



CHAPTER 9

Apology and Forgiveness

“Apologize? We don’t need to apologize! They are the ones who made the mistakes.” This was what I heard from a group of managers at a large corporation. I stood in front of the room in amazement. I knew the company had high standards for employment and promotion. I didn’t know that being perfect was one of the necessary qualifications. I assumed that because they were human, they also would sometimes make an error.

Wherever people are interacting with one another, working with or alongside others, there will be times when conflicts arise, egos are bruised, and damage is done to one another or to the relationship. Key to moving through these difficult moments is your willingness and ability to apologize and to forgive—two sides of the same key. That is, apology and forgiveness are often—but not always—inseparable. A sincere apology makes the ability to forgive much easier. There has been an acknowledgment of the harm experienced. The gift of forgiveness makes the sacrifice of apology worthwhile. Because we can be forgiven, we can admit our errors and make amends.

There are times when we apologize without any expectation or hope of forgiveness. The apology itself is a cleansing experience. When we

take responsibility for our actions, we can begin to forgive ourselves for our actions even if others do not or cannot. There are also times when we forgive without hearing an apology. We move through the process of forgiveness for our own benefit, not for the other person. We forgive to let go of past injuries and move on with our lives. But let's consider both sides of that key to successful conflict resolution.

Apology Offered

Often, the best thing you can do when you make a mistake is to apologize. Sometimes it's also the hardest thing you can do—to admit that you have not done the right thing. It might be an unintentional oversight, an honest miscalculation. You got busy with several office distractions and now you are embarrassed that you forgot the lunch appointment you set last week. You thought others already knew what you had been told; you didn't realize the information was confidential. You started the project without checking that others were also working on it.

Or, it might be an action you took guided by one of your lesser angels: maybe your desire to look good to your own boss or the work group, or to have more, or to grab control, or to get even. Maybe you flew off the handle at a member of the staff and recognized in hindsight that she really didn't deserve that sort of treatment. Maybe you intentionally let slip a piece of information because you thought it made you look good. Maybe you didn't include the names of others who made important contributions on the report when you submitted it to your boss. Apologies are particularly hard when you feel guilty or embarrassed or ashamed of your behavior. And yet we all find ourselves in that place at one time or another.

An apology can make the difference between moving forward and not. There are times and places when the other person cannot let go of his or her resentment or hostility until the person hears a sincere acknowledgment from you about what you did wrong and your stated intention not to repeat the behavior. That's the beginning step toward a resolution.

Acknowledgment

An acknowledgment is often the beginning of an apology. You may remember the story of Tre, the CFO, and his senior management team

in Chapter 2 of this book. One of the senior managers had presented Human Resources with a long list of complaints, ending with “Either he goes or I go. And, by the way, the other SMTs feel the same way.”

What followed that disclosure was a series of challenging meetings over several weeks, as the SMTs spelled out to Tre all of their frustrations, built up over the years. It was hard for Tre to listen to that, to lower his defensiveness and let go of his ego long enough to hear what they were saying. The day he walked into the meeting room and acknowledged all that they had said to him as true was a dramatic moment for everyone. In fact, you could feel the tension drain from the room. One of the team members said, “This has been life changing for everyone. We had kept our resentment from Tre for all this time, for fear of his reactions. Now that we have walked through this together, and he has acknowledged his part, we are stronger as a team than we ever were before.”

Because sincere acknowledgment can be such a powerful moment, here’s another example. Several years ago, I mediated a dispute in a large federal agency between a relatively high-ranking manager, Carl, and his boss, Angela. Carl had filed several complaints against the agency and was demanding \$1.5 million to settle them. He talked. Angela listened. He described a series of events during his career when he felt he had been wronged. She was thoughtful and still. Then she spoke carefully, “Carl, there are things that have happened here that should not have happened.” It was as close to an apology as she could get. He heard her. I watched the face of this robust and angry man soften, his eyes rimmed with tears. “Nobody in this agency has ever said that to me,” he said quietly. Within minutes, the discussion shifted from “\$1.5 million” to “what can we do now to fix this situation?” In this case, an outright apology could have been construed as an admission of guilt by the agency—and managers are trained to avoid any such admission for fear of legal liability. For Carl, her acknowledgment was enough—to hear that someone inside the agency could hear his story from his point of view and want to make amends.

It Takes Two to Tango

In resolving a conflict or addressing a difficult issue with an employee or

a co-worker, consider the part that you played in the event. It takes two to tango. A careful reflection will almost always reveal that both sides had some role in the situation's going badly.

When he didn't get the project completed on time, maybe you didn't make the assignment or the deadline clear, or you did not prioritize the tasks that employee was juggling. When she barked a curt response to your question, maybe your own tone of voice sounded disrespectful. Did you provide enough guidance so that he felt able to perform adequately? Were you so anxious about the task or his ability that you hovered over his desk, micromanaging his every move? Are you more comfortable with the work you once did as a member of the staff than with the assignments of your new position, so that you now interfere with a subordinate's ability to complete a project? Or might you have forgotten a commitment you made in a meeting and failed to provide the information you said you would send later?

After identifying your own role in any difficulty, it's time to sit down with the person and give feedback on what he or she did wrong. If you start by acknowledging your own part with a simple apology, the conversation will take a more positive direction. A caution here: Be clear with yourself before you start the discussion. You are only owning one piece of the interaction. Avoid allowing the conversation to shift and become all about you and what you did or didn't do.

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“Sally, I want to talk to you about the Hinkelman account. Henry called me yesterday and said he was still waiting for his payment.” The boss pauses to hear what Sally has to say.

“Gosh. I have been swamped with end-of-year requests. I can't do everything at once, you know.”

The boss acknowledges his part, “I realize I may not have been clear with you that this was a priority. I'll accept responsibility for that.” And then he goes on, “I count on you to handle all of these accounts. Customer service is vital to our success. Turnaround time for these payments is two days. What is the problem in getting that done?”

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Sometimes a manager resists apologizing, fearing to appear weak and ineffective. It seems more powerful to pretend that you are always right, that you never make errors. But that is a mistake. Rather, the ability to admit mistakes can make a manager stronger. The courage it takes to express regret is often recognized by others. An apology can create a strong bond between boss and staff. And an apology can give others permission, or even set the expectation, that they too will admit mistakes when they make them. A sincere apology takes responsibility, acknowledges the harm done, and asks for another chance to do better. Such an apology can be powerful, especially in difficult conflicts. An apology that is heartfelt and convincing can melt hardened attitudes and begin to rebuild relationships.

One of the hardest lessons for me has been to learn how to apologize, and that is true of so many of us. First, you must recognize when you have been wrong, and admit that to yourself. Then, you must walk back into the room and say it out loud to another person: “I am sorry. I was wrong. I behaved badly. I am not the person I want to be—or want to think that I am.” What makes it so hard? It is the vulnerability, admitting your imperfection and putting yourself at the mercy of another person. That means you have to trust that your apology will be accepted. Or, you have to trust that you will have the strength to deal with what comes next if you don’t receive forgiveness. Yes, you commit to not doing it again—to trying not to do it again—even to knowing you are imperfect—and that you may step unconsciously into that same pattern again. What you do know is that, as you learn, you step into those negative patterns less often and you catch yourself more quickly each time.

How to Apologize

Though making an apology isn’t easy, breaking it down into concrete steps can make it more manageable.

1. Acknowledge what you did and what harm it caused.
2. Ask the person how you can repair the damage, or offer the other person a solution.
3. Make every effort to change the behavior that caused the harm.
4. Give the other person time to hear your apology and to process

what you have said. An apology is often an important step to forgiveness, but you cannot demand to be forgiven.

5. Be patient, hopeful, and optimistic; seek new moments to demonstrate your sincerity and commitment to restoring the relationship.

Sincerity is the key word when it comes to apologies, as these examples demonstrate:

- ▶ “I realize that I let you down when I didn’t speak up in the meeting for the work you have been doing. You deserve a lot of credit and you have not gotten it. What can I do to make certain others appreciate your efforts?”
- ▶ “I should have remembered how much work you already had on your desk. I am sorry that I lost my temper over that report. I want to do a better job managing my own reactions, and I will work hard not to blast you that way again.”

Consider This

- ☑ Consider a recent action you now regret. Using the steps outlined above, have a conversation with the person most affected by your actions.

When Is an Apology Not an Apology?

Your apology has to be sincere, or else it simply is not an apology. Here are some clues for detecting an insincere apology:

- ▶ The too quick, flippant “I’m sorry” doesn’t carry any weight when it is said too soon, without reflection. It is likely to be heard as just a way to get out of an uncomfortable situation as quickly as possible.
- ▶ It’s another apology from the person who apologizes too frequently, for everything. This person apologizes for things he or she doesn’t even control. “I’m sorry it’s raining.” “I’m sorry you forgot your lunch.” Sometimes the person seems to be apologizing for his or her own existence. The apology is as meaningless and as empty as those who are too quick to offer one. Worse, the person makes the

idea of apologizing seem weak and ineffective—giving apologies a bad name.

- ▶ “I am sorry you felt that way.” This is not an apology. There is no acceptance of responsibility for your own actions.
- ▶ “I am sorry you misunderstood what I said,” or “I’m sorry I didn’t get that report to you on time. You didn’t give me enough time to do it.” These nonapologies turn the blame back onto the other person.

Forgiveness Granted

As I said earlier, the flip side of an apology is forgiveness. One naturally follows the other, as day follows night.

The Cost of Not Forgiving

Some of us carry hurts and grudges and bad feelings for a long time. Forgiveness does not come easy. In fact, sometimes holding onto those experiences becomes a mantle of pride: “Fool me once, shame on me. Fool me twice, shame on you.” Often, though, that determination to carry those grudges turns us bitter and resentful. Learning to let go can release you from the past and open your heart and your mind to new opportunities.

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The story is told of two Buddhist monks, Tanzan and Ekido, many years ago, who were walking together along a muddy country road. As they neared the village, they came upon a young woman stranded on one side of the road. She could not cross because the mud was so deep she feared it would ruin her silk kimono. Tanzan carefully picked her up, carried her to the other side, and the monks then continued on their way. Hours later, as night was falling, they finally arrived at their lodging. Ekido suddenly blurted out, “Why did you carry that girl across the road?!” “You know we monks are not supposed to touch women!”

Tanzan replied, “I put that girl down hours ago. Are you still carrying her?”

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You may know someone like April, whom I met in my role as a mediator. Or maybe you recognize yourself in some parts of her story. Many of us hold onto grievances and wounds for so long they begin to cripple us.

To forgive is not just to be altruistic, it is the best form of self-interest.

—ARCHBISHOP DESMOND TUTU

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April walked into the meeting carrying a manila folder bulging with paper. Three years ago her office had faced a major reorganization. Her job was eliminated; she was slotted “temporarily” into a lower grade position and had been working on a short-term assignment since then, to enable her to maintain her previous pay. Another position description was created that included some of her former responsibilities. When April competed for that job with others in the office, she was not selected. Sam was.

What was in the folder she carried? E-mails, some of them two or three years old. Performance evaluations proving her competence. She was eager to show me all the files and forms and e-mails that proved she had been wronged, deprived of the promotion she should have gotten. On the phone or in one-on-one conversations, she repeated her justifications. She had been victimized, denied a job that should have been hers. And she offered again and again to give me proof. She cried out in pain, “It’s just not *fair!*”

She acknowledged the effort that Hank, her boss, had put into restoring her job to the higher grade, but she clung to the injury she felt, even though that decision had been made over two years ago. So, Hank complained bitterly to me about April. “No matter what I do, she’s not happy. I don’t even want to talk to her anymore; all she does is complain.”

April spent much of her time in the office collecting data and evidence about Sam, the man who got the job she wanted. She tracked his hours at his desk, watching each of his assignments. She peppered the boss with questions (usually through e-mail): “Where was Sam yesterday afternoon?” or “I could have done that project, why didn’t you give it to me?” Or, “Why did he take so long to get that done?” The more she complained, the more the

boss avoided her. The more he avoided her, the more she complained.

What price did April pay for holding onto this grudge? Her anger and bitterness came with her to work every morning. She missed seeing a lot of the good and beautiful moments of life around her because her mind was consumed with how she had been wronged. When pressed, she acknowledged how she liked the field of work she was in, the luxury of avoiding the madness of metropolitan traffic, the friends that she had at work, her generous and supportive family. But, even her hours away from work could become wrapped up with the negative mood she created, the dread of going back to work after lunch or the next day, or after the weekend was over, or after vacation. She created a great deal of mental stress for herself. She alienated her boss and many of her co-workers. Others at work saw only the hostility that shrouded her face. They saw her as April, the discontented. Holding onto the resentment, she was the one who paid the price for not forgiving the boss or Sam.

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There was a cost to April's story, too, to the organization. Consider the work that didn't get done while she was busy gathering evidence about Sam. Think of the effect her attitude had on office morale. Morale drops, productivity falls, the business of the business is not getting done. And it is important to note that this victim mentality exists in all types of organizations and at all organizational levels.¹

So, holding onto resentment over past wrongs can be pretty self-destructive. Seen from another way, there often are rewards that keep a person stuck in a negative pattern such as April's. What did April get out of holding onto this resentment? As long as she committed herself to victimhood, she did not have to take responsibility for her own happiness or her job satisfaction or her performance. As long as she could blame someone else, she let herself off the hook.

There were a few people in the office who commiserated with April, who felt sorry for her. They joined in her anger and anguish and pity. Misery loves company. They created a camp within the office of "us" against "them" and spent a lot of time and energy blaming others for any

difficulties, discomforts, or challenges. As long as April could refuse to forgive her boss, she felt she could hold it over his head—somehow punish him for his mistake. What she failed to see was the terrible price that was paid for holding on to this attitude—and that *she* was the one paying the price.

*Forgiveness means giving
up all hope for a
better past.*
—LILY TOMLIN

Why Forgive?

Why should someone forgive? Forgiveness lifts the weight off; it is liberating. Letting go and moving on is in your best interest, regardless of the effect it has on anyone else in the office. Forgiveness grants you a strong sense of control and peace. There is that line from the poem “Invictus” by William Ernest Henley: “I am the captain of my fate, I am the master of my soul.” You may not be able to control all of what happens to you, but you can control how you react to it. When you can forgive, you are not buffeted by the whims and actions of others around you.

Holding onto the bitterness, refusing to forgive, is a poison you take yourself, often expecting it to have some ill effect on the other person. Reliving the story over and over again is like pouring acid on your own psyche. Meanwhile, the offender is not affected at all. Even if he or she had never apologized, the gift of forgiveness is as much for one’s own piece of mind as it is for the other person.

Occasionally I hear people say, “I never forgive.” If we all were to live by those words, we would not be able to function in society. In reality, when we depend on other people to get anything done, we forgive all of the time. Working together, day in and day out, to meet challenging goals inevitably involves people making mistakes. A thousand times a day, we are forgiving the minor annoyances and blunders.

Wherever people need other people, and the workplace is certainly that, people make mistakes and we let them go. Someone makes a sharp remark in a meeting, you let it roll off without further discussion. At other times, there is an acknowledgment and commitment to do better the next time. Maybe an employee missed a deadline for a report. She admits the error, you forgive her, and move on. The embarrassment of forgetting a lunch date with a colleague is not the end of the friendship. Sometimes we can only shrug our shoulders and sigh.

You can't get organisms that are willing to hang in there with each other through thick and thin and make good things happen despite the roadblocks and the bumps along the way if they aren't willing to tolerate each other's mistakes.

—MICHAEL McCULLOUGH

Forgiving Yourself

Maybe the hardest person for you to forgive is yourself. The past can haunt us. Things that we did wrong years ago can still sit aching on our hearts. The memory of those events can sometimes paralyze us in the present. Or we can acknowledge them, learn from them, forgive ourselves, and commit to doing better in the future.

When I recognize one of those parts of myself that I like the least—those habits and patterns that become traps—there is a voice in my head that is pretty harsh: “Yep, Stupid. You did it again.” First, I have to tune my conscious mind to hear that voice. Then I can reframe it: “This is that part of me that drives me crazy. I’ll keep working on it.” This is the beginning of forgiving myself. I have found I can then more easily translate that patience and willingness to forgive to others—the clerk at the grocery store who seems painfully slow, the employee who is on the phone dealing with some personal problem. Yes, I need to talk to him about using company time to conduct personal business. At the same time, I can practice being more willing to give him an opportunity to correct his behavior: I become more willing to forgive and begin anew.

If I could ever see Cheryl again I would apologize. Some thirty-five years ago, she was a bright high school student who came in every afternoon in the work-study program to shelve books in the school library I managed. She did much more than shelve books, however. She became an indispensable right hand for so many of the tasks that were waiting to be done—that person I could turn to and simply ask, “Cheryl, can you take care of this?” Done. When school was out and the program was over, we said good-bye. She applied for a real job and listed me as a reference. She had to call me three times to remind me that the future employer was waiting for that letter of reference.

In hindsight, I have stood accused in my own mind, over and over

again, of not sitting down immediately and writing that letter. Forgiving myself is consciously letting go of that guilt. Forgiving myself has also meant a personal commitment to fulfill the requests I receive now as quickly as possible. Continuing to beat myself up over it serves no one.

Consider This

- ☑ Think about your own experience as a manager. What regrets do you hold onto?
- ☑ For each regret, write down a lesson you can learn from those experiences.
- ☑ Consciously forgive yourself for your mistake, and commit instead to remembering what you learned.

How to Forgive

Sometimes the wounds are so deep that letting go and forgiving seem just too hard to do. If you recognize yourself here, if you tend to hold onto grudges and find it difficult to allow people back into your circle of trust, begin by forgiving people for some of the small stuff. As you practice those smaller moments of forgiveness, the larger ones can become more possible to consider. In those situations, think of forgiveness as a process. It is not as simple as saying, "I forgive you." It takes time, energy, and effort. Sometimes, when the pain has been particularly deep, you may need to revisit the process of forgiveness again and again. Here are some steps to follow:

1. Make a commitment to yourself to do what is necessary to feel better. Forgiveness is for you and not for anyone else. To decide to forgive is a choice for you to make.
2. Know exactly how you feel about what happened and be able to articulate what about the situation is not okay. It can help to tell a trusted person about your experience, or write down what happened.
3. Imagine as vividly as you can what the other person experienced.
4. Identify all the reasons you can think of *not* to forgive. Make a list. Write them down. Often making this list allows you to recognize how trivial some of those reasons are.

5. Think of times in your life when your wrong actions have hurt or disappointed others. None of us is perfect. None of us is without fault. It is much easier to forgive others when we remember our own weaknesses and failings. We all need to be forgiven from time to time.
6. Consider the expectations that the person didn't meet. Identify what it costs you to hold on to those expectations.
7. Accept responsibility for your own role in what happened.
8. Design and execute a ritual for completion and closure. This can be simple: throw the list you have made into a fire, or throw a pebble into the river declaring your intention for the past to be washed downstream, or bury the list in the garden, or ...
9. Instead of mentally replaying your hurt, seek out new ways to get what you need. Put your energy into looking for another way to get your positive goals met.

Consider This

- List the people that you need to forgive.
- Choose one person from this list, and create a plan for how you will forgive that person.

When Forgiveness Is Not Forgiveness

When you tell people you forgive them, you are making a commitment to them to let the offense go. Holding on to the bitterness or resentment is not forgiveness. Continuing to remind the other person of his or her transgression and how magnanimous you have been to forgive is not forgiveness. Fully forgiving and rebuilding the trust between you that has been broken takes time. Not allowing that process the time that it requires, being unwilling to begin to rebuild the trust, is not forgiving. Here are some tips on how you can recognize your failure to truly forgive:

- ▶ You keep reminding the person of incidents in the past.
- ▶ You ruminate over past hurts or offenses.
- ▶ You use past experience as an excuse to avoid interactions irrationally.

For example, having been bitten by a stray dog, it is reasonable to be wary of strange dogs. It is not rational to be afraid of *all* dogs—those you know well or who are closely monitored by their owners. Likewise, wariness with new relationships may be wise, while being unwilling to create new relationships at all can be crippling.

Note

1. June A. Halper, “Stop the Bellyaching.” *USA Today*, May 2007.
http://guttmandev.com/pdf/halper_usatoday0507.pdf, viewed 11/10, 2010.