



Proffitt

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Newsletter

Real Leadership, Real Apology

When an apology is in order, how do leaders in your organization apologize?

We can't help but notice when it goes poorly. Sometimes, it's a matter of people (or a person) not ready or able to forgive. And that's understandable, especially when there is no attempt at restorative justice.

Other times, apologies go sideways when egos get in the way. At best, it falls short as a polished explanation; the apology is an attempt to justify the behavior. This often results in the erosion of trust.

Great leaders—whether they are seasoned executives or untitled leaders—know how to humbly apologize. They understand that mistakes happen and that they are not infallible. Real leaders hold themselves accountable and make amends.

The Humble Apology

A person offering a humble apology acknowledges an offense has occurred, seeks to understand the harm that has been caused, and identifies how it will correct the mistake and avoid making the same mistake in the future.

Whether you're a popular and highly influential leader apologizing in a very public way or seeking forgiveness in a private setting, apologies can be tricky. The person(s) harmed certainly doesn't want to hear about you: your "why." They don't want to hear your assumptions about their feelings, either. They want you to ask, and listen.

Even seasoned executives can get this wrong. The fear of losing credibility stops them from doing the very thing that will actually help restore their credibility: an admission of wrong-doing. The irony is that in doing so, they can begin to move on and repair trust.

A Message from Nancy...

Let me ask you:

- Are the people on your team engaged and committed or just collecting a pay check?
- Do you have the right people in the right seats on the bus? Are *you* in the right seat?
- Is the high cost of turnover eating away your organization's bottom-line?
- Are your processes and procedures (or lack thereof) delivering productive and efficient results?
- How comfortable are the members of your senior team managing and leading others?



In today's highly competitive environment, it's no surprise that *"what got you here may not get you there."*

At **Proffitt Management Solutions** we are fully committed to providing a unique blend of team and individual development and executive coaching sessions where participants achieve more focus, a sense of purpose, and better results in their leadership roles.

Find out how services such as individual or team coaching and development, motivational and skills workshops, seminars may help you better answer those 5 questions and benefit you...

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What's Your Motivation?

It's not uncommon to see people stumble when they offer an apology. What's worse is an apology that horribly backfires, often seen in today's headlines and social media. When it happens, motivation is suspect.

As Joseph Grenny, author of [Crucial Conversations](#) (McGraw-Hill Education; 3rd edition, 2021) sees it, an apology is motivated by either restoring integrity or restoring trust. "If your goal is to simply restore trust, your motive is manipulative," writes Grenny.

In the 2016 [Harvard Business Review](#) article Grenny shares his understanding of how trust is lost when our abilities and/or motives fail to meet the expectations of others. Simply put, the conclusion is that the leader isn't competent and/or concerned about us. This can actually create more than one problem:

1. **Relationship problem:** When a leader falls short, they must address what they did and how it affects others, including trust in the leaders' competence and motives.
2. **Integrity problem:** When a leader falls short, they must address who they aspire to be. What do you feel and think about your actions? How do they align with your values? How will you hold yourself accountable? Do you deserve to be trusted?

"The best apology is a glimpse into your own accountability. It affords others an intimate and sincere view of your internal moral conversation—how you respond to their feelings and how you judge your own actions. At its best, an apology is the fruit of personal change, not a tool for interpersonal persuasion." - Joseph Grenny

Understanding Trust

At the core of leadership apologies—whether it is on behalf of the organization or in behalf of the leader—is trust. But here's the thing: when leaders offer a humble apology, their motivation is not about acquiring trust, it's about personal change.

To be sure, trust is critical to the success of any organization or leader. But manipulating others to gain their trust or forgiveness is not how real leaders apologize. They build trust from the inside out. What do I mean?

When a leader is genuine and authentic in walking their talk—their good intentions align with their values, how they treat others, and personal accountability—trust emerges.

In the recently published book, [The Power of Trust: How Companies Build It, Lose It, Regain It](#) (Public Affairs 2021), authors Sandra J. Sucher and Shalene Gupta examine the how and why others—clients, employees, or any stakeholder—make the decision to trust. They begin by defining trust.

The Complexities of Trust

Trust is a relationship with three components: the person extending trust, the person receiving trust, and the expected action.

- **Trust occurs in degrees.** When someone or something does not meet our expectations, it is easy to lose trust. In our disappointment (or hurt, or anger) it's easy to forget that trust is not an all or nothing proposition; trust is a spectrum.
- **Trust can be regained.** Of course, this requires time, effort, and change. Trust must be earned, typically by listening and responding appropriately. Motives, actions, and impact must be examined. Fairness (or justice) may require greater generosity. Humble leaders who understand the complexities of trust also understand the opportunities and benefits from real apologies.

The Elements of Trustworthy Leadership

Trustworthy leadership emerges from four key elements:

- **Competence:** As a leader, how do you demonstrate your ability to meet expectations? While this includes managing uncertainty and navigating external circumstances to reach goals and objectives, more important is keeping promises and commitments.
- **Motives:** As a leader, how do you serve the interests of those you lead? What about investors, clients, or any other stakeholder (the world at large)? How do you balance this with self-interests?
- **Means:** As a leader, how do you reach or exceed your goals? Trustworthy leadership demonstrates fairness with information, distribution, procedures, and relationships.
- **Accountability:** As a leader, how do you demonstrate responsibility for your decisions and actions? What action do you take to identify and understand your impact(s)? What action do you take in response to unintended impact.

The Public Apology

When was the last time someone apologized to you? Did they make it a public apology?

Unfortunately, persons in power often struggle with apologizing. The fear of admitting wrong-doing is often driven by fear of failure, losing esteem, or making matters worse. Sure, no one is perfect. But when someone has been offended or harmed, is an apology always necessary? How do you determine if it should be made public?

[Harvard Business Review](#) (2019) published an article that suggests that “sometimes apologizing is not the best strategy.” Based on their analysis of research conducted by several universities, authors Sandra J. Sucher and Shalene Gupta define two categories of mistakes:

1. **Incompetence** (i.e. failure of product or service reliability)
2. **Integrity** (i.e. failure in acting fairly or responsibly)

These categories and definitions differ from that of Granny, which may explain their analysis:

- When mistakes result from incompetence, apologies are effective.
- When mistakes occur as a result of integrity problems, apologies are not effective. They explain that when a leader or organization really did act with integrity, denial is a better strategy.

The Elements of a Public Apology

Genuine public apologies are based on three elements:

1. **Truth.** Identify what happened and what is happening. Understand what went wrong. This will require open discussion with the person(s) harmed, prior to issuing the public apology. Ask what they need, and offer your apology for the harm. Be prepared and willing to provide details of the decision and/or actions that led to the mistake, but seek to understand, rather than be understood. If issuing a statement, be factual. Disclose errors.
2. **Focus on the person(s) harmed.** When making a public apology, make it timely (ASAP) and include details about those affected. The only “I” or “we” statement made should be followed by an expression of sorrow.
3. **Concrete action.** Even the most carefully crafted apologies will not remedy harm if there is no

accountability. Reparations, in the form of change and/or compensation, may be in order. Share what action you will take in the future to prevent further harm.

How Real Leaders Apologize

It can be maddening to witness a poor apology. What may have begun with good intentions can quickly derail when the person apologizing begins with an explanation, moves on to justifying their behavior or actions, and ends up in a heated argument. We seem to see this happen more and more frequently, especially with public apologies.

When private apologies go poorly, the person harmed may be left wondering “what just happened?” Their confusion can fuel anger and resentment. Real leaders can avoid making matters worse with a real, humble apology.

The Elements of a Real Apology

A real apology is offered in a real-time conversation with the person harmed. Ideally, this is in-person, virtually, or if this is impossible for the person harmed, a phone call. The conversation should occur ASAP, and include four key elements:

1. **Acknowledgement of harm done.** Ask questions to understand their perspective. Don’t argue, explain, or rationalize.
2. **Acknowledgement of their feelings and values.** Again, ask questions to affirm and encourage them to talk about what is important to them. What do they need?
3. **An expression of empathy.** Without humbly stating the impact of your error—how it has affected them—your apology becomes a hollow justification of yourself or your actions.
4. **Acknowledgement of what you will do.** Don’t rush to this conclusion. If you will be making your apology public, as the person harmed how they feel about this. Do you have their permission to reveal details about them?

A follow-up letter, email, or direct message/text to the person harmed may be in order. Refrain from using social media to communicate, unless it is part of your public apology. Reiterate a summary of the four key elements to hold yourself accountable.



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