

## Sample Interviews: Fuzzy Zoeller's Apology to Tiger Woods

The following sample interviews demonstrate how Sharon Ellison can focus on several different aspects of any interaction. Using a well-reported incident between Fuzzy Zoeller and Tiger Woods, she focuses on

- whether Zoeller's comments to Woods were racist
- whether Zoeller's apology was sincere, and
- how a different outcome could have been created using non-defensive communication techniques

An interview might cover just one or all three of the related topics. In the examples below, the short interviews take a matter of seconds. The three longer interviews range from approximately 250 words to 700 words.

Background information: San Francisco Chronicle

"Sound-Bite" interview regarding racism issue

"Sound-Bite" interview regarding the apology

"Sound-Bite" interview regarding how to create a different outcome

Longer interview regarding the racism issue

Longer interview regarding the apology

Longer interview about how to create a different outcome

### **Brief Background:**

Excerpts from the *San Francisco Chronicle* article, May 21, 1997

Woods said last week he was disturbed that Zoeller walked away after making the fried-chicken remark, then turned and added, 'and collard greens, or whatever it is they serve.'

Zoeller's later remarks: 'I did do apologies. I told him I meant no harm by it,' . . . 'I'm relieved . . . 'It's over. . . 'The only thing I'm upset about is that I had to buy his lunch,' Zoeller said, again trying to play the incident for a laugh.

Woods indicated he saw the matter as a racial incident and not as an innocent joke misinterpreted, as Zoeller maintained.

Woods accepted the apology . . . .

## Three Samples of “Sound-Bite” Interviews:

### 1. Zoeller’s comments: are they racist?:

**Interviewer:** Do you think that Fuzzy Zoeller’s comments were racist, as Woods claimed?

**Sharon:** Absolutely. When Zoeller referred to collard greens or whatever “they” serve, he generalized, implying that all African Americans eat the same food.

He also called African Americans “they” right in front of Woods who has some African ancestry. Such phrasing is classic textbook racism.

**If the interviewer wanted more clarification, I would give another example, such as:**

It would be like a man talking to one woman while generalizing about *all* women, as if she weren’t there, saying, “they” are emotional. While there is nothing pejorative about collard greens or emotions *per se*, the generalization and phrasing turns both comments into insults.

### 2. Zoeller’s apology:

**Interviewer:** Do you think that Fuzzy Zoeller’s apology was sincere?

**Sharon:** No. Immediately after apologizing, he said he “meant no harm,” so the real message is, “Tiger, you misunderstood me.”

**Additional possible comment:** People who say they “didn’t mean to offend” often receive credit for apologizing, while actually getting away with one more put-down.

### 3. How to create a different outcome:

**Interviewer:** What could Tiger Woods have done besides just accepting the apology?

**Sharon:** He could have asked Zoeller,

“Are you apologizing because you think you did something inappropriate, or because you think I misunderstood you?”

**Additional possible comment:** If Zoeller doesn’t think he did anything hurtful, Woods can respectfully let him know he doesn’t want an apology,

**Or,** Woods might even say he feels offended to receive an apology that really just blames him for not “getting” Zoeller’s “joke”.

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## **Three Samples of In-Depth Interviews:**

### **1. Zoeller’s comments: are they racist?:**

**Interviewer:** Do you think that Fuzzy Zoeller’s comments were racist, as Woods claimed?

**Sharon:** Absolutely. Zoeller’s comments and phrasing do five different things that are demeaning to Tiger Woods and anyone with African ancestors.

First, By using the word “*they*” in conjunction with serving fried chicken and collard greens, he speaks of African American by implication. I believe calling a group of people, “*they*” without identifying specifically whom you are referring to is racist.

Second, without stating directly that he is talking about African Americans, Zoeller has stereotyped them as all eating the same food.

Third, in the phrase “or whatever it is they serve,” “whatever” is used dismissively, implying that even if “their” menu didn’t include collard greens, Zoeller still wouldn’t like it. An extension of this implication is that African Americans have a very limited menu and thus “*they*” are simple and lack sophistication.

Fourth, calling African American people "they" in front of Woods, who is partially of African decent, simultaneous appears to set him apart from that group at the same time it obviously includes him in the stereotype.

Fifth, Tiger's mother is part Thai; his father is part African-American, part Native American. Tiger is only one-quarter black. Even as a generalization, Zoeller's remark is way off base and implies that if Tiger has *any* African features, black stereotypes would fit him. For example, it suggests that Tiger's primary diet growing up was traditional African American food. Yet mothers usually prepare the family food, so it's more likely that if he his diet included any ethnic food, it might have been Thai.

**Interviewer:** Isn't that carrying it a little too far? If Zoeller insulted him with a stereotype, what difference does it even make whether it was accurate or not.

**Sharon:** Using racial stereotypes is one level insult, using a stereotype that isn't even accurate takes it to another level. It is something that is painful for many bi-racial people.

**Interviewer:** Couldn't this whole thing just have been Zoeller's way of kidding? You know, one of those male bonding jokes that sounds like a put-down?

**Sharon:** Are you wondering if it was the kind of humor used at a "roast," since Woods had just won a major tournament, and the discussion referred to the banquet?

**Interviewer:** Right.

While sarcastic, even caustic humor can be good fun and very bonding when done as a "roast," the main point I see here is that what Zoeller said is based on his stereotype about what black people eat. He wasn't honoring Woods with a joke slamming his talent, temperament, or some other personal characteristic.

To make a joke out of a racial or cultural stereotype, I think you have to be very close to that person and know that they will take it in good humor. I doubt that Zoeller and Woods had that kind of relationship. Also, a good friend would be *very* unlikely to call all the people in the friend's racial group "they," as if the friend weren't even there. I think Zoeller's "joke" crossed over the line from funny to demeaning.

**Interviewer:** Couldn't Zoeller have just been insensitive and not realize his "joke" was in bad taste?

**Sharon:** Some might say, "Oh, he's a good guy, he's just always kidding around." While I see truth there, I don't think we need terrible intentions to use harmful stereotypes. A lack of hurtful intention doesn't take the cruelty out of remarks that put salt in racial wounds. Fuzzy's *joke* had many of the postmarks of a racist message. In fact, my book discusses how people use jokes as a tool to make demeaning remarks and get away with it.

**Interviewer:** Tell me more.

**Sharon:** The method I believe Zoeller used here belongs in a category of defensive maneuvers I call "Surrender-Sabotage." The person pretends to be kidding in a friendly way, while using humor or sarcasm to put someone down. While the attack is almost always glaringly obvious to the person receiving it, the attacker has set it up so that he can deny any hurtful intention by later referring to it simply as a joke.

While I didn't personally hear Zoeller's tone when he made the remark, Woods said, "I have a problem with anyone saying it in that tone." This suggests Woods probably heard sarcasm in Zoeller's comments, which is typical of this kind of attack. Furthermore, if the person being attacked expresses displeasure, the attacker usually mounts a second form of attack, claiming that the victim "can't take a joke."

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## 2. Zoeller's apology:

**Interviewer:** What do you think of Fuzzy Zoeller's apology? Was it was sincere?

**Sharon:** I don't believe that Zoeller actually made a genuine apology. In fact, in my book I describe the type of bogus apology Zoeller used. Like his earlier sarcasm, it is a defensive tactic used in "Surrender-Sabotage." I call it, "Sorry-Denial of Intent" and translate this form of apology as follows:

Example: "I'm sorry you took it that way. It wasn't what I meant."

Translation: "I think it's too bad you had difficulty understanding me correctly."

In essence Zoeller uses his apology to *blame* Woods for the problem. Later, he referred to his apology by saying, "I did apologies," which has a flip quality to it that also diminishes any sense of sincerity.

(See article, [I'm Sorry! The New Blame Game](#))

**Interviewer:** Do you think that Zoeller was making a real attempt to set things right?

**Sharon:** No. In fact, he used the Surrender-Sabotage sarcasm for yet another putdown when he said,

The only thing I'm upset about is that I had to buy his lunch.

**Interviewer:** If all this is true, why do you think Tiger Woods accepted the apology?

**Sharon:** People accept a lot of counterfeit apologies. Using traditional communication, we haven't held people very accountable for their public conversations. I feel confident Woods knew the apology was insincere, but he might have been afraid that, if he refused it, he would be seen dragging out the conflict, holding a grudge, showing poor "sportsmanship."

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### **3. How to create a different outcome:**

**Interviewer:** If Tiger Woods believed Fuzzy Zoeller's apology was not sincere, is there anything Woods could have done besides accepting the apology?

**Sharon:** Yes, using non-defensive communication, he could have done several things.

**Interviewer:** Can you give an example?

**Sharon:** When Fuzzy first made his remark, Tiger could have asked,

“What people are you talking about—who serve fried chicken and collard greens?”

This would have required Zoeller to directly state that he was talking about African Americans, or to back off.

Woods could also have asked,

“Are you assuming that all black people eat the same food?”

Or he could ask,

“Are you assuming I like chicken and collard greens because I look like a black man to you?”

Or, yet again,

“Were you assuming that my mother cooked collard greens and fried chicken for me when I was growing up? Did you know that she is Thai?”

Or,

“Are you assuming that I grew up eating some kind of ethnic food?”

**Interviewer:** Aren't those questions rude?

**Sharon:** Not if they are asked in a *sincere*, curious tone. I think they are very direct and get at the issues behind the erroneous assumptions and stereotypes Zoeller was putting out. Ironically, at first, people see such questions *either* as showing too much vulnerability *or* as being too direct or blunt. My experience is, and many others tell me, that such questions are extremely effective in that they are disarming while still holding the other person accountable for what he or she says.

**Interviewer:** Well, if someone, say Tiger Woods, wasn't comfortable asking those questions, is there anything else he could do.

**Sharon:** One of the reasons I gave examples of several types of questions is because often a person will be not want to ask one question and find a slightly different question comfortable.

**Interviewer:** What if none of the questions is comfortable?

**Sharon:** He could have used a prediction to respectfully refuse the apology, saying perhaps,

“If you don’t believe you did something inappropriate, then I’d rather not receive an apology from you.

While the incident would still be painful, it is far less so than having to publicly accept an apology from someone who is really blaming us for not getting the *joke*. Refusing to accept such an apology can help any of us stand in dignity.

**Interviewer:** What kind of relationship will Woods be able to have with Zoeller if he doesn’t accept the apology?

**Sharon:** Probably a better one than if he has to swallow his pride and choke on a put-down in the guise of an apology. As it was, he ended up publicly accepting a false apology while getting another beating in the form of Zoeller’s public announcement that he wished he hadn’t had to take him to lunch.

**Interviewer:** Do you have any other thoughts about how to handle a situation like this.

**Sharon:** I’d like to see other respected people speak up more often, especially from within the community where any incident has happened. And I’d like to see Fuzzy Zoeller show some genuine curiosity and a desire to learn about how his words conveyed racist stereotypes.

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