

Why Can't I Be Forgiven without an Apology?

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I once was a teenager. (I bet you were, too.) Sometimes my Mom would do something that severely irritated me. After agonizing silently for a moment, I'd burst forth with, "Mom, I am really mad!"

Her response was unbelievably cavalier. "I guess you'll just have to get glad again."

Ooh, that interchange always burned me up! Didn't she care that she just added insult to my injury? Was she that oblivious to my pain? Did she think her comment helped me cope with my anger?

I know my mother loved me. In retrospect, she was probably holding me accountable to an appropriate standard. I know she meant well and was probably right to insist I gladly accept her feedback. Sometimes, though, her haughty, flippant attitude felt more demeaning than a slap across the face.

Sure, I wanted Mom to be more considerate. I realize now, however, my insensitivity to the demands of raising three kids with my Dad often absent. Mom's life was lonely, thankless, and child-centered.

I don't recall her ever apologizing for her dismissive attitude, however. She probably was mimicking what her parents had done with her. Maybe she thought she was doing what a good mother should do. She likely didn't realize how much I hurt when she offered her flippant retort. If she did, perhaps she presumed she deserved forgiveness simply because of her circumstances and honorable intent.

Why do I share this story? Because you might be playing an analogous role right now with a member of your organizational team. You can't function as a leader without occasionally offending someone. You may not even be aware of who is upset, what you did, or when you did it!

Or maybe, like my Mom, you feel justified in what you did. Maybe you presume that because of the pressures of your responsibility, your genuine desire to perform well, and your stature in the organization, you deserve forgiveness for how you behave. Maybe you think the person should just overlook your offensive behavior and go on with his or her life.

It's been fifty years since those incidents with my Mom. Yes, my displeasure has faded. But I still recall the incidents as unpleasant memories. Do you genuinely think that person you irritated is just going to "get glad again"? Can we humans forgive without first receiving a genuine apology?

I decided to talk with an expert. Jennifer Thomas is coauthor with Gary Chapman of their 2013 book entitled *When 'Sorry' Isn't Enough*. The book deals with apology and forgiveness. In the first chapter, Jennifer and Gary address my question. Jennifer emphasized that the key determinant is whether reconciliation is important to the individuals.

"Forgiveness without an apology is often encouraged for the benefit of the forgiver rather than the benefit of the offender. Such forgiveness does not lead to reconciliation." As an offender, do you desire reconciliation with your employee? I certainly longed for an empathetic understanding with my Mom.

"Genuine forgiveness removes the barrier that was created by the offense and opens the door to restoring trust over time." If the relationship was mutually respectful before the offense, an appropriate apology and conceded forgiveness can begin to restore the bond.

I pushed Jennifer on why an apology is so important. She explained that when an offense is committed, the hurtful act typically stimulates the injured person to feel, among other things, a bit "put down."

When the offender expresses appropriate contrition in the apology, the humility shown seems to reestablish equality in the relationship. For a moment, the power lies with the offended person who now can either grant or deny forgiveness.

Still, the person apologizing must be genuine, the words must be authentic, and the follow-up actions must be consistent. Otherwise, the effort is either manipulative or will be interpreted as such by the forgiver. The perceived inconsistency will diminish the trust in the relationship even more.

In my opinion, this reconciling process is tougher when a power differential exists due to hierarchy. It doesn't seem fair that, as the authority figure, you have to put forth more effort than if the offense had occurred in the other direction. Such is the life of a leader, however.

No one ever said leading is easy. The demands are severe, and there are few individuals with whom to commiserate. Yet the privilege of serving others, and beneficially influencing lives, is worth the price!

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