

The Power of Trust

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Tags: [#organizational-culture] [#difficult-conversation]

Dialogue

Title: The Art of Constructing Apologies

It's what you do when you screw up...

Do you recall ever learning formally how to give an apology?

Six elements of a good apology that the research has tested:

| Expression of regret: The offender expresses how sorry they are.

Where do people screw this up? How important is the actual word choice here?

| Explanation: The offender describes the reasons for the problem.

There's a distinction here between explanation and excuse.

| Acknowledgment of responsibility: The offender makes a statement that demonstrates they understand their part in the trust betrayal.

Is it that this is where the connection comes between the explanation and me personally?

| Declaration of repentance: The offender promises not to make the same mistake again.

US Mint example, perhaps?

Easy to say, hard to do. How much explanation here is helpful to show the other party that you've really done something to prevent the mistake in the future?

| Offer of repair: The offender offers a solution for rebuilding trust.

What's an example?

| Request for forgiveness: The offender explicitly asks for pardon.

What's important?

The combinations of these matter:

Most powerful --> acknowledgment of responsibility, with an offer of repair and an explanation

Least powerful --> an expression of regret, a declaration of repentance, and a request of forgiveness

What have you changed your mind on?

Quotes

We tend to believe that trust, once broken, cannot be regained, when actually the truth is somewhat more complex. Trust, once broken, cannot easily be regained. We fall into this fallacy for two reasons. First, trust is so hard to regain that so few do it, making us think that broken trust is truly lost forever. Second, because trust is so hard to regain, it makes more sense to focus on protecting your reputation and avoiding losing trust in the first place.

In a study about the effectiveness of apologies versus denial, researchers found that in the case of a betrayal of trust due to integrity, it is better to deny if you are innocent. The researchers found that innocent people are seen as having less integrity after an apology even though they are innocent. It turns out, the people who eschew apologies because they think they confirm guilt are onto something. The logic is as follows. Integrity is viewed as a sign of moral character, so when someone denies a problem because they are innocent, that is the kind of consistency that is a hallmark of integrity—I didn't do that thing, so of course I deny it. But if the innocent person instead apologizes, people are, at best, confused, and could conclude that the person can't be trusted if they can't even own up to a situation in which they are innocent! However, be warned: this is not encouragement to deny instead of apologize. When the researchers gave participants clear evidence that the applicant was guilty, participants were far more willing to hire guilty applicants who apologized than guilty applicants who denied. (And rest assured, in this day and age where anyone can publish online and data are easily available, if someone is guilty, the truth will eventually come out.)

So, what is a good apology? A good apology will take a multipronged approach and try to address a variety of different needs, as we'll see below with JetBlue. In 2016, researchers published two studies to understand how 755 participants reacted to different types of apologies. They tested six elements of apologies:

- Expression of regret: The offender expresses how sorry they are.
- Explanation: The offender describes the reasons for the problem.
- Acknowledgment of responsibility: The offender makes a statement that demonstrates they understand their part in the trust betrayal.
- Declaration of repentance: The offender promises not to make the same mistake again.
- Offer of repair: The offender offers a solution for rebuilding trust.
- Request for forgiveness: The offender explicitly asks for pardon.

When an apologizer used only a few elements of apology, the most effective combination was acknowledgment of responsibility followed by an offer of repair, then an explanation. For example: "I'm so sorry I didn't invite you to the meeting. Do you have time now for me to tell you what we discussed? I forgot you had joined the team since your division hadn't participated before." The least effective was a request for forgiveness. ("Please forgive me for not inviting you.") The researchers combined different sets of elements and found that some combinations were more powerful than others depending on the scenario they had given subjects. However, combining the most powerful elements (an acknowledgment of responsibility, with an offer of repair and an explanation) was always more powerful than the combination of the least powerful elements (an expression of regret, a declaration of repentance, and a request of forgiveness).

References