

The Power of Apology

Chapter 4, Engel, B. (2001). *The Power of Apology*. John Wiley & Sons Inc., Canada.

Apology can be something that seems commonplace and can even be taken for granted. In her book, *The Power of Apology* (2001), Beverly Engel writes about the influence apology can have in our lives as an important social ritual. It can be a way of showing empathy and respect for those who we might have wronged in our relationships. It cannot be an act we engage in simply to be polite.

Some of our most important relationships occur in the workplace, and conflict and misunderstanding can occur. When this happens Engel describes how the power of apology can disarm the anger of others, can prevent further misunderstandings, and can bridge distances between colleagues. An apology can do more than soothe wounds or mend work relationships, but also has the ability to rehabilitate an individual, resolve conflicts, and restore professional harmony. When someone does something that hurts our feelings, but does not apologize for it, we become resentful of that person. Apology can be an important factor in creating and maintaining healthy relationships.

In chapter 4, “*The Right and Wrong Way to Apologize*,” Engel talks about how to make a meaningful heartfelt apology that can be meaningful to both you and the person receiving the apology. She explains that a meaningful apology communicates the three R’s: Regret, Responsibility, and Remedy.

Expressed regret is a statement expressing remorse for having caused the inconvenience, hurt, or damage. This includes an expression of sincere empathy towards the other person by putting yourself in the other person’s shoes. Having empathy for the other person you have hurt or angered is the most important part of your apology. It is acknowledging the hurt and inconvenience you might have caused the other person and regretting your part in it. Engel states that if empathy is not expressed, your apology will sound and feel empty. While your intention may not have been to hurt another person, you recognize that your action or inaction did hurt and you feel bad. When you truly have empathy, the other person will feel it. Engel suggests regret or remorse needs to be communicated to the other person through statements such as:

- “I am so sorry. I know I hurt your feelings and I feel terrible about it.”
- “I deeply regret having hurt you.”
- “I am truly sorry for the pain I caused you.”

For an apology to be truly effective it must be clear you are accepting total responsibility for your actions or inactions. Therefore your apology needs to include a statement of responsibility such as:

- “I’m sorry. I realize being late held up the first part of the meeting.”
- “I’m sorry. I know it is difficult for you to truly trust people, and my lying to you hasn’t made it any easier. I shouldn’t have lied no matter how afraid I was of your reaction.”
- “I’m sorry. You have every right to be angry with me. I shouldn’t have said those words to you.”
- I’m sorry. There’s no excuse for my behavior and I know I hurt you.”

Although you can’t go back and undo or change the past, you can do everything in your power to repair the harm caused. A meaningful apology needs to include a statement where restitution is offered, or a promise to take action so that the same offense does not happen again. For example:

- “I’m sorry. Let me make it up to you. Next time it is on me.”
- “I’m sorry for yelling at you. Next time I won’t do it again.”
- “I’m sorry for talking to you like that. I’ll work on letting you know when I don’t like something instead of holding it all in and then exploding like that.”

When we acknowledge our intention and attitude to make amends, the power of apology can begin to take place. An apology needs to include a sincere attempt to express heartfelt feelings of regret, to take responsibility for your actions, and to right the wrong you’ve caused, or it will not feel meaningful or believable to the other person. In order for the person you have wronged to feel this sincerity, your desire to apologize must come from inside you.

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