

THE POWER OF APOLOGIES AND ITS EFFECTS ON OTHERS

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05 December 2019

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to express the powerful impact apologies have in society. This paper informs the reader how apologies should be expressed and how our initial interpretation of apologies is normally incorrect. This is accomplished by first teaching what real apologies are and why we tend not to apologize. Then, their importance in society and relationships. After, by introducing what makes an effective apology and what doesn't; as well as how we anticipate apologies. Lastly, by providing real life examples based on my own experiences and how I was able to apply these practices.

This paper is meant for readers who want to improve their understanding and better practice apologies or for those who do not have an understanding with effective apologies. I anticipate the results of this reading to have a great impact on the reader on how to apologize effectively as it did for me. After reading this paper, we recommend practicing the principles outlined every time you're faced with an opportunity to apologize.

Keywords

apologies, relationship reconciliation, forgiveness

Table of Contents

Abstract	2
Overview	4
Theory/Concept.....	4
Analysis	7
Reflection.....	8
References.....	9

Overview

Nobody is perfect; we all make mistakes from time to time. The biggest mistake we can make is not understanding what makes an effective apology or what an apology even is. In this paper, we will explore the importance of apologies in our society, what makes an effective apology, and how we interpret apologies. I will then discuss actual examples from my life related to the theory below. Finally, I will provide what was learned from this module and how it applies to me in engaging in successful communication.

Theory/Concept

When it comes to restoring damaged relationships, a meaningful apology is one of the most powerful interactions parties can have when strengthening or restoring their relationship. An apology should not be thought of as being a weak or pathetic thing to do as they require a great deal of strength and courage (Lazare, 1995).

We tend to be hesitant about apologizing because we tend to associate apologies with losing, and losing may diminish our self-concept. When in fact, it's the opposite. Typically, the most common reason for us to apologize is because we have attacked someone's self-concept (Lazare, 1995). When we apologize meaningfully, we are communicating to the other that our intentions are to restore the relationship, and/or because you regret your actions against the other (Lazare, 1995). There are two other motives for apologizing that aren't so meaningful. The first one is apologizing to avoid negative consequences and the other is to relieve their guilty conscience (Lazare, 1995).

When we apologize, we should do it correctly. Otherwise, the relationship may not be restored, and may even be worsened. The first step in an effective apology is recognizing and

acknowledging that you have violated a relational or moral norm (Lazare, 1995). This is a required step as someone who apologizes without recognizing they made a mistake won't seem genuine to the other and they are more likely to make the mistake again. The next step to an effective apology is explaining why you committed the offense and conveying that your actions were not personal (Lazare, 1995). This shows that this is not who you really are and helps convey to the offended that the offense won't happen again (Lazare, 1995). After, one must express genuine feelings of regret, shame, guilt and/or anxiety to the other so they take your apology as more sincere (Lazare, 1995). The final ingredient to an effective apology is an offering of reparation (Lazare, 1995). These four steps are needed in order to improve the chances of the offended forgiving the offender and reconciling the relationship.

Of course, with most things, there's a right way and a wrong way to apologize. The most common reason people apologize incorrectly is due to failing to take or admit responsibility, and/or an individual's pride or fear of shame (Lazare, 1995). The offender may also have their timing off when apologizing. Taking too long to apologize for a minor offense can magnify the offense whereas apologizing too soon for a major offense can make the apology seem insincere (Lazare, 1995).

According to Lazare, in addition to above, an offender must satisfy at least one of the seven psychological needs of the offended person in order for the apology to be considered effective (Lazare, 1995). They are: The restoration of dignity in the offended person; Both parties agree that the harm committed was wrong; Victim validates they were not responsible for the offense, assurance the offender will not repeat the offense; Reparative justice; Reparation; and/or the offended parties expressing their feelings towards the offender (Lazare, 1995).

Apology is an important part of restoring relations. It is typically the first step of the forgiveness process (Cahn & Abigail, 2014). However, apologies are not always required nor necessarily the first step to forgiveness and reconciliation (Cahn & Abigail, 2014). A person may choose to forgive the offender without apologizing first. This can happen if the offended party feels a need to move on, has experienced hurt and hatred, and finally let go of the feelings of revenge and desire to retaliate (Cahn & Abigail, 2014). However, the forgiveness stage may take a lot longer to get to if the offender does not apologize beforehand. Learning to forgive without an apology on the other hand can help invoke an apology from the offender as it demonstrates compassion.

Accepting an apology is equally important as giving one. In fact, failing to accept an apology turns the tables and makes you the offender (De Cremer, Pillutla, & Folmer, 2011). This goes to show just how much our society values apologies. According to De Cremer, Pillutla, and Folmer, apologies serve several social functions. They acknowledge that social rules or norms have been broken, reaffirm the gravity of those rules or norms, restore dignity of the offended, and initiates reconciliation between the offended and offender (De Cremer, Pillutla, & Folmer, 2011).

We value apologies so much that we sometimes expect too much from someone apologizing. This is because when we have been hurt, we let our imaginations take over reality and sometimes overestimate how the offender will apologize. This is evident from a study conducted by the Association of Psychological Science. In this study, they had two groups. One group participated in a real-life apology from another person while the other group were told to imagine that apology. The results found that the group who participated in the real-life apology

had less satisfaction than the group who only imagined the apology (De Cremer, Pillutla, & Folmer, 2011).

Analysis

There have been numerous instances where I have found this theory to have taken place in my life. Most impactfully being the results of the study conducted by the APS. Occasionally when I have been wronged, I first imagine the worst-case scenario of future interactions with my offender. Then I imagine my best-case scenario of future interactions benefiting only me. Only when the actual apology takes place, I find myself content, but not as satisfied as I imagined.

On the giving end of apologies, I have found it difficult to express an apology to someone I've wronged as I often find it as a signal of weakness or incompetence. As the theory suggests, apologizing is liberating and I find it to not only strengthen relationships, but also my character. I find the hardest part of apologizing is hitting all the marks outlined by Lazare.

One example of this is an argument I had with my wife. We were arguing about how our money should be spent and she was complaining that she has no input on our finances. I told her that she was wrong and has plenty of input on our finances. She explained further by telling me that I tend to shut her out when talking about her concerns. At that point, I realized I was wrong. At first, I found it very hard to apologize as I was so convinced I was right. After a few days, I was able to fully apologize to her according to Lazare's principles. She forgave me and we were able to collaborate a new method for our finances where we both had equal inputs.

Reflection

As Alexander Pope once said, "...To err is humane; to forgive, divine." (Pope, 1711). We live in a world that thrives for perfection, yet fails to recognize we all make mistakes. I chose this theory because I find myself having the hardest time apologizing. I believe this is because of my pride, fearful of being weak, and ignorance on the true meaningfulness of apologies.

I have already seen a difference in my attitude and interactions with others since learning these principles. I feel that I am more sensitive to other's feelings and more apologetic than I was before. I will use the principles I've learned from this theory to better my interactions with others, preserve relationships and possibly even help mediate others.

References

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