

How to Apologize

Asking for Forgiveness Gracefully

Scott has just arrived at his staff meeting, and he can tell that his boss, Catherine, is stressed. He ignores the tension in the room, and launches into his carefully researched presentation.

After a few minutes, however, Catherine picks up on a tiny error and begins to berate Scott. She accuses him, and the rest of the team, of not pulling their weight. Her hurtful words embarrass Scott, and he leaves the meeting early because he's so upset.

As the days pass, Scott expects Catherine to apologize for her behavior. However, the apology never comes, and their relationship becomes strained, resentful, and unproductive. A few months later, Scott takes a position in another department.

In this situation, Catherine could have healed her relationship with Scott with a sincere apology after the meeting. But, instead, she lost a talented team member.

In this article, we'll see why apologies are so important, and we'll look at how to apologize with sincerity and grace when you've made a mistake.



Learn how to deliver a sincere apology.
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What is an Apology?

An apology is a statement that has two key elements:

1. It shows your remorse over your actions.
2. It acknowledges the hurt that your actions have caused to someone else.

We all need to learn how to apologize – after all, no one is perfect. We all make mistakes, and we all have the capability to hurt people through our behaviors and actions, whether these are intentional or not.

It isn't always easy to apologize, but it's the most effective way to restore trust and balance in a relationship, when you've done something wrong.

Why Apologize?

There are many reasons why you should make a sincere apology when you've hurt someone unnecessarily, or have made a mistake.

First, an apology opens a dialogue between yourself and the other person. Your willingness to admit your mistake can give the other person the opportunity he needs to communicate with you, and start dealing with his feelings.

When you apologize, you also acknowledge that you engaged in unacceptable behavior. This helps you rebuild trust and reestablish your relationship with the other person. It also gives you a chance to discuss what is and isn't acceptable.

What's more, when you admit that the situation was your fault, you restore dignity to the person you hurt. This can begin the healing process, and it can ensure that she doesn't unjustly blame herself for what happened.

Last, a sincere apology shows that you're taking responsibility for your actions. This can strengthen your self-confidence, self-respect, and reputation. You're also likely to feel a sense of relief when you come clean about your actions, and it's one of the best ways to restore your integrity in the eyes of others.

Consequences of not Apologizing

What are the consequences if you don't apologize when you've made a mistake?

First, you will damage your relationships with colleagues, clients, friends, or family. It can harm your reputation, limit your career opportunities, and lower your effectiveness – and, others may not want to work with you.

It also negatively affects your team when you don't apologize. No one wants to work for a boss who can't own up to his mistakes, and who doesn't apologize for them. The animosity, tension, and pain that comes with this can create a toxic work environment.

Why Apologies are Difficult

With all these negative consequences, why do some people still refuse to apologize?

First, apologies take courage. When you admit that you were wrong, it puts you in a vulnerable position, which can open you up to attack or blame. Some people struggle to show this courage.

Alternatively, you may be so full of shame and embarrassment over your actions that you can't bring yourself to face the other person.

Or, you may be following the advice "never apologize, never explain". It's up to you if you want to be this arrogant, but, if you do, don't expect to be seen as a wise or an inspiring leader.

How to Apologize Appropriately

In an article in the Journal of Psycholinguistic Research, psychologists Steven Scher and John Darley present a four-step framework that you can use when you make an apology.

Let's look at each step, below.

Step 1: Express Remorse

Every apology needs to start with two magic words: "I'm sorry," or "I apologize." This is essential, because these words express remorse over your actions.

For example, you could say: "I'm sorry that I snapped at you yesterday. I feel embarrassed and ashamed by the way I acted."

Your words need to be sincere and authentic. Be honest with yourself, and with the other person, about why you want to apologize. Never make an apology when you have ulterior motives, or if you see it as a means to an end.

Timeliness is also important here. Apologize as soon as you realize that you've wronged someone else.

Step 2: Admit Responsibility

Next, admit responsibility for your actions or behavior, and acknowledge what you did.

Here, you need to empathize with the person you wronged, and demonstrate that you understand how you made her feel.

Don't make assumptions – instead, simply try to put yourself in that person's shoes and imagine how she felt.

For example: "I know that I hurt your feelings yesterday when I snapped at you. I'm sure this embarrassed you, especially since everyone else on the team was there. I was wrong to treat you like that."

Step 3: Make Amends

When you make amends, you take action to make the situation right.

Here are two examples:

- "If there's anything that I can do to make this up to you, please just ask."
- "I realize that I was wrong to doubt your ability to chair our staff meeting. I'd like you to lead the team through tomorrow's meeting to demonstrate your skills."

Think carefully about this step. Token gestures or empty promises will do more harm than good. Because you feel guilty, you might also be tempted to give more than what's appropriate – so be proportionate in what you offer.

Step 4: Promise That it Won't Happen Again

Your last step is to explain that you won't repeat the action or behavior.

This step is important because you reassure the other person that you're going to change your behavior. This helps you rebuild trust and repair the relationship.

You could say: "From now on, I'm going to manage my stress better, so that I don't snap at you and the rest of the team. And, I want you to call me out if I do this again."

Make sure that you honor this commitment in the days or weeks to come – if you promise to change your behavior, but don't follow through, others will question your reputation and your trustworthiness.

Tip:

If you're concerned that your words won't come out right when you apologize, write down what you want to say, and then role-play the conversation with a trusted friend or colleague. However, don't practice so much that your apology sounds rehearsed.

Further Strategies for Effective Apologies

In addition to the four steps above, keep the following in mind when you apologize.

Don't Offer Excuses

During an apology, many people are tempted to explain their actions. This can be helpful, but explanations can often serve as excuses, and these can weaken your apology. Don't shift part of the blame onto someone or something else in an attempt to reduce responsibility.

Here is an example of using excuses in an apology: "I'm sorry that I snapped at you when you came into my office yesterday. I had a lot on my plate, and my boss demanded my project report an hour earlier than planned." In this case, you excuse your behavior because of stress, and you imply that the other person was at fault because he bothered you on a busy day. This makes you look weak.

A better approach is to say, "I'm sorry I snapped at you yesterday." This is short and heartfelt, and it offers no excuses for your behavior.

Tip:

Make sure that you are fair to yourself when you make an apology. There is a fine balance between taking full responsibility and taking responsibility for too much.

Don't Expect Instant Forgiveness

Keep in mind that the other person might not be ready to forgive you for what happened. Give that person time to heal, and don't rush her through the process.

For example, after you make your apology, you could say, "I know that you might not be ready to forgive me, and I understand how that feels. I simply wanted to say how sorry I am. I'll give you plenty of time to see that I'm changing my behavior."

Be Aware of Legal Ramifications

Bear in mind that the law in some countries and regions may interpret an apology as an admission of liability or guilt.

Before you apologize on behalf of your organization, you may want to speak with your boss, or get further advice from a legal professional. However, don't use this as an excuse not to apologize, unless the risk is significant.

Tip 1:

Be gracious and fair when you receive an apology. If you respond with aggression or self-righteousness, you may lose the respect of the person who apologized, as well as the respect of the people around you.

Tip 2:

Don't demand an apology from someone else. They may well refuse, and you can easily end up in an angry, unproductive standoff.

Key Points

An apology is a statement of remorse that you make when you've done something wrong. It can be difficult to apologize, but it can do a lot to heal relationships and rebuild trust.

Follow these steps when you make an apology:

1. Express remorse.
2. Admit responsibility.

3. Make amends.

4. Promise that it won't happen again.

Don't offer excuses when you apologize. Otherwise, you'll sound as if you're trying to shift blame away from yourself and on to someone or something else.

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