

Apologizing and Forgiving

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Have you ever broken a promise? Made a bad mistake? Forgotten to do something you said you would? Sure! You're human, right? If you're going to have an active life, you're going to mess up on occasion. We all do!

As I work with leaders, I encourage them to acknowledge their mistakes quickly. When an inevitable breakdown occurs, their colleagues and direct reports likely will feel disappointment, resentment, anger, or even betrayal. Repairs are usually fairly easy and effective, but only if acknowledging the error and taking corrective action occurs quickly and genuinely.

Two actions--apologizing and forgiv--are the miracle cures for restoring the mutual respect and trust necessary for healthy relationships. Unfortunately, too many individuals underutilize these terrific tools.

When you realize you have made a mistake through poor judgment, overlooking an opportunity, or taking some action that has created an unexpected negative effect, you always have the option of apologizing.

Apologizing starts with a sincere acknowledgment that what you did likely offended, disturbed, distracted, inconvenienced, demeaned, or in some other way diminished your relationship with a colleague. If you didn't commit the act deliberately, you can explain (or at least speculate on) how the circumstances occurred. If you took the action deliberately and it had a different outcome than you had intended, you can humbly explain your surprise at the unexpected effect.

The most important part of a genuine apology comes next. You express that you are committed to not repeating this action, and you sincerely ask for forgiveness.

Wow! What an opportunity for rebuilding! After your friend assures herself that the slight was not intentional, and if she has faith that your motives for the future are honorable, she has the power to respond in a conciliatory way, helping to rebuild the damaged linkage. Like a broken bone that heals stronger than before the injury, the relationship may even be healthier after the apology than before!

How vastly different a genuine acknowledgment is from the many superficial apologies I hear these days. For example, I'm sure you've received a casual or flippant "I'm sorry"--which essentially means, "Would you be willing to release me from any long-term consequence of offending behavior and let me move along with the next thing on my agenda?"

Another superficial apology I'm sure you've heard is "I forgot!"--as if forgetting is a legitimate justification for having offended you or having failed to meet a commitment to you.

Sometimes tolerating a superficial apology is appropriate--if moving along to the next interaction is high enough in importance, or if the infraction was minor. If the violation was significant, however, or if there have been too many minor infractions over time, a deeper, more sincere apology may be required to rebuild the relationship.

Let's shift now to the concept of forgiveness. If someone has committed some indiscretion toward you or shown poor judgment, you can heal your hurt and restore the relationship if you are willing to forgive. This may be easier if the other person has apologized, but with practice, you can forgive even without the person's apology. **(Note: This information was added after publication. The previous sentence and the following two paragraphs are possible, but not if reconciliation with the other person is desired. I learned this from my dialogue with Jennifer Thomas, coauthor of *The Five Languages of Apology*. See my article entitled "Why Can't I be Forgiven without an Apology?" on my website, address below.)**

What's required? First, you make a voluntary choice never to use the person's transgression to justify any future action on your part. Second, you promise yourself to never bring up the incident in the future, to the individual or any other person.

These commitments do not have to be expressed verbally. Sometimes the promises should be made silently, inwardly, as there is little to be gained in opening the wound again. A solid commitment made to yourself, and kept faithfully, offers great release.

Are apologizing and forgiving required activities in life? Only if you want your relationships to be healthy. If you are a growing leader, you had better start practicing. Anyone who is actively involved with others will need to both apologize and forgive frequently!

Added after publication: On page 114 of his book *What Got You Here Won't Get You There*, Marshall Goldsmith has a superb description of forgiveness:

"Forgiveness is letting go of the hope for a better past."

This is one of the most practical, logical descriptions of the purpose and value of forgiveness. No one can go back and undo (or not do) something that has already been done. However, anyone can go back and admit error and ask for forgiveness.

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