

Follow up Handout from “Power of Apologies” teleforum – April 15, 2010

There are costs associated with not apologizing and resolving issues: resentment, stonewalling (communication breakdowns), inability to move forward, over-all stress (high emotions and upset), decreased productivity (people not able to focus on work), change can't be implemented as quickly or effectively.

Preferred apology languages

Gary Chapman and Jennifer Thomas, authors of "The Five Languages of Apology", note that if you receive an apology that omits your apology language, chances are you won't fully accept it or even recognize it as an apology. Learn the techniques to effectively recognize and deliver apologies and watch your relationships thrive as a result.

1. Expressing regret — "I'm sorry."
2. Accepting responsibility — "I was wrong."
3. Making restitution — "What can I do to make it right?"
4. Repenting — "I won't let that happen again."
5. Requesting forgiveness — "Will you forgive me?"

The foremost element for any of these apology languages to be effective are that the words are heartfelt. Secondly, be aware of the impact your apology has on the other and if one language doesn't work then experiment with another. We all have a preferred apology language, so the one style or language that resonates with you may not fit be significant to another.

What gets in the way of effective apologies?

What our experience tells us gets in the way:

Fear of losing control—asking for forgiveness may = relinquishing control and putting the future of the relationship in the other person's hands

Fear of rejection—when you seek forgiveness (say you are sorry or ask to be forgiven), the other person may say no.

Fear of failure—for some people, admitting they are wrong feels as though you have failed the other person, or failed to uphold your moral or professional standards. It is the equivalent of admitting “I am a failure.”

Asking to be forgiven — it's no small thing and means (possibly) giving up the quest for justice. The forgiver may need to forgive consequences that are long lasting. Finally, the forgiver may have a hard time if this is a repeat offense or if the offense was major.

Difference between empathy and apology (from www.sorryworks.net)

In some situations there is a need for – **Initial Disclosure** – this is all about empathy and re-establishing trust and communication in the immediate aftermath of an adverse event. You may say "sorry" but no fault is admitted or assigned. The goal is to make sure the offended party never feels abandoned.

If there is a need for **Investigation** (say if there has been a policy breach, med error or something that has resulted in a serious incident), this should be undertaken right away and without fanfare. It typically involves bringing in outside experts.

Resolution - is about continuing to empathize, even if there was no mistake ("we are sorry this happened"). It may also involve an explanation if there was an investigation. However, the point is to have compassion for the other person(s), regardless whether a mistake was made or not.

Remember, saying you are sorry is *compassion with a backbone*.

Resources

The Five Languages of Apology: How to Experience Healing in All Your Relationships

By Gary Chapman and Jennifer Thomas, 2006

<http://www.sorryworks.net/> for The Sorry Works! Coalition.

The coalition was founded in 2005 and is the United States' leading advocacy organization for disclosure, apology (when appropriate), and upfront compensation (when necessary) after errors and mistakes in medicine, business, insurance, and the law. A simple three-step disclosure process is at the heart of the Sorry Works! program.

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Courageous teams – those willing to adjust their attitudes about apologies – empower and propel their organizations toward greater productivity and mission fulfillment. Our job as coaches is to create safe, trustful environments where these courageous conversations can unfold. With skillful facilitation and consistent support, the results can be remarkable.

Contact us if you and your team are courageous enough to apologize for mistakes, and want to ensure you've got the skill to get the results you're seeking from those apologies.

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