

I Didn't Mean Anything By It--Do I Have to Apologize?

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“Apologizing” is an interesting and powerful interpersonal activity. Apologizing well can measurably strengthen relationships.

If everything always worked beneficially in the short-term, you'd likely never have to apologize. However, sometimes what you intend isn't what the other person in your relationship experienced. So, you find yourself involved in a breakdown. What's “normal” for you and the other person now isn't.

If the relationship is important, somebody will have to initiate reconciliation. We typically think the person who was at fault should take the first step. But what if the “who is to blame” is not obvious?

What if there is contention over who was at fault? Is it really important to technically determine who was responsible for the glitch? Or is starting the relationship back toward good health the bigger priority?

These are hard questions. Unfortunately, the answers develop more from the emotions of the moment than from logical analysis. If you allow emotions to dictate actions, the relationship may be further damaged the longer the conflict lingers. One person may feel that the other person just doesn't care.

If you are more of “the leader” in the relationship, you can't afford for anyone in your organization to have the impression you don't care. Therefore, let me suggest that you consider making the first move toward reconciliation. That may not seem fair, but you should realize by now that the obligations of leadership have nothing to do with the equitable distribution of responsibility.

Usually when there is a breakdown in a relationship, no one did anything intentionally offensive. One of you did something with every good intention and it just landed wrong. That's why I point out that in every interaction, each party has only half the information. One knows the intent and the other knows the effect. When you take action with a certain intention, you cannot accurately predict its effect.

That's why feedback is so important. And it's why you as a leader should be seeking feedback all the time. It's the only way you can tell if what you've intended has had its desired effect. (Please refer to my most recent article, which you can find on my website on the “Article Archives” page. Scroll down alphabetically to find “Servant Leadership--Seeking Feedback Unselfishly.”)

As a leader, you will be apologizing frequently. You will occasionally offend or hurt individuals, sometimes by oversight and sometimes when the effect on them was never your intention. You might as well spend some time learning how to apologize well.

I suggest you obtain and read, then retain as a reference source, the book entitled *When 'Sorry' Isn't Enough*, by Gary Chapman and Jennifer Thomas. Some of you may recall an article I wrote four years ago in which I cited a book entitled *The Five Languages of Apology* by the same authors.

The first book was superb, so I was curious as to why they would issue a modified version. I scheduled some time with Jennifer Thomas to understand. She explained that the publisher initiated the effort, seeking to stimulate interest among a different reader population. If you prefer a more intellectual treatment, obtain the original book. If you prefer something more informal, purchase the newer book.

I came away from the conversation with several pieces of information that I will share in future articles. The point for this article is associated with reconciliation, however. Do you, the leader, have to apologize? No, you never HAVE TO apologize. The question is, “How important is it to you and to the organization to reposition your relationship back onto a trajectory of mutual benefit?”

When you choose to apologize first, a likely response is, “I'm sorry, too.” You've started to rebuild!

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