

How Comfortable are You with Apologizing?

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Early in my career, a wise mentor suggested I get comfortable saying two very important sentences: “I don’t know” and “I’m sorry.”

That counsel has served me well. No leader knows everything! Being asked a tough question merely provides the opportunity to expand your knowledge! And no leader has a perfect track record. We all mess up! And when we do, it’s very powerful in rebuilding relationships to sincerely apologize.

Ah, but what seems like a sincere apology when you present it may seem incomplete and superficial to those listening. If your apology is considered inadequate, the healing effect you anticipated will not occur. So, how can you improve your apology effectiveness?

I had the pleasure last week to talk with Jennifer Thomas, co-author with Gary Chapman of *The Five Languages of Apology* (website is www.drijenthomas.com). Whew, did I learn a lot, both preparing for the conversation and in the dialogue with Jennifer! My desire is to share my insights with you.

Have you read Gary Chapman’s book *The Five Love Languages*? The concepts will help you understand relationships at work, and will especially help at home. The essence is that we all communicate our appreciation for others primarily in one of five different “languages.” To be effective, learn to speak the language of the person receiving your expression of appreciation.

Jennifer Thomas had used Chapman’s concepts in her practice as a psychologist, serving individuals and couples. She saw a similar pattern emerging relative to how apologies were offered and received. She approached Gary Chapman and shared her observations. They decided to collaborate on *The Five Languages of Apology*.

Jennifer volunteered to handle further research and Gary handled the writing. The book was published in 2006 and is very relevant for the workplace. Not only are the concepts appropriate to use with those you influence, but strong teams also need to know how to apologize to each other when someone messes up! The book contains an “Apology Language Profile” to help identify your apology language.

What are the five languages of apology? Here’s a brief description.

Expressing regret is characterized by saying, “I’m sorry.” Your specific words should acknowledge the hurt, disappointment, or violation of trust. Body language, facial expression, and tone of voice should match the severity of your offense. If you’re feeling awful about what you did, you’d better show it in your physical appearance as well as in your words!

Accepting responsibility is characterized by admitting, “I was wrong.” Whether you were selfish, chose poorly, or spoke harshly, some people need to hear you own up to your failure. Justifications and extenuating circumstances won’t provide a free ride. Just confess the error in your performance.

Making restitution is characterized by asking “What can I do to make our relationship right?” Some people need to hear a willingness to provide appropriate repayment for the violation or inconvenience. Your commitment to correct the situation may require some of your time, a public confession, or restoring something damaged. The restitution works best when offered in the language of the offended person, so if you’re not familiar with *The Five Love Languages*, here’s a reason to learn them!

Genuinely repenting is characterized by promising, “I’ll work hard to avoid doing that again.” A sincere intent to change needs to be followed by a specific plan, and then some action in that direction. Want to speed up the pace of acceptance? Invite the offended person to offer suggestions for how you might avoid the mistake in the future.

Requesting forgiveness is straightforward. Just ask, “Will you please forgive me?” This may seem a little risky, because it gives the “go ahead” permission for rebuilding the relationship to the person you offended. Sometimes, however, none of the other languages will seem adequate.

What do you do if you don't know the other person's apology language? The safest thing is to take time to construct a series of statements that include all five languages. This would be overkill for a minor infraction, of course, but may be very appropriate for a major one.

Jennifer's suggestion for a more minor infraction is to merely say, "I apologize," and follow that statement with an appropriate acknowledgement of the mistake. Her experience has been that most people will accept "I apologize" as a variation of their own apology language.

Your particular language of apology is so "natural" for you that you probably presume it is identical for others. Not so! As a leader, you would do well to research and master the other languages!

Be a role model and a mentor for future leaders in your organization. For help, contact Dennis Hooper at dhooper2@juno.com or (478)-988-0237. Visit his website at www.buildingfutureleaders.com.