

McFarlan, B. (2004). Apology: Regret, Reason, Remedy
Dropping the pink elephant: Fifteen ways to say what you mean.
New York: MJF Books, pp. 32-52.

Bill McFarlan, author of the book, Dropping the pink elephant: Fifteen ways to say what you mean, talks about different strategies for taking responsibility for our actions and communication. The chapters reviewed in this summary, Sorry Seems to be the Hardest Word, and Tell the Unpalatable Truth, Rather than the 'White Lie', deal with how apologizing sometimes seems to be a very hard thing to do and that often people do it very poorly, or not at all.

Sorry Seems to be the Hardest Word

Many people find it very difficult to accept that they have done something wrong, and furthermore, when they do realize it, they would usually prefer to keep it to themselves. There are many problems with refusing to apologize, and the first of these is that it increases tension between the person who was wrong and the person who was impacted by this wrong. A lack of apology also increases mistrust, anger, and hurt feelings among parties.

McFarlan shares that often, people prefer not to apologize because they are afraid that admitting fault is a sign of weakness and might cause further mistrust. McFarlan believes that the opposite is true, and that it takes courage to admit one's faults, and that doing so is a sign of strength that actually fosters feelings of confidence and trust. He also suggests that apologizing at the earliest opportunity can help prevent further trouble, even legal action.

McFarlan offers a simple formula for a satisfying apology that consists of three consecutive parts:

- Regret
- Reason
- Remedy

We have probably all been subjected to receiving no apology when one was due, or a dissatisfying "apology" that consisted only of one or two of the components above. The following are some examples of explanations or "apologies" that lack at least one of the three the essential components listed above:

- "We have done nothing wrong." (There is no apology when one is due).
- "We are out of towels because none have been delivered today." (Reason only)
- "We are not serving tomatoes tonight because they are in short supply due to the freeze. Instead we are offering beets." (Reason and Remedy only).

None of the above examples is a satisfying apology. An apology that has all three of these components would sound like:

- "I am really sorry that I'm late (Regret). I misjudged the traffic this morning and got held up in a jam (Reason). If you like, I'll shorten the lunch break to ensure that we finish on time" (Remedy).

An apology with all three components satisfies the audience in that it expresses regret for the wrong and takes responsibility for this fault. Then it offers an explanation so that people are not left questioning what happened and this explanation bolsters a sense of trust. Lastly, a satisfying apology suggests some type of solution, whether it is a short-term fix, as in the example above, or a strategy for not letting the problem happen again.

Two Important Points about Remedy:

- If you express that the problem will not happen again, then it is essential to do everything possible to prevent its recurrence.
- If it is difficult to predict when the problem will be fixed, say so rather than proposing a deadline that may be unreasonable and ultimately missed.

McFarlan shares the idea that, "People in high places who make big mistakes seldom apologize." He believes that more frequent apologies from police, the courts, and the government for things that go wrong could go a long way to restore declining confidence in these entities. The same goes for restoring confidence in anyone who is in the wrong, especially someone in a position of power. The formula of Regret, Reason, and Remedy can be used with any situation, business or domestic.

Tell the Unpalatable Truth Rather Than a White Lie

McFarlan talks about the fact that oftentimes people are tempted to tell a white lie rather than to take responsibility for the difficult truth. There are many obvious problems with lying, however, many people think that a white lie does no harm. Any lie is not the truth, and lies interfere with people being able to trust. He gives the following example. "If you told a friend/colleague that you were late because your car broke down, only for him to discover that you were late only because you set out impossibly late, he would grow suspicious of your motives and question your trustworthiness." So even though this may be a white lie, the consequences can be huge.

McFarlan suggests taking responsibility for being late (rather than lying) using Regret, Reason, and Remedy.

McFarlan notes that "The truth is easier to remember because it happened. Lies are figments of the imagination. As such, they're easier to forget." Thus, one lie turns into another lie, and it can be hard to keep track of things that did not actually happen. Telling the truth rather than lying is an option with fewer potential pitfalls and is a behavior that garners trust instead of suspicion.

McFarlan offers two personal anecdotes to demonstrate the effects of lying versus telling the truth.

Lies

McFarlan had a decorator working at his house and suddenly heard a crash and a gushing noise. He walked into the room where the decorator was working only to find the radiator gushing and the decorator yelling, "I didn't stand on the radiator." The decorator did not apologize, and instead lied. McFarlan shares that this was the first in a series of lies from the decorator. This interaction resulted in McFarlan pursuing the decorator for half of the cost of the plumbing bill to fix the damage.

Unpalatable Truth

In contrast to the story above, McFarlan had a painter working on repainting his house when he heard a huge crash followed by a tentative knock on the door. The painter said, "I am really sorry. I dropped the full can of paint and it has gone all over your steps. Do you have some rags and turpentine for me to clean it up?" This was a satisfying apology with Regret, Reason, and Remedy. McFarlan shares that he admired the painter's courage and honesty in taking responsibility for this mistake.

We can probably all think of situations where people have lied to us, and our feelings around this experience have been mistrust, suspicion and frustration, as with McFarlan and the decorator. This contrasts strongly with the feelings we experience when people make big mistakes that impact us and take responsibility for these mistakes by expressing Regret, Reason, and Remedy, like McFarlan and the painter. When people take responsibility for their actions and offer a satisfying apology, it is much easier to move on with a spirit of acceptance, forgiveness, and sometimes even admiration for how a person in the wrong handled the mistake.

Succinct Overview:

People usually do not like being wrong and will oftentimes lie or refuse to apologize when they are at fault. Lying or refusing to apologize when an apology is due leads to mistrust, anger, and hurt feelings among parties. People may also offer unsatisfactory "apologies" by simply offering an explanation or saying that steps are being taken to remedy the situation. This contrasts strongly with a satisfying apology, which consists of expressing Regret, Reason, and Remedy. Taking responsibility and apologizing for even unpalatable truths shows a sense of courage and trustworthiness.

"...things do go wrong and it's how you handle them that matters." – Bill McFarlan

Summary prepared by Meg Hoskison, ODR Graduate Assistant, Spring 2011