

Apology 101

People who experience conflict usually have a basic request when seeking to restore a broken relationship. Many times, people in conflict tell me, “All I want is a simple apology.” However, a simple, “I am sorry” is usually not enough. Sometimes other conditions are expected along with the apology, for example: sincerity, remorse, humility, evidence of change, promises, agreements, or trust building. A simple apology is sometimes not so simple.

What to include: While making an apology may be an art, it should not be agonizing. There are things to include in an apology and things to avoid. David Augsburg reminds us an apology is not: an account, appeasement, excuse, disclaimer, explanation, or a justification. All of these things ruin a good apology. Augsburg explains that a simple apology includes:

- Acknowledging the fact of your wrongdoing. “I did this . . .” “I said this . . .”
- Accepting ultimate responsibility for your offense. “I hurt you when . . .”
- Expressing your sincere sorrow and regret. “I deeply regret . . .”
- Promising not to repeat your offense. “I will not do it again because . . .”
- Awaiting the other’s response. “I hope someday you will be able to . . .”

What not to include: Ken Sande, in *The Peace Maker*, encourages us to avoid using the words, “if, but and maybe.” He writes, “The best way to ruin a confession [or apology] is to use words that shift the blame to others or that appear to minimize or excuse your guilt.” Such as:

- “I’m sorry *if* I’ve done something to upset you.” The word “if” says you do not own the offense, you are unsure, or you do not even know how you hurt the other person. Find out exactly how you offended someone – then your apology will be specific and clear.
- “I shouldn’t have lost my temper, *but* I was tired.” The word “but” introduces an excuse, minimizes the offense, and actually cancels the words that precede it (Sande).
- “*Maybe* I could have tried harder.” The word “maybe,” or “I guess,” or “possibly I,” neutralizes the apology to a great extent and only helps the one who is apologizing to save face rather than own the offense.

Own it: Jesus said, “First take the **plank** out of your own eye,” Mt.7:5. An apology addresses your part in the conflict. It gives you an opportunity to own fully your contribution in escalating the conflict. An apology is not when you say, “I am sorry you got so upset.” “I am sorry you took it wrong.” An apology is rarely helpful when it starts with, “I am sorry you . . .” Don’t shift the blame. Own what you need to own by saying, “I am sorry I . . .” “I am grieved over how I treated you.” “I regret saying those words.” “I am distressed because of my actions.”

Do it now: Dan Heist says, “When you realize you've made a mistake, make amends immediately. It's easier to eat crow while it's still warm.”