

## All Apologies

### “I’m sorry” is more than just words

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Apologies are a part of life, and they’re a part of business. While a successful apology shows an acknowledgement of, and responsibility for, a problem, all too often we get them wrong.

Roy Lewicki, professor emeritus of management and human resources at Ohio State University’s Fisher College of Business, tells the *Connection* there are six components to any good apology: an expression of regret, an explanation of what went wrong, an acknowledgment of responsibility, a declaration of repentance, an offer of repair and a request for forgiveness. The more of them you include, the better your odds of mending or preserving a relationship.

In an experiment, Lewicki and his colleagues tested how more than 700 people related to apologies that contained from one to all six of these components. “We were interested in what makes apologies more or less effective, so we constructed a hypothetical scenario with apologies containing one or more of the key components and asked [test subjects] to judge their effectiveness,” he says.

What they found was that the more components the apology included, the more effective it was judged, the two key components being an acknowledgment of responsibility and an offer of repair.

But, cautions Lewicki, the components were not weighted equally, and language was key. “We’re so used to hearing political doublespeak involving too many words without meaning, where it gets in the way of the message and minimizes the apology,” he says.

One kiss of death for an apology? “The phrase ‘I’m sorry if anyone was offended by what I said/did,’ Lewicki tells the *Connection*. “That phrasing is completely empty, conveys a meaning that is both underhanded and cynical, and shows neither empathy nor sincerity.”

Empathy and timing are vital elements, he feels: “The closer to the offense that you apologize, the more effective it is. If you wait too long, it only gives the offended more time to stew in that juice, and makes the apology less meaningful and less effective.”

Lewicki ends with a warning: “The bottom line in all of this is that, from Washington to Hollywood to the sports world, there are so many people apologizing for so much that the overall efficacy of the apology is being diminished unless it’s a really finely crafted, empathetic apology.”

#### **Rebuilding trust**

Trust expert Roy Lewicki says an apology is important because the violation casts a shadow over victims’ confidence in their own judgment, creating uncertainty and tension, which a well-crafted apology can help restore.

“That reflects on the individual’s or business’s character,” he says, “and that is a long healing process, which takes not only a well-crafted apology, but considerable action over a period of time – not just words.”