

Art of the
A P O L O G Y

How, When, and Why to
Give and Accept Apologies

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For everyone who ever had to make an apology . . .

in other words, for almost everyone.

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I N T R O D U C T I O N

Since childhood, I've been a passionate lover of the performing arts, enjoying music and theater both as a performer and as a delighted audience member. One of my favorite high school roles was Lucy in *You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown*, a musical comedy based on Charles Schulz's much-loved comic strip *Peanuts*. In a most memorable scene, hotheaded Lucy storms onstage and informs her brother Linus that their mother has cancelled Lucy's birthday party because Lucy has misbehaved. Linus sensibly suggests that Lucy apologize to their mother, providing a little speech that begins, "I'm sorry, *dear* Mother." Lucy agrees to try it, and manages to struggle through almost to the end before turning to Linus and bellowing, "I'D RATHER DIE!!!"

That scene drew an appreciative laugh from the audience and especially amused my mother, who happily quoted that speech for years whenever we had an argument. There were moments when I was very sorry I had ever played the part in front of her, but that speech is the only thing in the show that I remember decades later. Even then, I could see the value of a good apology.

I've since grown up, gone to law school, and spent twenty-five years working as an attorney. I've counseled dozens of clients through professional crises, argued in front of federal judges, and spent hundreds of hours educating professionals on good business conduct. I've been married and divorced, changed jobs several times, traveled extensively at home and abroad, held friends' hands through their personal troubles, read dozens of self-help books, and watched people interact in settings from the highway to the boardroom as they struggled to get along.

Based on all those experiences, I've come to one inescapable conclusion: Nobody's perfect.

As fallible human beings, we're bound to make mistakes. If such a notable as Saint Paul could lament, "That which I should do, I do not—that which I should not do, I do," what hope do the rest of us have of getting through life without doing something wrong now and then? We lie, we procrastinate, we break promises, we make unkind remarks or stupid jokes, and we step on each other's toes every single day. And, unless we do something about it, our relationships with the people around us suffer for it.

The secret, when you make a mistake, is to apologize.

Unfortunately, many people find making an apology downright painful. They would rather go to the dentist for a root canal than apologize for something they've done wrong. It's not that they're coldhearted. It's usually that they're embarrassed, uncomfortable, or unsure of what to say. They find it's easier to shrug it off, make a joke, hope the whole problem will just go away over time, or even end a relationship altogether than it is to go to someone they've angered or hurt and apologize.

This book is intended to help you think about the importance and value of apologies, and to learn how to apologize effectively to practically anyone. Apologizing can be difficult, but it's essential to maintaining successful relationships and a civilized society. Unless you're prepared to change jobs on a regular basis and replace your friends once a year and your spouse once a decade, learning how to apologize effectively is an essential skill at work, at home, and in life.

In the chapters that follow, we'll discuss the reasons to apologize and when and how to do it. We'll look at how apologies need to differ in different settings, and why the way you apologize to a business associate is not the way you apologize to a friend or loved one. We'll look at the most common mistakes people make when they apologize, and identify ways to avoid them. We'll examine alternatives in situa-

tions in which you can't bring yourself to apologize, and we'll address the special challenges that accompany having to apologize for a really spectacular blunder. Finally, we'll talk about how to accept an apology in a way that leads to true forgiveness and stronger relationships.

Throughout this book, you'll find stories about how people dealt with various situations in which an apology was in order. These are true stories involving friends, colleagues, and clients that I've encountered over the years. I've changed their names and, in some cases, altered the facts a little to protect the privacy of the people involved. These stories are intended to demonstrate the fine art of the apology, illustrating how to apologize and some of the pitfalls to avoid.

Inspirational author Margaret Lee Runbeck once wrote, "Apology is a lovely perfume; it can transform the clumsiest moment into a gracious gift." I hope you will use the ideas in this book to make your own life, and those of the people around you, a little more gracious.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This book is intended to help you apologize in a wide range of situations and to many different kinds of recipients. I recommend that you sit down and read it from beginning to end *before* you start using its advice. You may be tempted to “skip and dip” through the book—skip to the chapters that are most applicable to your particular situation and dip into only those parts, where you’ll find the advice that is most likely to be useful to you. Unless you’re already experienced at the how to apologize artfully, I’d advise against this. Reading the whole book will help you familiarize yourself not only with the principles of effective apologies, it will give you a thorough understanding of how the process of apology works in various situations.

Once you’ve read through the book and successfully followed its advice once or twice, you may thereafter be able to refer only to particular chapters that relate to a particular situation. The one that will apply most frequently when you find the need to apologize is Chapter 3, “The Six Essential Elements of an Effective Apology.” As the title suggests, the elements identified in this chapter should almost always be taken into consideration if you want an apology to be effective, regardless of who the recipient is or why you’re apologizing. Until you know all six of the essential elements by heart, it’s probably a good idea to review Chapter 3 every time you have an apology to make. It’s your apology Bible.

May your apology be graciously received and accepted.

P A R T O N E

B E F O R E T H E
A P O L O G Y

CHAPTER 1

Why Apologize at All?

Of all acts of man repentance is the most divine. The greatest of all faults is to be conscious of none.

—THOMAS CARLYLE

There are many reasons people refuse or fail or are reluctant to apologize when they've offended someone else. Pride, embarrassment, anger, shame, or the fear of losing an advantage or of being unfairly punished can all create a nearly irresistible temptation to say no to saying you're sorry. It's so much easier just to hope that time will heal the damage you've done or to walk away from someone who deserves an apology. This chapter will help you understand why apologies are so often the necessary and right thing to do.

Common Reasons Not to Apologize

It's no surprise that people are so often reluctant to apologize: There seem to be so many reasons to avoid it. Here are some of the reasons people hesitate to apologize—and explanations of how those reasons don't hold water.

I'm too embarrassed. Some mistakes are particularly humiliating to the people who make them, and that feeling can make it tempting to hope that the whole thing will simply blow over if it isn't brought up again. "I can't believe I was so stupid," one man lamented after drinking too much at a company party and making a foolish remark to his boss's wife. "She'll never forget what I said, my boss will never forgive

me, and I'll never live it down," he continued. "I might as well just find another job right now. It would be a lot less painful." This man clearly believed that no apology could restore his reputation—in essence, he believed that other people would never forgive him, because he couldn't forgive himself. The incident did happen, though, and the failure to acknowledge it didn't make it go away. Maybe the man's boss won't forgive him, but he'll never know, and probably never rest easy about it, if he doesn't apologize for his offensive behavior.

I don't know what to say. Even when people want to apologize, they can't always find the right words. "I'm absolutely mortified," one teacher said after learning that a student he had scolded in front of the class for being late with a paper was suffering the emotional side effects of her parents' messy divorce. The teacher wanted to apologize but was afraid that no matter how he worded it, he couldn't help but embarrass the student by implying that her family's private problems were known around the school. "It's probably best not to say anything at all—she'll get over it, and I'll know to be more careful from now on," he reasoned. While his intention to do better in the future was a good one, the teacher's failure to apologize cast a shadow over his relationship with the student and her classmates that lasted throughout the school year. It's almost always better to apologize than to let bad feelings fester, even if the apology is imperfectly phrased.

Apologizing will make me look weak. Some people fear that if they admit to an error and apologize, others will see their error as a flaw or weakness. "Me, apologize?" a supervisor once said about his abusive treatment of an employee who had made a mistake in an important report. "I'm the boss here, and I handle my employees the way I see fit. If that idiot doesn't like being told when he's screwed up, he can quit!" He was afraid that if he acknowledged his bad temper, his

employees would respect him less. The trouble is, people know when someone has made a mistake or behaved badly. Refusing to acknowledge an error or apologize for it makes a person look arrogant, stubborn, and immature. Apologizing after a mistake is a sign not of weakness but of maturity and strength.

The recipient will never let me live it down. Sometimes people are reluctant to apologize because they see an apology as the beginning of a long, hard penance. “I’m not going to apologize,” a friend recently said about a cruel joke he’d made about his wife having gained some weight. “She’ll never let me forget about it if I ever admit I was wrong.” He was afraid that his wife would use his apology as a weapon for months, if not years, to get the advantage in future disagreements. Small wonder he was hesitant to admit that he had been unkind. Unfortunately, by failing to apologize he dealt his wife a second insult, implying that she was too self-righteous and vengeful to accept his apology with grace. Apologies to those we are closest to can be especially sensitive (we cover that in Chapter 8, “Apologizing to Loved Ones”), but it’s damaging to the relationship and downright hurtful to withhold a deserved apology from someone you love.

Some people aren’t worthy of apologies. Sadly, a common excuse is grounded in the attitude that workplace subordinates simply aren’t important enough to deserve apologies. When called on the carpet by his boss for having submitted an inflated expense report, Joe blamed the mistakes on his secretary, Alice. He later heard through the grapevine that Alice had learned what he’d done and was upset about it. Joe didn’t apologize, rationalizing that “taking the fall for her boss is part of her job description.” He was genuinely puzzled when she quit a few weeks later. Co-workers who are subordinate to you in the office hierarchy deserve to be treated with the same respect as your peers and superiors. We’ll talk more this in Chapter 6, “Apologies in

the Workplace,” but suffice it to say that withholding apologies from those who are beneath you in the hierarchy can do tremendous damage to office morale and personal success.

I haven't done anything wrong. Sometimes, people refuse to apologize because they believe they're in the right. “Why should I apologize?” one woman asked after chewing out her daughter-in-law for her messy housekeeping. “Their home is a pigsty, and my poor son can't so much as find a pair of clean socks that match. She deserves every word I said!” This woman wouldn't admit that although she was right that the house could use some attention, the way she made her point was hurtful to her long-term relationship with her son and his wife. It wasn't what she said as much as the nasty tone with which she said it that caused the hurt feelings. It would have been far better for the woman to apologize for being judgmental and harsh than to let her self-righteous behavior create a lasting rift in the family.

The stakes are too high. Part of making an effective apology is taking responsibility for your actions, but that can be scary if the consequences associated with your mistake loom too large. A business analyst who had recommended that his corporation purchase a small competitor later realized that he had seriously understated the risks associated with the acquisition. He was terrified of being fired if he admitted to the error and apologized, so he chose to say nothing and hope things went well. In such situations, though, a failure to admit to a mistake can seem like an intentional cover-up after the fact. It's almost always better to apologize for a mistake when you discover it than to have to explain later why you failed to do so.

I might get sued. With the risk of lawsuits constantly escalating, many businesspeople and professionals avoid apologies for fear that they'll become the basis for lengthy, expensive litigation. Philip, a

pediatrician, made a mistaken diagnosis that almost cost one of his young patients her life. The girl survived, but only after suffering a long and painful illness. Philip wanted to apologize to the girl and her family, but his lawyer advised against it. “I’m afraid they’re going to sue you for malpractice,” she warned. “If you admit you made a mistake, you’ll be handing them an easy victory in court.” The lawyer’s advice may have been prudent, or not—we’ll explore that point in greater depth in Chapter 7, “Apologizing in Business (and Why Your Lawyer May Object!)”—but it did nothing to heal the relationship between Philip and his patient’s family the way an apology might have. In fact, a national movement is under way to encourage doctors to apologize for errors without increasing their legal liability, and some studies even show that an apology can actually reduce the likelihood of a lawsuit.

Reasons to Apologize

Given all the reasons not to apologize, why do it at all? The answer may depend on the circumstances: what you did, why you did it, who you did it to, how they felt about it, and what it will mean for you in the future if you don’t say you’re sorry. Ultimately, though, there are at least seven very good reasons to apologize to someone when you’ve done something wrong, even if you’d really rather avoid it, and other people are encouraging you not to bother.

You’re genuinely sorry. The best and most straightforward reason to apologize is that you’re sorry about something you’ve done and want to make things right. While there can be practical reasons you might be reluctant to apologize, or others might argue against an apology, it’s important not to let those practicalities distract you from your fundamental sense of right and wrong. When you hurt or

offend someone else, apologizing for what you did is simply the right thing to do.

To maintain good relationships. Apologies can do a world of good for all of your relationships. If your business colleagues, friends, and loved ones know that you are someone who openly admits to your mistakes and tries to make amends, they'll respect, trust, and love you more. Communication among you and others will be better and more relaxed, because hurt feelings will be less likely to fester. Over time, you will find that your own self-respect and happiness will increase. Saying "I'm sorry" once in a while is a tiny price to pay for all those big, beautiful benefits.

To salvage a relationship. If the person you've hurt is important to you, whether personally, professionally, or otherwise, blowing off a deserved apology is a great way to risk losing that person's trust and goodwill. If you've built a sufficiently strong relationship with that person in the past, he or she may forgive you—once, anyway—if you hurt or offend him or her and fail to apologize. Do it repeatedly, however, and you're setting up a disaster with someone who matters to you.

William was a brilliant organizational psychologist, who was intelligent, well read, and articulate. Unfortunately, he passionately enjoyed debating almost every point and, in his eagerness to demonstrate his intellectual superiority, often slipped from debating into bullying in conversations with his wife, Dorothy. When she complained that some of his tactics were too aggressive, he would dismiss what she said, loftily informing her that she was being too sensitive and needed to be more open to other people's opinions—specifically, his. Dorothy tolerated William's behavior for years but eventually found his domineering impossible to live with and filed for divorce.

If William had respected Dorothy as much as he valued his own debating prowess, he might have been receptive enough to her feel-

ings to realize he should apologize to her when his eagerness to win a point got out of hand. As it was, he succeeded in winning many arguments with her, but lost his marriage in the process.

To contain an escalating crisis. Sometimes an apology is the best way to keep a tense or difficult situation from spiraling completely out of hand. A well-timed and delivered apology can prevent a labor strike, head off a riot, save a marriage, salvage a friendship, or preserve a family. Even (or perhaps especially) if there's wrong on both sides, one party usually has to say "I'm sorry" first before reconciliation is possible. Often, all it takes after a fight is for one person to say, "You know, I'm really sorry," to open the floodgates of apology and reconciliation.

Connie was an administrative assistant who worked for a branch office of a cable company. A white woman from a small southern town, she was extremely uncomfortable with having her "personal space" invaded. A few years after she came to work in the office, the owner hired a new general manager, Ron, to oversee the staff. Ron, from New York City, was an outgoing, warmhearted African American man who routinely bear-hugged his friends, stood close in conversation, and patted his employees on the arm or shoulder when giving them direction. Connie couldn't stand Ron's style, characterizing it as "in your face," but she was too shy to ask Ron to step away and stop touching her when he talked to her. She grew increasingly unhappy and angry about Ron's "invasive" behavior, finally filing a sexual harassment complaint against him.

Ron was flabbergasted. He had no idea that he had been making Connie uncomfortable, and he was hurt and angry that she hadn't talked to him before filing the complaint. He felt that she had been dishonest with him, and suspected that her actions were racially motivated because no one else had complained about him and she was, after all, from the South. Within days, Ron had become as upset as Connie was.

Fortunately, the office's human resources director contacted the company's attorney. They investigated the situation and decided to try to avert a full-scale lawsuit. They explained to Ron that, while his actions had not been intentionally offensive, he had violated Connie's comfort zone. They appealed to his good nature, pointing out that he was the supervisor and, therefore, had more responsibility for keeping the peace in the office than Connie did. Although he was upset at first, Ron recognized that apologizing to Connie would be a good way to prevent a painful and expensive lawsuit, and he agreed to make the apology. The human resources director then spoke with Connie. She explained that Ron had not realized that he was making Connie uncomfortable, and encouraged Connie to speak up in the future when she was feeling uneasy. She then asked Ron to come in, and Ron apologized to Connie. Things were a little awkward for a week or so, but Connie ultimately dropped her lawsuit and worked well with Ron thereafter.

Ron's willingness to apologize defused a potential disaster. He learned from the apology (something you'll learn more about in Chapter 18, "Learning from Your Apologies"), and was more careful afterward about how he related to his staff. Connie, in turn, learned that she could trust management, and particularly Ron, to listen to her concerns and respond respectfully. She became more trusting, and her work improved. The result was multifold: Ron's apology led to a happy, productive workspace.

To benefit someone else. In some situations you might have to look past yourself and the person you've hurt or angered in order to find a reason to apologize. Even if the injured person isn't especially important to you, he or she is almost certainly important to someone else. You may not care much whether that person ever speaks to you again. But if you care about someone who cares about that person, you may find that an apology is a small price to pay for great results.

Sally couldn't stand Mark's mother, Eleanor. She was rude, narrow-minded, bigoted, and cold. However, Sally loved Mark deeply, and when he proposed to her, Sally instantly said yes, dreaming of their wonderful life to come. She forgot that Mark came with a family—in particular, with Eleanor.

Sally's daydreams hit a wall of reality as the wedding plans were announced. Eleanor had an opinion about everything, and she wasn't the least bit shy about sharing her views with everyone. She complained about the wedding date, the location, the invitations, the color scheme, and so on, until Sally couldn't stand it anymore. One day, when Eleanor was holding forth about her disappointment with the dinner menu for the reception, Sally lost her temper, called Mark's mother an unprintable name, and stormed off sobbing. Truthfully, Eleanor wasn't unhappy about Sally's outburst—it gave her the perfect opportunity to add another complaint to her ever-lengthening list of disappointments. She seemed to take particular pleasure in telling anyone who would listen that Sally had insulted her, that Sally was unstable, and that Mark was making a tragically inappropriate choice.

Mark, on the other hand, was devastated. He knew that his mother could be opinionated and unpleasant, but he loved her and felt responsible for looking after her, particularly because his father had passed away. He felt torn between his love for Sally and his loyalty to Eleanor. For a while, it looked as though the wedding might never take place.

Sally would have been quite content never to see Eleanor again. She didn't like or trust her future mother-in-law and she felt as though Eleanor had goaded her into losing her temper with the unending flood of criticism. Nevertheless, when she thought things through, Sally realized that Mark was so important to her that she was willing to make peace with his mother to please him. This was not an easy thing to do. Almost everyone who knew them thought that Eleanor's behavior had been outrageous and silently cheered

when Sally told her off. But Sally was mature enough to take the long view and realize that the immediate gratification of asserting herself was not worth sabotaging her relationship with Mark.

Sally was afraid to apologize to Eleanor in person—she feared that Eleanor would try to take the upper hand by criticizing Sally until another explosion occurred. Instead, Sally wrote a personal note and attached it to a bouquet of flowers that Mark delivered on her behalf to Eleanor’s house.

It was a classy, elegant gesture, and it worked. Eleanor was mollified, Mark was relieved, and the wedding proceeded on schedule. Sally learned from the experience. She put a little distance between herself and Eleanor, and reminded herself regularly that she was in love with Mark, not his mother. Her apology to Eleanor proved to be the best wedding present Sally could have given to her husband-to-be.

To preserve your own integrity. Chicken maven Frank Purdue joked in one of his commercials, “It takes a tough man to make a tender chicken.” To paraphrase, it takes a courageous and humble soul to apologize for a regrettable act or behavior. Courage and humility are two of the greatest virtues, and practicing them will, ultimately, make you a stronger and better person. When you know you’ve behaved badly or hurt someone’s feelings, it’s perfectly normal to feel ashamed and a little embarrassed. Pretending the whole thing never happened can seem like a very attractive alternative, but you know it’s not honest, and it won’t repair your relationship with the person you’ve offended. When you’ve made a mistake, square your shoulders, admit to what you’ve done, and apologize. You’ll find the restoration of your personal integrity worth any fleeting embarrassment.

To contribute to making the world a better place. While there can be many good reasons to apologize in a particular situation, perhaps the best reason is that apologizing when you’ve made a mistake helps

restore civility to the world. Apologies are about courtesy and treating other people with respect and kindness. Every sincere apology contributes to making the world a kinder, more pleasant place and offsets some of the stress and rudeness that so many people object to today.

Why Are *You* Apologizing?

There are many good reasons to apologize, but before you issue an apology to anyone, it's important to consider and understand your intentions. You need to be clear in your own mind about your motivations before you open your mouth to someone else. Otherwise, you run the risk of doing or saying something that will make the situation worse. When you were a child, you may have been ordered by a parent, teacher, or other authority figure to apologize to someone for something you said or did. "You shouldn't have kicked Johnny in the knee—now, go on, say you're sorry!" The reluctant "I'm sorry" you managed to mumble in Johnny's general direction may have mollified your mother, but you and Johnny both knew you were only apologizing to get out of trouble. That sort of apology may work on the playground, but it's certain to be a flop from one adult to another.

Why *are* you apologizing? Maybe it's because you're genuinely sorry and want to ask the person you've offended to forgive you so that you can stay on good terms. If that's the case, great! It will be easier for you to apologize because you won't have any internal conflict about it, and you won't need to worry about sounding insincere.

If, after you've read this chapter, you're still not so eager to say you're sorry, ask yourself these questions:

- Even if I don't really want to apologize for what I did in this situation, is the other person important to me? Will apologizing help me keep on good terms with him or her? Would I be sorry if I let this relationship deteriorate to the point where it vanished?

If so, isn't it worth making an apology for the long-term health of our relationship?

- Is this a potentially serious situation? Am I looking at a possible lawsuit, the loss of my job or professional credentials, a divorce, or an equally devastating outcome? Could an apology prevent that disaster, or at least increase the chances of resolving the situation short of a trip to court? If so, isn't it worth a try?
- Even if I'd be thrilled never to see the other person again as long as I live, is that person important to someone else who *does* matter to me, like my parent, child, best friend, significant other, or boss? Will it make things easier for my loved one if I apologize? Will my loved one be forced to choose between me and the other person if I don't apologize?
- Did I really mess up? Did I do something so dishonest, hurtful, stupid, or thoughtless that I'll be unable to think about it without being embarrassed or upset? Will apologizing clear the decks and help me recover my self-respect? Will it help me regain the respect and trust of the people around me?
- Did my actions create or contribute to an untenable situation? Will apologizing for what I've done help restore peace and goodwill to my family, my workplace, or my community? Will apologizing reinforce my personal integrity and restore my self-respect?

If the answers to those questions don't help you decide to apologize, ask yourself this: *If I don't apologize now, will I look back on this situation weeks, months, or years from now and wish that I had?*

If your answers to these questions, and particularly to the last one, amount to "yes," you need to apologize. The good news is that you know now why you're doing it. Your next step is to decide what to say. The next several chapters will help you do just that.