

The Power of Apology

Whether at a personal level or as a leader of an organization, apology is one of the most powerful ways to defuse and move on from a mistake or a negative situation. Apologizing well is a quality of good leadership, effective conflict management and just plain old-fashioned good manners.

Apology was prominent in the news when Steven Truscott was acquitted on August 28, 2007 by the Ontario Court of Appeal. Ontario Attorney-General Michael Bryant said the Crown would not appeal the decision and apologized to Truscott. "The court has found in this case, in light of fresh evidence, a miscarriage of justice has occurred - and for that miscarriage of justice, on behalf of the government, I am sorry." He went on to say that the government of Ontario "will fully co-operate" in any compensation request.

For governments, apology is linked with compensation. Governments say how sorry they are with money. The compensation amount for Steven Truscott has not yet been publicly announced.

Steven Truscott was convicted of the murder of Lynne Harper, who was found on June 11, 1959, raped and strangled in a woodlot in Huron County. On September 30, 1959 Steven Truscott, age 14, was found guilty and sentenced to hang. The sentence was later commuted to life imprisonment and Truscott remained in jail until he was released on parole in October, 1969. He lived under the cloud of his murder conviction for 48 years. What is the number of dollars that provides compensation for this?

Another recent (July, 2007) but lower profile example is the mistake made by an Ontario Cabinet staff member who hit "reply" rather than "forward" on an email from a job seeker who is black and who thus found out that he was referred to as the "ghetto dude". After the

mistake became public, Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty phoned to make a personal apology to the student who had applied for a media analyst position. In the context of the Ontario election looming in October, 2007, the phone call was made after Opposition Leader John Tory, pressed the Premier to apologize because "that kind of language or inference is not acceptable".

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Leaders are expected to apologize when mistakes happen under their watch. Trying to blame others or cover up just compounds the original problem. The leader who apologizes shows that she or he takes responsibility and may have the effect of defusing the situation. Without the apology, the organization may suffer lowered morale and the leadership capability of the leader or manager will likely be questioned.

On the other hand, having the boss repeatedly say "I'm sorry" can backfire. Frequent apologies may not sound sincere. To avoid this, an apology may be sufficient from a manager lower in the chain of command for a matter of internal or lower significance. Where a mistake becomes known outside the organization and reflects badly on the organization as in the case of the "ghetto dude" matter, it is appropriate for the person at the top to apologize quickly and without trying to shift the blame.

"The chances of offence-causing incidents happening are growing as Canada's work force becomes more diverse and people increasingly communicate electronically through e-mails and

text messages, where subtleties of meaning and irony are not as obvious as they are in face-to-face communication", said business etiquette adviser, Louise Fox, quoted in the July 25, 2007 issue of the Globe and Mail.

Whether you are apologizing as a leader or in a personal context, one consideration is the legal implications of apology. Especially in jurisdictions without an Apology Act to shield an apology from implying legal liability, this remains a murky area. However prompt and effective apology can decrease the likelihood that an incident will end up in court at all.

Why is apology so hard? Two main reasons that people do not apologize are described in *On Apology*. We fear the reaction of the person to whom we apologize and secondly, we are embarrassed or ashamed of ourselves. Carol Travis and Elliot Aronson in their 2007 book *Mistakes were Made (But Not By Me)* offer this explanation: "As fallible human beings, all of us share the impulse to justify ourselves and avoid taking responsibility for any actions that turn out to be harmful, immoral or stupid...Most of us find it difficult if not impossible to say 'I was wrong; I made a terrible mistake.'" Their theory is that cognitive dissonance, the tension experienced when we believe two inconsistent ideas at once, drives us to resolve that absurdity by trying to make sense of the contradiction. We try to justify ourselves even if only in our own minds.

For tips on how to apologize well, see Munn-thly Memo in this issue of Common Ground.

For more about apology see Common Ground # 29 "Apologies, Non-Apologies and Dispute Resolution" at www.munnrcs.com

Tools of the Trade - On Apology

by Aaron Lazare

Oxford University Press, 2004

This little paperback is an exploration of the humbling act of apology in many contexts. It is also a how-to guide. Lazare uses examples from stories of public and his own personal events to illustrate the effective use of apology in an easily readable format. The section on negotiating apologies identifies how apology can be designed to meet the needs of both parties, a useful consideration for the conflict resolver.

Bottom line: This is required reading for everyone who has ever made a mistake and who deals with conflict. Isn't that every one of us?

Munn-thly Memo

Q. A situation happened at work which resulted in our team leader being blamed by the boss for a screw up. I am partly responsible, but it wasn't my fault only. I was relying on information from others. After her meeting with the boss, the team leader was upset with me and told me in private that she expects an apology from me. Ever since then, the team leader has been very antagonistic and negative with me. Now it seems that she goes out of her way to be disagreeable to me. Should I apologize to her? What should I say?

A. First of all what not to do. Don't say "I'm sorry you were upset", at least not as your whole apology. Take responsibility for your part in the situation and don't focus on shifting the blame to others. Don't wait. Apologize as soon as possible.

According to Dr Aaron Lazare in *On Apology* these are the components of effective apology.

1. **Acknowledge the offence:** While this may seem obvious as a start to the process of apology, there are many examples of undermining the apology by failing to acknowledge the offence adequately.
 - Be specific about the offending behaviour.
 - Own up with clear language as in "I did it." Don't use the passive voice, "Mistakes may have been made."
 - Recognize the impact of your behaviour on the team leader and don't fall back on the fuzz factor of statements which minimize your responsibility such as "If mistakes were made..." or "If you were hurt..." These may have the effect of even compounding the offending behaviour.
 - If you say, "I'm sorry" be clear that you are not using that apparently empathic expression as a way of avoiding responsibility. An example of dodging responsibility is "I'm sorry you were upset."
 - Be clear about what you did that offended her. She may have been offended by your initial action that contributed to her being blamed by the boss. She may also be offended by your failure to acknowledge to the boss your role in the situation and by your delay in apologizing.
 - Always consider whether you are apologizing to the right person. In your situation it seems clear that you need to apologize to your team leader. Consider whether an apology to the boss is also appropriate.
2. **Communicate remorse:** An effective apology expresses the guilt or shame that you feel for the harm done. As a healthy way to move forward from that, remorse includes forbearance, a commitment that you will not do the offending behaviour again. While public apologies may be effective for the offended person even if they are not sincere, in a one-to-one situation such as yours, sincerity and honesty are crucial.
3. **Explanation:** An offended party may not find the apology satisfactory if it does not include an explanation. Before you meet with the team leader to apologize, consider the reasons that the situation occurred as it did. Remember that if the reasons you give seem to her to be dishonest, manipulative or an insult to her intelligence, your explanation may serve to aggravate rather than calm the situation. Respond honestly if she seeks an explanation by asking questions such as "Why did this happen?" An offended person often assesses whether she can expect similar problems in future, and therefore whether she needs to take action to forestall future occurrences.
4. **Reparation:** In situations where reparation can completely restore the loss, reparation may be the dominant feature of an apology. Even when it cannot restore the loss as in the Truscott situation described in the article above, reparation is also important as part of the apology because it indicates the apologizer's or society's serious view of the offending situation.

Consider what you can offer to the team leader to make amends. Would it help if you were to explain your role in the situation to the boss? What if you were to apologize to her in a team meeting? Maybe you could offer symbolic reparation such as making a donation to the team leader's favourite charity, or arranging a way to support or honour her in the workplace. When you meet with her to apologize ask, "Is there anything I can do to make it up to you?" Warning: even generous reparations may cause the apology to fail if the other aspects of the apology are not handled well.

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Electronic Common Ground

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Kathryn Munn, LL.B., Cert.ConRes., C. Med., is a mediator, arbitrator, facilitator and lawyer. Through her firm Munn Conflict Resolution Services she works exclusively in alternate dispute resolution from a base in London, Ontario. She is a Roster Mediator, Ontario Mandatory Mediation Program - Toronto / Ottawa / Windsor, a mediator under contract to the Farm Debt Mediation Service of Canada, insurance industry ombudservices and for Canadian government departments.

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