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All Apologies Are Not The Same

An apology can be an effective means for restoring trust in negotiations and disputes. However, the purpose and meaning of an apology may differ across cultures. New studies conducted by William W. Maddux of INSEAD and his colleagues examined the cultural differences in how apologies are perceived in the United States compared to Japan.

The research of Maddux and his colleagues found that in the United States, apologies are usually perceived as an admission of personal responsibility and an expression of regret. By contrast, in Japan, where organizations are generally viewed as more culpable than individuals for wrongdoing, an apology is understood as recognizing a burden suffered by someone else, instead of a means for assigning blame. Culture creates the difference in the meaning of the apology. Individualistic cultures such as the United States think in terms of individual decision-making and culpability, whereas collectivistic cultures like Japan tend to place greater emphasis on groups and think more in terms of “we.”

These cultural differences for apologies were seen when the CEO of Toyota appeared on television to make public apologies for his company’s actions concerning the potential vehicle accelerator problems in 2010, followed by full-page newspaper ads that read: “We apologize from the bottom of our hearts for the great inconvenience and worries that we have caused you all.” Compare that with the congressional testimony of American executives from AIG and other companies that awarded themselves large bonuses after receiving government bailouts. The bank executives at the helm during the financial meltdown adamantly refused to apologize for any role in the crisis.

While an American CEO may weigh the value of an apology against potential reputational or legal risks, in a collectivist culture like Japan’s, an apology can be an effective tool to reduce conflict regardless of whether you are to blame. Keep that in mind when considering the effect of an apology in cross-cultural negotiations.