

I'm Sorry! The New Blame-Game

When is an apology not really an apology?

What's wrong with saying, "I'm sorry if I hurt your feelings"?

How can you make sure an apology is authentic?

I think most of us at some time have felt hurt, angry and/or distanced from someone who has hurt our feelings with a comment, or who has failed to acknowledge our assistance with a task. Once someone has hurt our feelings for any reason, the pain can gnaw on us for a long time.

For example, you may help a co-worker on a project and not get any genuine appreciation in return. Or that person may not reciprocate with a helping hand when you need it. Your boss might implement your idea without crediting you. Someone may put you down in a meeting, or make a disrespectful comment about your age, race, gender, sexual orientation, or the quality of your work. At home, forgotten "Thank you" or an habitual "Oh, you always sound cranky in the morning" can create a brick wall between people, the effects of which have been vastly underrated.

In the workshops I facilitate, I have been told about hundreds of situations where a "seemingly insignificant" interaction has ruined someone's whole day. The impact of one comment can be tremendous, easily evolving into an ongoing power struggle that damages a personal or professional relationship. I think we are as finely tuned emotionally as we are molecularly. When we feel hurt, we need to find a way to heal the wound, just as surely as if it came from a gunshot.

If we talk to the person about our feelings, resolution may come in a couple of different ways: 1) we may get more information and realize that we misunderstood her or him, which removes the reason for feeling hurt; or 2) the person may recognize and acknowledge having done something hurtful, and feel regret. When making a sincere apology—a person's recognition of error and genuine sorrow can instantly heal damaged feelings.

An apology has to be real to heal. And there's the problem. From what I see, people seldom give genuine apologies any more. These inauthentic apologies have one overriding characteristic: *The person apologizing fails to be personally accountable for his or her own behavior.* An all-too-frequent corollary to this unaccountability is *transference of blame to the person who has felt offended.*

Let's look at the example of Trang Lei and Martha.

When Martha wanted to buy some new pieces of furniture and art for her house, she asked her friend Trang Lei, who had an exquisite eye for design, to go with her. Because Trang Lei had spent the whole day helping Martha pick just the right pieces, she felt taken for granted when Martha did not offer to pay for her lunch.

Weeks later, Trang Lei still felt distant from Martha, so she decided to talk to her about her feelings. Martha responded by saying, "I'm sorry. I was just so excited and engaged in what I was buying that I didn't even think about it." Despite Martha's "apology," Trang Lei did not feel better. In fact, she felt worse.

I believe Martha's response further damaged their relationship because it wasn't a real apology. In my book, *Don't Be So Defensive!*, I describe a category of apologies called "Sorry-Not-Sorry." The particular format that Martha used was "Sorry-Excuse." One person apologizes and then—in the same breath—rationalizes her/his attitude or behavior. Translated, Martha's apology reads like this: "I'm sorry you were upset with me even though I had no intention of hurting you and I think you should understand why I forgot given that I was so excited about my purchases."

By offering an excuse in her apology, Martha implies that her behavior was unintentional and beyond her conscious control. Moreover, Martha has an expectation that Trang Lei will accept the excuse as satisfactory resolution, rather than taking full accountability for her own inconsiderate behavior. In the process, Martha perpetuates the original problem by being more focused on herself than on Trang Lei.

If Trang Lei refuses to accept Martha's excuse, she might say angrily—"I don't care! You still could have bought my lunch or noticed that I had just spent my whole day with you!" Martha might respond, "You know I appreciate you! I'm sorry you can't understand that I might forget one little thing in my excitement!" Here, she sees Trang Lei as "not being very understanding," or being "too rigid" or "judgmental." Checkmate! In this blame-game the fault is transferred from the person who gave the hollow apology to the person receiving it.

If you have any doubts about whether this kind of apology transfers blame, the next time someone apologizes to you and follows it immediately with an

excuse, try not accepting that excuse and see whether the person remains apologetic or becomes irritated with you for not being understanding.

When we receive a bogus apology we often sense it. Rather than healing the hurt, the bogus apology just adds insult to injury. I think almost all of us have given such apologies.

Some people who offer "Sorry-Excuse" are being consciously manipulative in order to avoid responsibility. But I don't think such conscious manipulation is always the case. Over time, many of us have developed defensive habits, so that we apologize in ways that covertly deny responsibility. We can do several things to change how we deal with apologies, so an apology can once again become real and meaningful.

1. Identify common formats for apologies that are counterfeit.

If you identify and familiarize yourself various types of counterfeit apologies, you will more easily recognize when you are giving or receiving an apology that is not real. The phrasing used in the examples below reveals common indicators of a less-than-sincere apology.

"Sorry-Excuse"

Example: "I'm sorry I didn't call—I've been really busy."

Translation: You should understand that other things were more important than you."

"Sorry-Denial of Intent"

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

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

Example: "I'm sorry if I offended you."

Translation: I can't think of anything I did wrong, but if you think so, I'd be happy to apologize so I can get back in your good graces.

Example: "I'm sorry you felt that way."

Translation: I didn't have anything to do with it, but I'm sorry you are having a hard time.

"Sorry-Blame"

Example: "I'm sorry I didn't call sooner. Have you been feeling insecure about our relationship lately?"

Translation: If you are upset about my not calling, the real cause is your own insecurity, not anything I did.

You will probably be able to add to this list if you listen carefully to any apologies you hear.

2. Decline to accept an apology that is not given sincerely.

When you accept an apology, and then walk away knowing it wasn't real, you enter a world of make-believe: you pretend an issue is resolved while harboring resentments. In most cases, those residual feelings will make the situation worse instead of better.

Trang Lei had been practicing the Powerful, Non-Defensive Communication process I describe in my book. So, instead of just accepting Martha's apology, Trang Lei sincerely described her own experience, without being judgmental:

"The fact that you got so excited that you forgot to appreciate my part in it was exactly what hurt me. I had taken so much time and you didn't take the time to notice my efforts."

Martha then examined her own behavior more carefully and said,

"You're right, there is no excuse for not showing you my appreciation, especially since you took your only day off to help me."

Here, instead of focusing on her own excuse, Martha took full responsibility for her inconsiderate oversight. In doing so, she put a real focus on her genuine appreciation of Trang Lei, which she had completely omitted before.

When a person makes excuses or implies that you misunderstood, ask the person a direct question, such as:

- What is it that you believe you did that you are apologizing for?

- Do you believe you did anything inappropriate or hurtful?
- Did you do something you feel sorry for, or do you think I misunderstood you?

To be effective, your question must be sincere and gentle. Do not use a judgmental tone. If the person does not think he or she did anything to be sorry for, I recommend simply saying something like,

- "If you don't think you did anything, I'd rather you didn't apologize to me."
- "I only want you to apologize if you believe you did something hurtful."

If the person's apology strongly suggests you caused the problem, I might say,

- "I don't want to accept an apology from you when you believe I am the one who is actually creating the problem."

When you refuse to accept an insincere apology, you are refusing to reward behavior that is inherently manipulative and designed to pacify you while simultaneously shifting the blame to you. The effect of this can lift some of your resentment because you haven't surrendered to this blame-game. And you will probably feel less victimized. It can also give you a sense of personal empowerment and clarity. To be successful, it is vital not to get caught up in a power struggle if the person insists that you accept his or her apology. If the apology is not genuine, you don't have to argue; you can simply gently, but firmly refuse it. This is vital regardless of who the other person is—co-worker, intimate partner, or your child.

3. Only say "I'm sorry," when you mean it and can specify exactly what you are apologizing for.

When we give what I believe is a "healthy" or authentic apology, we can state clearly what we did that was disrespectful or inconsiderate without:

- immediately explaining why we did it,
- telling the person that however it looked or sounded, it wasn't our real intention, or,

- bringing up some other issue that suggests that the other person contributed to or caused the problem.

For example, we might say, "I'm sorry I haven't called you lately, especially since I knew you were having a hard time. I don't think there is any excuse for not letting you know in some way that I was thinking of you."

Or let's say you have been engrossed in an intense discussion during a meeting at work, and interrupted another person several times. He or she may never tell you, but may remember it. When you realize what you've done, a sincere apology might be, "I realize that I interrupted you several times during the meeting, and I'm sorry. I think it was disrespectful of you and your ideas."

If we can change how we give and receive apologies, we can become less defensive, gain insight, and strengthen all of our relationships. We can also serve as a strong model for others, including our children. They will observe that a real apology reflects personal character, gains the respect of others, and demonstrates great healing power.

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