

## **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 mother would do something that 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 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 conform. 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 (how often do your children pause to express gratitude for your many sacrifices?).

I don't recall her ever apologizing for her dismissive attitude. She likely didn't realize how much her abrupt finality hurt. Maybe she thought she was doing what a good mother should do. Or perhaps she presumed she deserved my forgiveness simply because of her circumstances.

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 know who is upset, what you did, or when you did it!

Or maybe, like Mom, you feel justified in what you did. Maybe you presume that, because of your responsibility and stature in the organization, you deserve forgiveness for how you did it. 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 presume 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 this 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 mutually supportive 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 seems to equalize the relationship. For a moment, the power lies with the offended person who now can either grant or deny forgiveness.

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 must put forth more effort than if the offense had occurred in the other direction. Such is the life of a leader.

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, beneficially influencing their lives, is worth the price!

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**Special note:** A reader pointed out that the person must be genuine in initiating the apology, the words and tone of voice must be authentic, and the follow-up actions must be consistent with the committed future behaviors. Otherwise, the effort is either a clear manipulation or will be interpreted as such by the forgiver. That inconsistency will diminish the trust in the relationship even more!

Dennis Hooper, July 23, 2013