

Apologies That Heal

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Editor's note: Cedar Barstow continues to reflect and develop her approach to clinical and community ethics through right use of power by considering here the nature of apologies.

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Abstract

The importance and effectiveness of apologies are explored within both healing and leadership contexts. Ineffective approaches are noted as well as guidelines for making them more helpful and useful.

“David, tell Randy you’re sorry.”

“Sorry.”

The mother takes 7-year-old David to another part of the playground. By the sound of the “saaaaawry,” I’m guessing that David was being obedient, but he didn’t really know what he did, didn’t feel like it was his fault, and wasn’t sorry at all. As adults, we hear (or even give) apologies like “I’m sorry you felt hurt.” “If I did something that hurt you, I’m sorry.” “I apologize, but I was really distracted by something else.” “I’m sorry, but you should know that I really love you and you shouldn’t take it so personally. It’s just the way I am.” “I’m sorry, but you are really making too big a deal of this. It is just a little thing.” “I apologize, but give me a break.” “I’m sorry for the problem you had. My assistant is normally on top of things.” When we give such an apology, we can say, as 7-year-old David did, “But I apologized!” However, when the apology (as in the examples above), is an inauthentic or inadequate apology, it doesn’t heal, it doesn’t resolve, it doesn’t soothe, and the hurt remains unmoved.

Authentic and effective apology is at the core of healing, clarifying, and restoring interpersonal, organizational, and cross-cultural relationships. A real and well-thought-out apology can, like forgiveness, interrupt the cycle of anger, revenge, and hatred. However, making a genuine apology causes the giver to be extremely vulnerable. You are admitting directly to another that you did something that caused them harm. This is humbling! Doing so is also challenging

because it’s like leaping off a cliff into the unknown. You are not in charge of how your apology will be received. Your efforts could be harshly rejected; your hopes for healing thrown back in your face.

A client of mine spent some months working with his shame about having abused his younger sister. From a most humble place, he wrote her an apology in the hope that this could be a first step in restoring their relationship. Several weeks later, the letter was returned to him with “Rejected. You will not be forgiven.” written across his words. He was devastated. Over time he began to look at what he *could* do rather than grieving for the loss of his relationship with his sister.

His sister couldn’t accept his apology, but he could demonstrate that he had learned and changed by volunteering at a women’s crisis center. He also could be proud that he had broken many generations of family history by not abusing his own daughters. He was proud of these actions, and they had shifted his inner wound from the shame of feeling unforgivable to the fact of being un-forgiven. He could now move on.

I asked a few of my friends to remember a time when they needed to and did offer someone an apology. Usually, we rightly focus on the feelings and needs of the hurt person, but I wondered what the apologizer got from the process. This is what I heard: “I got to let go of at least some of my guilt.” “The apology was accepted. It repaired the relationship, and the friendship actually got better.” “In the process

of getting to being able to apologize, I went through all my defenses and finally got to see something about myself that I didn't like and face the truth about a familiar and hurtful pattern I had been denying or at least had been unaware of. This was hard work. Once I got it, the apology was easy." "Honestly, I don't know if I got anything at all. It was really like just getting it out of the way." "It was unbelievably relieving for me." "It took such courage. I try so hard to be 'good,' and it was painful but freeing to be able not only to see but to take responsibility for doing a bad thing." "I learned that it's really okay to make mistakes. What isn't okay is not to apologize for them and learn from them." Apologies open big doors. As John Kador (2009, pp. 43–44) puts it, "Apology is the bravest gesture we can make to the unknown.

. . . Apologies unmask all the hopes, desires, and uncertainties that make us human because, at the moment of genuine apology, we confront our humanity most fully. At the point of apology we strip off a mask and face our limitations. No wonder we hesitate."

Now, what is the value of apology to the one who has been wounded? Opportunity for restoring relationship, de-escalating conflict, re-balancing power, recovering dignity, letting go and moving on, stopping a cycle of resentment and revenge, and increasing trust in the human capacity for goodness and truth. This is a strong litany. From the biggest perspective, "Quarrels often escalate into serious conflicts on the fulcrum of apology. . . . Throughout human history, endless cycles of revenge and untold suffering have resulted from the denial of effective apology. It's a tragedy because apology has the power to defuse almost all human conflicts" (Kador, 2009, p. 45).

In my book, *Right Use of Power: The Heart of Ethics*, and in my ethics programs, I talk about resolving difficulties as one of the most important and challenging skills to learn as leaders and human beings. I describe five things that most people need to hear for an injured relationship to be restored. Not all of these things will be essential in all situations, but at least one—and probably more—will be needed. Here they are:

1. Acknowledgement, 2. Understanding, 3. Regret, 4. Learning, and 5. Repair (Barstow, 2006, p. 160). Making "...a genuine apology or an authentic expression of. . . .regret" is the complete description of number three. With a deep bow to John Kador for his excellent book, *Effective Apology—Mending Fences, Building Bridges, and Restoring Trust*, I want now to suggest how one can make an apology (#3) with greater wisdom and skill.

Kador (2009, p. 124) also names five dimensions in making an effective apology: 1. Recognition, 2. Responsibility, 3. Remorse, 4. Restitution, and 5. Repetition. Here's more about each of these.

Recognition. Apology requires recognition that what you did was wrong or harmful. The injured person needs to know that you understand your offense and that you are apologizing for the right thing. "I'm sorry I hurt you" is not sufficient because it is not sufficiently specific. "I'm sorry I spoke to you in a disrespectful way" is better. You need to face and name your offensive action. Doing so calls for humility and vulnerability. It is more effective when both parties agree on the facts of what happened, but sometimes when there is disagreement, you need to give up your need for this aspect of closure. "Apology is basically giving up our struggle with history. Contested facts invariably lie at the heart of botched apologies" (Kador, 2009, p. 52).

Responsibility. In this dimension you take full responsibility for your offense without being defensive, making excuses, offering long explanations, or blaming anyone else. "You misunderstood me. What I meant was" or ". . . . and what's your part in this?" won't get you anywhere and might even make matters worse. "I take responsibility for being angry, using mean words, and hitting you" is clear and direct. In my program, dimension two is *understanding* ("They want to know what happened or what your intention was.") I personally have experienced times in which an explanation of my intention or my process was helpful. However, I agree with Kador that explanations can defuse an apology and that the best time for giving an explanation or stating your intention is later on, if at all. "In general, explanations burden apologies. . . .When victims first consider an apology, they don't care about intentions. All they care about are consequences. Explanations have an unfortunate tendency to serve the needs of the wrongdoer more than the wronged" (Kador, 2009, p. 67).

Remorse. Here you use the words "I'm sorry," or "I apologize." It seems there isn't any substitute for these exact words accompanied by appropriate feeling. The little boy on the playground used the right words, but he didn't accompany the words with the much-needed non-verbal cues that would have demonstrated genuine feelings of remorse, humility, vulnerability, and respect. "I wish it hadn't happened," or "I wish I could do it over again" just don't have the needed affect at the moment when "I apologize" is needed.

Restitution. You need to make amends. You need to offer an appropriate action. "I was careless with your bicycle,

and I will take it to a bike shop tomorrow to get it fixed and tuned up.” Restitution should go one step beyond the actual harm done, as in this example of having the bike tuned up in addition to simply having it fixed. In my program—number five, *repair*—I talk about the question, “What is needed here for relationship repair?” While this can be a useful, heartfelt question because it conveys a desire to reconnect and restore the relationship, in the apology process it is usually advisable not to ask the injured person what restitution they want because they may not know or may ask for something greater than what you can offer. It is most often best to make an offering yourself.

We sometimes hear the words, “Don’t admit you made a mistake because it will be held against you in court.” Offering some restitution would seem dangerous because it clearly admits guilt. However, this understanding is not supported by facts. “An expression of regret combined with an offer of restitution actually reduces punitive measures and lowers the odds of litigation. Restitution is not cost-free, but it is almost always less costly and destructive to the relationship than protracted litigation” (Kador, 2009, p. 99). “The last thing a plaintiff’s lawyer wants to introduce in court is evidence of a contrite physician who issued an apology” (Kador, 2009, p. 219).

Repetition. Here you say what you have learned, how you have changed, and how things will be different in the future. This action in my program is aspect number four, *learning*: “They [the injured party] want reassurance that you’ve learned something and will act differently in the future.” Repetition in making an effective apology goes further. It is a commitment to not repeat the offending action. For example, “I’ve learned that I have poor boundaries. I revealed confidential information about you. I will not do this again. I hope over time you will be able to trust me again.” This commitment to change is critically important to the success of the apology.

Some General Considerations

Ifs or Buts. Don’t use them! Statements like, “I apologize if I said anything offensive,” or “I’m really sorry, but I only said this because you said that” neutralize or worsen the injury by making the apology conditional; in effect they deny responsibility (Kador, 2009, p. 203–204).

Assumptions: You may be attempting to express your empathy, but “I know exactly how you feel” doesn’t really add to the process. It is much better to enter the dialogue by expressing interest in and concern about how the person is truly feeling. For example, “I wonder how I’d feel if . . .” is

better than “If I were in your shoes, I’d . . .” (Kador, 2009, p. 209–210).

Form. Begin your apology with “I.” This word makes it clear that this is a personal response from you. Don’t ramble on. Being simple, clear, and concise is more powerful and effective than an overly long apology (Kador, 2009, p. 211).

Timing. When the offense is small, immediacy is best. A simple, “I’m sorry I stepped on your foot” will be enough. Without this simple apology, the relationship “bag” gets full of remembered incidents that can be interpreted as a lack of awareness or respect by the other party. This will then require a larger apology and a more complex process for increasing trust. When the offense is great, however, time to think it through, cool off, or do some psychological processing is needed.

Form. Apologizing in person is usually the most successful. An email, which can be easily misunderstood, does not convey emotion well. However, when a CEO or a government official needs to apologize, a written apology may be the only available way.

The other side of offering an apology is accepting one. On the receiving side, you must discern whether the apology is genuine and also whether it feels satisfactory. Accepting is just accepting. It doesn’t automatically include trusting or forgiving. Rebuilding trust happens over time. Forgiveness is a separate process. When you do accept an apology, it is important to make an acknowledgment. Responses like “It was nothing,” or “Don’t worry about it,” or “You don’t need to apologize,” or “It’s too late,” have the effect of dismissing the intended communication. They trivialize a vulnerable moment. Before learning about the apology process, I had thought that when I said, “It was nothing,” I was being kind, generous, and forgiving.” I now understand it to be disrespectful. When the apology is genuine, it is best to say, “I accept your apology.” The interaction needs to be complete and acknowledged. A friend’s “I’m sorry I’m late. I know that caused you some extra work.” deserves my recognition of her humility and awareness of her negative impact. “Thank you. I accept your apology” works well as a response.

An apology can move mountains. A half-hearted one can make things worse. A sincere and well-crafted apology can restore relationships.

Apology as High-Road Leadership

When you are looking for a good leader, one of the most discerning things to ask is whether or not the leader can

apologize and take responsibility for repairing relationships and situations. It seems, however, that the path to making an apology is strewn with obstructions. Here are a few: Leaders may fear that an apology will make them seem weak rather than powerful. Those in positions of power are often removed or even protected from hearing negative feedback and so don't know when an apology is needed. Leaders don't understand the anatomy of apology and thus don't do it effectively. Leaders can over-identify with their up-power roles and forget their capacity to cause great harm. When given role power, leaders tend to lose touch with their natural empathy and compassion. Leaders can understand and use power as control, manipulation, force, and exploitation; in this understanding of power, the leader is not even aware that making an apology is an option.

Just as increased responsibility accompanies increased power, so the power of apology increases when genuinely offered by a leader. In actual practice, making an apology reduces the likelihood of legal action, as noted earlier. Effective leaders make genuine apologies. Effective apologizers model what could be called "high-road leadership."

Here's an inspiring story from Canada as described by Jocelyn Orr (personal communication). "Sitting in the Hakomi training circle during the Right Use of Power segment taught by Cedar Barstow, we were instructed on The five aspects of a good apology (recognition, responsibility, remorse, restitution, repetition). I realized that the hearing I had attended as moral support to one of my clients, had quite closely followed these guidelines.

My client and I sat together in a small room with two other women; one a lawyer representing Canada (who referred to herself as 'Canada' throughout the hearing), and another who was the time and record keeper. The agenda was clearly outlined to my client and the process began by Canada's opening remarks. Canada spoke in the first person and she gently and kindly articulated *Recognition* of the terrible wrongs that she, Canada, had inflicted upon my client. She spoke in general terms but acknowledged that the meeting we were about to participate in was to recognize the specific injuries inflicted upon this woman. Canada took full *responsibility* for what my client had suffered, and she expressed *remorse*. We then went forward with the hearing, which required my client to speak of her personal abuse and suffering. Often Canada would stop the process to ask clarifying questions or to gently give the survivor whatever time she needed to gather herself and continue. Canada had specific questions, but my client was generally free to tell her story in her own way and time.

Canada concluded the meeting with closing remarks, which again expressed *recognition*, *responsibility* and *remorse* for the terrible experiences and loss of childhood my client suffered. She spoke of the inadequacy of this form of *restitution*, but stated that this was the best she, as a nation, could do at this point in our history. 'No sum of money will ever fully compensate you for your suffering, and for that I am so very sorry,' she *repeated*. I was brought to tears by the experience. As my client and I left the building, she expressed her feelings to me: 'You know, the money is really of no consequence. Having this experience is what I really needed. I feel my country has apologized to me, and I feel a greater degree of healing as a result.'

For leaders—and we are all leaders in some aspects of our lives—who are dedicated to right uses of power, the practice of apology has pro-active value. Kador (2009, pp. 223–224 and 239) describes three evolutionary shifts that accompany the practice of apology.

First, "Practicing apology challenges ingrained attitudes about power and accountability." As a leader you must come to see that power requires your accountability. Granting you executive immunity is simply a way of helping you avoid your responsibility.

"Dealing with emotions of apology" comes next. As a leader you must learn to recognize when you have caused harm, be willing to bear knowing the harm you have caused without getting lost in shame, and be capable of the ego vulnerability of offering an apology even when you don't know how your apology will be received. Finally, you must be able to self-correct. This is true, non-defensive self-awareness.

The third requirement is cultivating "a disposition favorable to personal transparency." Learning the emotional and practical aspects of apology serves more than the particular relationship it is attempting to repair. Apology also significantly shifts our understanding of power toward a new paradigm in which we use it with wisdom and skill to heal and repair harm, evolve situations and relationships, and promote the common good.

Apologies may be as simple as expressing remorse for stepping on someone's foot or as deep and complex as apologizing for national abuses of power to minorities or other down-power groups: American Indians, blacks, military women who have been raped, aboriginal peoples, children who have been abused by the clergy, or victims of genocide. Apologies can be as interpersonal as between mother and daughter or as multi-personal as a representative of an

organization apologizing for the offenses of many in the organization.

Here are two personal stories. The first is a simple interaction between my seven-year-old goddaughter and myself; the second has a larger context.

Batia Rose, age 7, my goddaughter, usually has my full attention for several hours after school on Tuesdays. This Tuesday, however, I had a few things I needed to do, and so we didn't get as long as usual to play with the dolls. From her point of view, the dolls need to get fed and dressed and have a chance to play. We use blankets to make a house. We light candles around the room. It is elaborate. This Tuesday we got the house made, lit the candles, and got the dolls dressed, but there was no time to play. Batia was upset. "Why did we do all this when we didn't have time to play? I don't want to just sit and look at how beautiful it is!" "You feel kind of cheated, huh?" "Yes. I want my time to play." She lay down on the floor, sobbing. I sat and waited. After a while I could hear her quieting herself. "You're calming yourself down. That's a good thing to do." Pause. "Cedar, I have an idea for next time." "What is that?" "Well, next time you have things you have to do, you could tell me how long it will take and how much time we'll have left." "That's a really thoughtful suggestion. That way you won't be taken by surprise like today. I'll be happy to do that next time. And I am sorry that you felt hurt today because I didn't tell you what was happening." Our relationship was quickly repaired.

Marian is a Native American elder from a tribe in New Mexico. We met at a gender reconciliation workshop led by Cynthia Brix and Will Keepin. Gender reconciliation is brave, intense, and vulnerable work. The personal hurt and anger shared needs a safe container. Marian sat across the room from me. The warmth of her smile and the compassion in her eyes was potent. She radiated safety. She offered a native prayer in support of the earth and the best of humanity.

I sought her out at lunch for a conversation I was longing to have. I asked her if I could talk with her about something that lay heavy on my heart. She nodded and I spoke. "For 25 years I have been a member of a group of people who do outdoor ceremonial dances in which we call the four directions, drum and rattle, and dance together around a central pole. Obviously we are including things that have come from what we understand about native traditions. I know that many Native Americans rightly feel that white people co-opt and trivialize their sacred ways. If you came to our ceremony, I don't know how you would

feel. But drumming and our understanding of the four directions are important and meaningful to us. We are grateful. I don't know if I have any right, but I want to ask for your personal permission to use these things." I paused. Marian nodded. "I promise that I will never trivialize these things. I tell you that the Native American influence has been a great gift to us. The drum has taught us about honoring and entraining to the heartbeat of community. Feeling the energies and guidance of the geographical directions has re-connected us to the beauty and wisdom of the earth." Long pause. Another nod.

"There's one other thing. Can I say more?" "Yes." "My ancestors arrived in New England in the mid-1600s. They received help and learned how to live on this new land from local natives. My ancestors were white people who then treated your people as less than human. My ancestors stole your people's land, disobeyed treaties, killed your people, imprisoned your people, and destroyed your cultures. And we have not yet made it right. We came to America to escape persecution and then went against our own values of freedom and pluralism. I offer you my personal apology." Pause. I see tears in Marian's eyes. "I re-dedicate myself to helping people learn how to use their power and influence to repair situations both big and small that have caused harm and suffering." Marian nods. "Thank you for receiving these words, Marian."

Marian speaks through tears. "I am one who goes out to see what's going on outside the reservation. I come back and sometimes tell the elders about what I see and experience. We know that what we find out there, we will also find in our tribe, and what we find in our tribe, we will also find out there." "What stories will you be bringing back from this workshop?" I ask. "I will tell stories that they will hear. I will tell them that I met this woman (you). I will tell them what you just said. They may be surprised. Hopefully, they will receive and accept your words. Thank you."

In our book, *Living in the Power Zone*, my husband, Reynold Ruslan Feldman, and I refer to the power zone as a range of responses to situations that are discerning, healthy, appropriate, and skillful. There are a number of power parameters that we suggest our readers explore. For example, how do you tend to respond on four continuums: 1. being directive vs. responsive, 2. persisting vs. letting go, 3. being task-focused vs. relationship-focused, or 4. being firmly bounded vs. flexibly bounded? (page 73) Effective, respectful, and skillful leaders have honed their ability to respond to situations by discerning what is appropriate

along each continuum. Less effective and skillful leaders get stuck in habitual responses that are appropriate for some situations but not for others. For example, they place such high value on being responsive as leaders that they can't shift to being directive when the task or team requires it. Leaders who abuse their power get stuck in responses from the extremes of each continuum. For example, leaders who are extremely task-focused (or profit-focused) become manipulative, forceful, and exploitive. Leaders who are extremely relationship focused abuse their power by taking advantage of friendships, crossing boundaries, controlling, shaming, and/or letting a task fall apart. Both task and relationship are necessary. It is habitual behavior at the extremes that causes great harm and suffering.

Apologizing is another power parameter. Some leaders (especially women) over-apologize. They may do so for accidentally brushing against someone. They apologize for sitting in a chair that later someone else wanted. They apologize for opening a window to let in some fresh air. They apologize as a strategy for deflecting conflict or making sure everyone likes them. Many years ago, as a new administrator, I thought that if I apologized first, others would join me and share the responsibility. Oops! In my organization, when I apologized, I was happily given all the blame and all the responsibility. My apologies diminished both me and my power.

There are other leaders who make it a policy to never apologize, convinced that apologizing shows weakness and lack of vision. Leading from this policy can permanently rupture relationships, compromise the leader's humanity, and lead to a deteriorating work environment.

Always apologizing and never apologizing are ineffective and damaging. Leaders who use apology wisely and well have learned how to discern when they have done something hurtful; know how to offer an apology simply, directly, and humbly; and are ready to self-correct and move on. Yes!

Here is an excellent summary of this article from Kador (2009, pp. 201-202):

In wholehearted apology, the kind that recipients find immediately satisfying, the offender

- Offers a detailed factual record of the events related to the offense, specifying the offense in plain language without a hint of defensiveness;
- Accepts undiluted moral responsibility for the offense on the offender's own behalf
- Categorically expresses regret for the conduct;

- Takes practical responsibility for the offense; and
- Signals that the offender has learned the error of his or her ways and promises not to do it again.
- In halfhearted apology, the offender
- Hints at the offense at the heart of the injury and argues the facts;
- Attempts to share responsibility;
- Shades the issue of personal regret;
- Resists taking practical responsibility for the offense beyond words; and
- Disregards the issue of repetition.
- In non-apology, which may take the form of an apology but has no apologetic meaning, the offender
- Disputes the facts and defends the offender's actions;
- Sidesteps accepting responsibility except in the most impersonal, non-causal way;
- Avoids expressing personal remorse;
- Rejects providing restitution; and
- Suggests that in the same circumstances the offender will pursue the same offensive conduct

Right Use of Power facilitator, Magi Cooper, works with men who are in habitually abusive relationships. They are familiar with half-hearted or non-apologies described in the list above. With these clients, Magi uses a variation of the apology process described in this article that she finds to be remarkably effective. It has three parts: "This is what I regret (describe behavior and impact)." Then, "This is what I am going to do about it so it doesn't happen again (describe specific actions)." And lastly, "Is there anything you need from me right now about this?" Her languaging is colloquial and the steps are simple and easy to respond to. The process gets to the core of the matter.

Apology is a topic worthy of deep and thoughtful attention. Sincere and well-considered apologies can heal personal relationships, improve organizational dynamics, and de-escalate conflict, interrupt harmful generational patterns, lead to forgiveness, and even stop wars. Learning to apologize well is worthy work of the heart and essential to using personal and role power wisely and well.

References

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