

RISKY BUSINESS – APOLOGIES

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“A stiff apology is a second insult. The injured party does not want to be compensated because he has been wronged; he wants to be healed because he has been hurt.”

-- G.K. Chesterton

Apologizing is something that all of us struggle with. We see this frequently with public figures, in the corporate world, in our own workplace and personal lives. We are all prone to making errors and sometimes behaving badly. Unfortunately, often the tendency is to try to justify our actions or to lay blame on others or circumstances.

Failure to apologize does not help the problem, it creates the potential that the offended party or parties become even more hurt, angry or frustrated. Apologizing is an important way of showing empathy and respect for the wronged person. It has the effect of disarming others of their hurt, frustration, and anger, and can prevent further misunderstandings. So why aren't we comfortable with apologizing more often? The risks we may be concerned about include, if we apologize, we may lose credibility, be embarrassed, feel humiliated, lose face, jeopardize our job or possibly, be sued. So, it may somehow feel safer to point the finger away from ourselves and toward something or someone else.

Studies have shown that after a problem has occurred, the individual, client, patient or family members have three primary interests: 1) to learn what happened; 2) receive an apology, or at least an acknowledgement from the offender; and 3) to learn that steps are being taken to reduce the likelihood that the problem will reoccur. Regardless of who it involves, a client's family member, the client, a coworker, your boss or within your own family, the purpose of apology is to repair the relationship.

According to Beverly Engel, in her article entitled “The Power of Apology,” there is a connection between apology and empathy. Most people need to gain some empathy and compassion for the wrongdoer in order to forgive. When someone apologizes, it is much easier to view that person in a compassionate way. This occurs because when someone expresses regret and acknowledges responsibility for their actions, we then develop a different image or view of that person or company. We see them not through anger or bitterness, but as fallible and vulnerable. Of course, the apology must be genuine. If your apology reads like corporate legalese, it certainly will not be effective. Ineffective apologies are those that are forced, said reluctantly and insincerely. Automatic or hasty apologies tend to be empty and insincere. Excuse laden apologies are not apologies at all.

There are three components of effective apologies. The first being a statement of **regret** for what happened. There must be a genuine expression of regret which indicates that you are empathizing with the party or parties hurt. This will reflect that you truly know how they feel. For example, regret for not performing up to expected standards and acknowledgement of the intent not to make the same error in the future. The second component of an effective apology is **acknowledging responsibility** for your actions, an act that if otherwise left unaddressed, might compromise the future relationship. The third component is **remedy**, such as, instituting a procedure to lower the risks of future incidents, reeducating staff members or participating in a remedial development course.

The potential outcomes of an effective apology includes removal of the insult from the injured, restoration of respect and dignity, decreased anger, furthering the potential for reconciliation and diminishes antagonistic behavior. The best and most effective way to deliver your apology is face-

to-face. The receiver will be able to assess the sincerity of your expressions and body language. And, for obvious reasons, the least effective way to express your apology is by email.

It is apparent that, the benefits of apologizing outweigh the risks. Apologies benefit not only the receiver but the giver as well. By taking responsibility for our actions or the situation, we ultimately have a greater sense of confidence, self esteem, less guilt and self-reproach, a stronger sense of personal and professional integrity, and, from a business standpoint, greater credibility. Sincere apologies are effective and in most cases have a positive outcome reducing potential risk factors. By delivering genuine apologies integrating the three basic components mentioned above and delivering them with true sincerity and humility we are much more likely to mend any ruptures that have been created in our relationships and begin to rebuild trust.

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