize for? It was clear to me that the person responsible for this mess was the gossip who violated the board's confidence. I would deal with him at another time. Right now I

had to confront the reality that a friend and valued member of the organization was in pain. Here's what I said:

"Keith, I'm so sorry you've had to live with this situation for so many weeks. I apologize for the unprofessionalism of our organization that you were put in a position of questioning your value to the organization as a volunteer and to me as a friend. I continue to value you as a colleague and as a friend. I had many things to say about you and, yes, one of them was that I didn't think it made sense to invite you on the board this year. That was my opinion, and if you want to talk about my reasons, I'm okay with doing so. What I'm not okay with is you being angry with me and not giving me a chance to make it right. So, I'm sorry that I put a friend in this difficult position. I promise to be honest with you. I ask that you let me show you that I'm sincere in my friendship and that we can recommit ourselves to the work of the organization."

Now, I'm not claiming that my response was perfect. I regret I allowed my annoyance at Keith to leak out. My criticism should have come at another time. My point is that I kept talking to Keith long after he made it clear that he didn't want to talk to me and pushing him to level with me so I could address his concerns. It's tempting to respond to rejection with more rejection. It's harder to hold to the view that relationships have value and ought not so easily be discarded. Earlier in the book, I defined apology as the decision to value the relationship more than the need to be right. Inviting the grievance is an extension of that definition for it keeps the relationship and its preservation at the heart of the matter.

Concluding Story

Let me close with one last story that illustrates the power of apology to mend fences, build bridges, and restore trust. It's a true story from the noted author and consultant Mark Albion. You may have heard of him. Mark has been on *Nightline*. The

news magazine *60 Minutes* profiled him as a poster boy of a new breed of marketing wunderkind. By the age of twenty-five he had three degrees from Harvard University: a bachelor's in economics, an MBA, and a Ph.D. in business economics. By age thirty-one, he was teaching marketing at Harvard Business School. He quickly leveraged his success there into a whirlwind of high-profile intellectual and commercial success for Fortune 500 companies. He started six businesses. His life was filled with brilliant associates, open doors, and unlimited tangible rewards. And then Mark gave it all up because his choices were making him miserable. He quotes Lily Tomlin's observation—"The problem with the rat race is that even if you win, you are still a rat"—to explain his decision to get off the treadmill.

Mark transformed his entire life. He designed a new life centered on the theme that people won't be happy if they just make a living; they need to make a life. He backed away from the responsibilities that did not bring him joy. He wrote some well-received books chronicling his experience. He studied Zen practices and began a rigorous study of ancient texts from the Greek and Hebrew. Mark became involved with the community centered in Temple Beth David in Westwood, Massachusetts, and formed a strong bond with its long-term spiritual leader, Rabbi Henry Zoob. Mark led a number of highly regarded education and study groups. Over the years, the community came to regard Mark as one of the most learned members of the congregation and he developed close connections with many congregants. In ways he did not quite recognize, the congregation embraced him as someone they could count on.

That's why, to Mark's genuine surprise, there were so many hard feelings with a decision he made. In 2006, after thirty-eight years with the temple, Rabbi Zoob retired. With his spiritual advisor retiring, Mark decided it was an opportune time for him to make a transition, as well. Mark sought ways to deepen his knowledge of Judaism and spirituality beyond what he thought

was available at the congregation. He tried to be thoughtful; he certainly didn't want his withdrawal to be a surprise or for it to be perceived as disapproval. Well before he resigned from the congregation, Mark made a point of taking a number of people aside to explain what he was planning. Eventually, with Rabbi Jeffrey Wildstein ready to assume his new responsibilities, the time came for Mark to take his leave.

Then the blintzes hit the fan. Mark was surprised by the confusion, hurt, and cries of abandonment that his leaving created. It took many months and a number of painful conversations—with the new rabbi, with the temple president, with dozens of others—before Mark realized his error. "It was obvious that I had messed up," he says. "There might have been a classy way for me to leave the congregation, but the way I did it wasn't it. There were many things I was clueless about. I failed to recognize how tough I made it for my friends in the congregation and the new rabbi."

What Mark failed to appreciate is that when someone people regard as one of the most learned members of the congregation removes himself from the mix, it sends a signal. The weakest time for any congregation is the transition between spiritual leaders. Membership and financial resources always fall off. The community sees other members' departure at this time as a signal that they don't approve of the new leader.

Mark saw that his actions had damaged the community. After a number of conversations, including one in which Rabbi Wildstein asked some very probing questions and made some important points firmly—yet with the intent to help, not to lecture—Mark decided it was not only wrong of him to leave the synagogue the way he did, but wrong of him to leave at all. "I didn't realize the impact I had on the community. I didn't realize what a dramatic effect my decision to move on would have on so many people," he says. "A community gives the lie to the pretense that we are solitary beings acting in isolation and that

we can diminish a community without diminishing ourselves." He met with the rabbi to figure out how best to reenter the community.

Some form of apology was clearly needed. A group email would not do. "'Leaving a community' was just a euphemism for distancing myself from the individuals that make up the community," he says. "I needed to apologize to as many people as possible face to face." Mark's simple but direct apology, repeated many times to many people, was:

> *I messed up and I'm sorry. What I did was thoughtless and immature. I apologize for hurting you. I won't do it again.*

In his apology and the conversations that followed, Mark avoided elaborations, explanations, or defensiveness. Explanations, if any, would come later for the few people who really wanted to know. For now, he just wanted people to know that he was sorry for the confusion his actions created for the congregation at a time when it needed him more than ever. Over a course of months, Mark met with as many members as possible to convey his apologies in person. Everyone at Temple Beth David welcomed Mark back with open arms. Everyone learned something important. For Mark, perhaps the most important was a lesson that comes out of *The Wizard of Oz*. All the knowledge and wisdom he thought it was necessary to find elsewhere was available for him right there in his neighborhood synagogue. "I went after the other bag of gold," Mark says. "I see now that I'm a more positive, thoughtful person, and hopefully a bit kinder, too."

In the wake of the incident, it's clear that there have been some positive developments. During the period after Mark left the congregation, a number of members stepped up to leadership roles that he had formerly filled. Some of the new leaders, Mark acknowledges, do a better job than he did. Mark's relation-

ship with Rabbi Wildstein has also grown stronger in the wake of their struggle over the departure and reconciliation. Once Mark apologized and rejoined the congregation, it just seemed obvious for him to pay his dues retroactive to his departure. To Mark, this was just fair. To me, this decision honors the restitution dimension of effective apology.

One reason I chose to end the book with this story is because it so perfectly illustrates how effective apology keeps the promise of the subtitle: mending fences, building bridges, and restoring trust. When he left the congregation the way he did, Mark blundered through the fence that defines a community. It's easy to think of fences as barriers that keep people apart, but fences can help protect communities, as well. This is a fence that is worthy of respect. By affirming that members of a community have a bond with each other—a bond that is not to be broken lightly—Mark's apology mended the fence that helps keep a community intact. By reaching out to individual members of the congregation, his individual apologies built bridges that strengthened individual relationships. And by publicly admitting his mistake, expressing remorse, and reentering the community, Mark's apology helped restore the trust that is the foundation of every community.

Final Thoughts on Apology

Progress occurs one apology at a time. I see evidence that people and institutions are taking baby steps toward accepting responsibility for mistakes of the present and using apology to clean up the mistakes of the past. I am optimistic about the possibility of the world eventually embracing apology as the first response, not the last. The attitude of the CEO who inspired this book ("I'm sorry, I never apologize!") is gradually being replaced by an understanding that apologizing is increasingly regarded not as a sign of weakness but as a sign of moral confidence and discipline. More and more, leaders at every level have come to accept that

humility is a desirable quality. Even the very nature of failure is being reframed by the interconnected, globalized world in which we operate. In this world, missteps are no longer automatically chalked up to moral failure; the moral failure is created by the response of leaders to those missteps. Failure is increasingly viewed as benign, even noble, evidence of experimentation, thinking outside the box, and taking risks on behalf of innovation. People around the world increasingly understand that although different is not always better, better is always different. Without apology, none of these changes would be possible.

I do not, however, believe that these changes will happen overnight or without risk. When we embrace our humility, decide to be responsible for the injury we caused, and issue an unconditional apology, we may come face-to-face with a culture that is indifferent or even hostile toward the intimacy, vulnerability, and selflessness this transformational act requires. Much of our culture is still organized to reinforce transactional behavior. This part of the culture still regards people and relationships as a means to an end, as assets to be used to bring something about, rather than as ends in themselves.

It's no accident that apology has evolved to be another instrument to be bargained or transacted. And in rare cases, it is appropriate to use apology in the same way we use currency or any other medium of value. But if the only way we can have a relationship with apology is by trading it like a commodity, we will miss out on an opportunity to increase our intimacy, transparency, flexibility, and security. It is only when we accept that we are people who are capable of doing exactly the things for which we need to apologize, instead of separating off that part of ourselves, that we can be whole. In a world where nothing stays hidden for long, powerfully acting as if we have nothing to hide demonstrates authentic leadership.

Apology is the clearest path to confronting reality, because on some level it requires you to accept the victim's version of

events and of yourself. Genuine apology not only requires you to recognize what the victim dislikes about you; on some level it also requires you to agree with the victim. Unless you are willing and ready to see yourself in an unflattering light, you're going to get only a distorted or limited view of the situation. Apology serves to remind you that acknowledging the facts—including those that make you look bad—is part and parcel of living a connected life. I wrote *Effective Apology: Mending Fences, Building Bridges, and Restoring Trust* to make the case for why apology is really in your rational self-interest. Apology is not for the faint of heart, but then, neither is life.

Nothing about apology is easy. In this book, I have tried to present a coherent description of a new kind of apologetic discourse that accommodates the world as it is being shaped by technology, globalization, and a political consciousness that is increasingly inclusive, tolerant, and egalitarian. I suggest the world may not be as punitive or as adversarial as it sometimes appears. I encourage practicing apology as an antidote to our perceived helplessness.

There are three things that are real: accidents, human fallibility, and apology. The first two are pretty much beyond our comprehension or control, so we must do what we can with the third.

The purpose of apology is to extend ourselves in such a way that relationships become deeper, and life becomes richer and more human in the process. All we have to do is honor the impulse—and practice. It's not always easy, but we rarely wrestle with apology and lose.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The more you practice apology, the more effective your apologies and relationships become.
- Practicing apology requires:
    - Challenging ingrained attitudes about power and accountability
    - Dealing with the emotions of apology
    - Cultivating a disposition favorable to personal transparency
- Five apology practices
    - Keep an apology journal
    - Before apologizing, stop to ask yourself three questions
    - What is the transformation in me that is required right now?
    - What courage is required of me right now?
    - What is the price I am willing to pay?
        - Reverse the nouns
        - Make an apology list
        - Stand up from the place you fell

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notes

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    In 2006, I made a serious error in judgment and conducted myself in a way that was disloyal to my family and to my core beliefs. I recognized my mistake and I told my wife that I had a liaison with another woman, and I asked for her forgiveness. Although I was honest in every painful detail with my family, I did not tell the public. When a supermarket tabloid told a version of the story, I used the fact that the story contained many falsities to deny it. But being 99% honest is no longer enough.

    I was and am ashamed of my conduct and choices, and I had hoped that it would never become public. With my family, I took responsibility for my actions in 2006, and today I take full responsibility publicly. But that misconduct took place for a short period in 2006. It ended then. I am and have been willing to take

any test necessary to establish the fact that I am not the father of any baby, and I am truly hopeful that a test will be done so this fact can be definitively established. I only know that the apparent father has said publicly that he is the father of the baby. I also have not been engaged in any activity of any description that requested, agreed to or supported payments of any kind to the woman or to the apparent father of the baby.

It is inadequate to say to the people who believed in me that I am sorry, as it is inadequate to say to the people who love me that I am sorry. In the course of several campaigns, I started to believe that I was special and became increasingly egocentric and narcissistic. If you want to beat me up—feel free. You cannot beat me up more than I have already beaten up myself. I have been stripped bare and will now work with everything I have to help my family and others who need my help.

I have given a complete interview on this matter and having done so, will have nothing more to say.

Edwards' apology is available at www.politico.com/news/stories/0808/12405.html.

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on myself to the point that I'm not able to help my teammates out and help this organization win a championship. This issue that happened is going to be an opportunity for the Carolina Panthers and myself as an individual to show our true colors and be able to show the impact we can have and not have this moment leave the legacy of who I am to my children, who I am to my teammates, who I am as a man. I will not put myself in position where I have to defend myself or state my side of the story. There's only one side, which is a lack of judgment on my part. . . . I have no excuse. All I have is the opportunity to gain the respect of my fans, gain the respect of my family, gain the respect of my co-workers and the organization, and also the peers I play against as well. I'm going to take this opportunity to let God break me, humble me, and continually let me move forward in being the person I can truly be—and that's a God-fearing man, no matter what people may think or what they may say. It's an opportunity for me to stand tall and take my punishment, but take it with God on my side and not me standing up trying to be something that I'm not. I'm a fallen man. I'm a man who made a mistake. I intend to mend the bridges I have burned and help rebuild a bridge if I need to all by myself, but not do it in a spiteful way. But to do it with the labor and the sound mind that God gives me, which is to do what I'm supposed to do. I'm not going to get into who's right, who's wrong. I'm completely wrong. (It was) an asinine decision. I'm going to move forward, and move forward better than I probably have had to. This is the first time in my life that I really haven't forgiven myself. That's what's I'm going to work on."

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at the ghetto monument. On the abyss of German history and carrying the burden of the millions who were murdered, I did what people do when words fail them." Willy Brandt, *Erinnerungen: "Mit den Notizen zum Fall G"* (Ullstein, Berlin, 1994), 214 (quote translation by John Borneman, http://condor.depaul.edu/~rrotenbe/aeer/v17n1/ Borneman.pdf).

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   In the past few days I have begun to atone for my private failings with my wife, Silda, my children, and my entire family. The remorse I feel will always be with me. Words cannot describe how grateful I am for the love and compassion they have shown me. From those to whom much is given, much is expected. I have been given much: the love of my family, the faith and trust of the people of New York, and the chance to lead this state. I am deeply sorry that I did not live up to what was expected of me. To every New Yorker, and to all those who believed in what I tried to stand for, I sincerely apologize.

   I look at my time as governor with a sense of what might have been, but I also know that as a public servant I, and the remarkable people with whom I worked, have accomplished a great deal. There is much more to be done, and I cannot allow my private failings to disrupt the people's work. Over the course of my public life, I have insisted, I believe correctly, that people, regardless of their position or power, take responsibility for their conduct. I can and will ask no less of myself. For this reason, I am resigning from the office of governor. At Lt. Gov. Paterson's request, the resignation will be effective Monday, March 17, a date that he believes will permit an orderly transition.

   I go forward with the belief, as others have said, that as human beings, our greatest glory consists not in never falling, but in rising every time we fall. As I leave public life, I will first do what I need to do to help and heal myself and my family. Then I will try once again, outside of politics, to serve the common good and to move toward the ideals and solutions which I believe can build a future of hope and opportunity for us and for our children. I hope all of New York will join my prayers for my friend, David Paterson, as he embarks on his new mission, and I thank the public once again for the privilege of service.

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acknowledgments

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about the author

John Kador is an author, consultant, and speaker who believes that every word is a moral choice. His work centers on identifying and describing best practices in leadership and promoting the highest standards of personal accountability, humility, and transparency. This book, which describes the benefits that leaders accrue when they embrace apology rather than shy from it, is squarely in that tradition. His personal credo is that different is not always better, but better is always different.

He is the author of several books: *Charles Schwab: How One Company Beat Wall Street and Reinvented the Brokerage Industry* (2002), *50 High-Impact Speeches & Remarks: Proven Words You Can Adapt for Any Business Occasion* (2004), and the *New York Times* best seller *Net Ready: Strategies for Success in the E-conomy* (with Amir Hartman and John Sifonis, 1999). His career books include *The Manager's Book of Questions: 751 Great Questions for Hiring the Best Person* (2007), *How to Ace the Brainteaser Job Interview* (2004), and *201 Best Questions to Ask On Your Interview* (2002).

As a corporate ghostwriter, John has distinguished himself as a writing partner to a number of Fortune 1000 executives who credit him for his willingness to embrace the hectic and unpredictable schedules of busy executives. These books include *Pricing with Confidence: 10 Rules to Stop Leaving Money on the Table* by Reed Holden and Mark Burton (Wiley, 2008), *The Six Sigma Leader* by Peter Pande (McGraw-Hill, 2007), *The Manger's Book of Decencies: How Small Gestures Build Great Companies* by Steve Harrison (McGraw-Hill, 2007), *A Call to Action: Taking Back Healthcare for Future Generations* by Henry McKinnell with John Kador (McGraw-Hill, 2005), and *TechnoVision: The*

Executive's Guide for Understanding and Managing Information Technology by Charles B. Wang (McGraw-Hill, 1996).

John's writing practice also includes corporate speechwriting. He has written speeches for executives at IBM, Sears, and Computer Associates.

Among the most satisfying but lesser-known aspects of John's writing practice is his work preparing family histories. A number of distinguished families have engaged John to research, write, and publish book-length family histories for private use. Research for these books has taken John all over the world and provided him a chance to interview fascinating people of all ages. The resulting products are the most lavishly produced books he has published.

John began his writing career in Washington, D.C., at a high-tech advertising and public relations agency. For over thirty years he has been the principal of Kador Communications, providing editorial assistance to dozens of corporate and media clients. John's insights have been featured in more than one hundred magazines and newspapers, including *The Chicago Tribune*, *Computerworld*, *Working Women*, and *Business to Business*. John has columns in *Chief Executive*, *Registered Rep*, and *Human Resources Executive*.

Born in Budapest, Hungary, John came to the United States when he was six and settled with his family in New York City. He holds a master's degree in public relations from The American University and an undergraduate degree from Duke University. John currently lives in Winfield, Pennsylvania, with his wife, Anna Beth Payne, a psychologist at a university counseling center. He has two children: Dan, a software engineer in San Francisco, and Rachel, an undergraduate at the University of Massachusetts–Amherst. When he isn't working, he likes to fence, a sport that he has practiced since high school.

To inquire about having John speak about apology at your event, or if you have questions about any of his writing services,

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