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The Most Effective Ways to Make It Right When You Screw Up

by Heidi Grant Halvorson | 8:00 AM June 19, 2013

After promising your boss you would complete an important assignment on time, you realize you're behind and it's going to be late. You unintentionally leave a colleague out of the loop on a joint project, causing him or her to feel frustrated and a bit betrayed. On the subway, you aren't paying attention and accidentally spill hot coffee all over a stranger's expensive suit. It's time for a *mea culpa*.

Apologies are tricky. Done right, they can resolve conflict, repair hurt feelings, foster forgiveness, and improve relationships. An apology can even keep you out of the courtroom. Despite the fact that lawyers often caution their clients to avoid apologies, fearing that they are tantamount to an admission of guilt, studies show that when potential plaintiffs receive an apology, they are more likely to settle out of court for less money.

However, as anyone can tell you, most apologies don't go so well. Ask John Galliano, for instance. Or John Edwards, or Todd Aiken, or Kanye West. (I could go on and on.) An apology is no guarantee that you'll find yourself out of hot water.

This is usually either because the person or persons from whom you are seeking forgiveness really aren't interested in forgiving, or because the transgression itself is deemed unforgivable. But more often than not, your apology falls flat because you're apologizing *the wrong way*.

In a nutshell, the problem is that most people tend to make their apologies about themselves—about their intentions, thoughts, and feelings.

"I didn't mean to..."

"I was trying to..."

"I didn't realize..."

"I had a good reason..."

When you screw up, the victim of your screw up does *not* want to hear about you. Therefore, stop talking about you and put the focus of your apology where it belongs: on him or her. Specifically, concentrate on how the victim has been affected by your mistake, on how the person is feeling, and on what he or she needs from you in order to move forward.

Thanks to recent research (<http://news.illinois.edu/news/10/0602apologies.html>) on effective apologies, you can fine-tune your approach even further according to your relationship with the recipient of the apology:

You Are A Stranger or Mere Acquaintance

The guy in the coffee-stained suit wants an offer of compensation. Offers of compensation are attempts to restore balance through some redeeming action. Sometimes the compensation is tangible, like paying to repair or replace your neighbor's fence when you inadvertently back your car into it, or running out to get your girlfriend a new phone when you accidentally drop hers into the toilet (which happened to me, by the way. Not cool.) Offers of compensation can also be more emotional or socially-supportive. (as in, "I'm sorry I acted like a jerk, and I'll make it up to you by being extra thoughtful from now on.")

You Are My Partner, Colleague, or Friend

The colleague you accidentally left out of the loop doesn't want compensation. When you have a relationship with the injured party, you will instead need to take his or her perspective and express empathy. Expressions of empathy involve recognizing and expressing concern over the suffering you caused. (e.g., "I'm so sorry that I didn't appreciate all of your effort. You must have felt awful, and that's the last thing I want.") Through expressions of empathy, the victim feels understood and valued as a partner in the relationship, and trust is restored.

You Let Our Team Down

In the modern workplace, we often operate as teams. So when you fail to meet an important deadline, chances are it's not just your boss that's affected—it's your whole team, and possibly your whole organization. In team settings, people don't want compensation or empathy—they want an acknowledgement of violated rules and norms. Basically, you need to admit that you broke the code of behavior of your social group, your organization, or your society. (e.g., "I have a responsibility to my team/organization/family/community and I should have known better. I didn't just let myself down, I let others who count on me down.")

When you think about it, it's surprising that we're often so bad at apologizing. After all, we are frequently on the receiving end of apologies ourselves—so we should know what works and what doesn't. In reality, we often forget what it's like to be on the other side—whether we're trying to apologize, impress, persuade, help, or motivate.

So when crafting your apology, remember to ask yourself the following: Who am I talking to, and what is he or she looking for in my apology? The guy on the subway still dripping from your morning joe doesn't want to hear that you "feel his pain"—but when you forget your wife's birthday, she most definitely would like you to feel hers.