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## How To Apologize Effectively

**Conflict or Peace: It's A Choice**



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# How To Apologize Effectively

By Brenda Kelleher-Flight

## Introduction

Many conflicts are resolved when we apologize. However, many people have not witnessed effective apologies. They do not know how to ensure the act of apologizing ends the conflict. As a result, what starts out as a small misunderstanding blossoms into a larger conflict.

An effective apology is designed to avoid the development of these larger conflicts. Apologizing may feel unpleasant at first. Always remember apologizing is actually a sign of personal strength, not weakness.

This article addresses the reasons for conflict, why certain apologies do not work, describes what an apology entails, when to apologize, and how to effectively apologize.

## The reasons for conflict

Conflict starts when negative emotions arise because of

- a perceived insult
- power imbalance
- feeling belittled or ignored,
- feelings of being controlled unnecessarily
- perceived discrimination, and/or
- thoughts such as “I am not getting my fair share.”

The interpretation of circumstances leads to negative thoughts which result in the creation of negative emotions.

When hurt and anger starts and a person is willing to apologize, an effective apology can make all the difference. It can eliminate the conflict or keep it from getting out of control.

## When apologies do not work

Apologizes do not work when you are

1. determined to be right versus being happy
2. insincere
3. do not look the person in the eye during the apology
4. do not understand the art of effective apology
5. fear that an apology means appearing weak or admitting guilt, or
6. believe that apologizing will only fuel the dispute instead of remedying it.

An apology is not a tool for you to use to quickly make peace with the other person or to get the other person off your back. It is also not a habitual mannerism. For instance, constantly saying “sorry” without any real feeling or meaning behind it isn’t apologizing. A genuine apology also is not a tool to manipulate others into doing what you want.

Further, a genuine apology is not a way to introduce harm. For example, saying, “I’m sorry, but I think it’s time we went our separate ways,” to your significant other is not a genuine apology.

If you do not believe in apologizing, you are not alone. The attitude that apologizing does not work is extraordinarily prevalent in our society and is largely based on our basic mistrust of each other. Sometimes we have subconscious beliefs about apologizing if we apologized in the past and

- were ridiculed for doing so
- were told that only weak people apologize, or
- found that nothing changed after the apology.

Apologizing does not mean

- I am guilty of something
- I will never fail to do what someone expects in the future
- I am willing to tolerate abuse of any kind

- I am going to apologize and repeat the same behaviours in the future
- You can throw something negative in my face in the future.

It is not a way to control another person. If we use an apology to control another person and we repeat negative behaviours in the future, that person will distrust you and rightly so.

In fact, apologies do repair many damaged relationships. Very few people abuse apologies. Genuine apologies are generally well received. They do much to resolve disturbances and keep relationships functioning in healthy ways.

## **An Apology**

Apologizing is a practice that is responsible for resolving numerous disputes without violence or resorting to the courts for dispute resolution. The genuine apology is an unfashionable concept in our day and age. However, genuine apology is a vital part of life that is indispensable in building and maintaining strong and healthy relationships.

To state it most simply, an apology is taking responsibility for having caused negativity in a relationship. However, simply apologizing or saying “I’m sorry” is not considered genuine. That rote statement is considered insincere because it does not express any understanding of your role in the conflict. It does not demonstrate to the other person that you are taking full responsibility for your part.

A sincere apology includes two components. First, is your acknowledgment that you are unhappy about your role in the situation. Second, is that you are making an effort to stop an escalation or eliminate the behaviours which are perpetuating the situation. A genuine apology is a deliberate effort to solve a problem or occurrence within a relationship. It is when you have taken responsibility for your actions through your acknowledgment of your role and that you are willing to take the steps to resolve things.

## **When To Apologize**

When should you apologize? You should apologize whenever there is a disturbance or break in a relationship. It does not matter what the issue is or how much you feel you may or may not be at fault. There will usually be a part of the disturbance that is your responsibility, even if the part is small.

In answer to the question, you should apologize as soon as possible. The actual time frame depends on the relationship and on the person. For example, some people are capable of apologizing sincerely immediately after a transgression has come to light. Other people need some time to cool off before they can even think of what to say or how to say it.. What type of person are you?

It is your responsibility to take the initiative in apologizing. Do not wait for the other person to come to you or to apologize first because you feel that the other person was 'more wrong' than you were. For instance if you take the time to wait for the other person to come to you, you may be waiting a very long time. It takes integrity to step forward first, realize that you must take some or all of the responsibility for the situation, and take steps to remediate the situation. It displays emotional maturity.

## **How to Apologize Effectively**

The following steps are guidelines to help you in delivering a sincere and effective apology:

### **Take responsibility**

1. Make your apology genuine. Frame all apologies with the word “I”. Say, “I’m sorry”. If you are not genuine, the other person will very likely be able to spot an insincere apology. This will do much more harm than good. Insincere apologies can exacerbate minor conflicts and turn them into major ones. A genuine apology outlines your role in the issue and indicates the efforts you are willing to make to re-establish harmony.

### **No rationalizing**

2. Do not justify your actions. When you explain why you did what you did, it starts sounding like you are not apologizing or taking responsibility for your actions. While brief explanations may help in understanding, do not assume that the other person does not understand or even wants an explanation. Explanations often turn too quickly to justifications, and this may fuel and exacerbate the situation.

### **Be specific**

3. Be specific in your apology. Make sure the other person knows why you are apologizing. Saying, “I saw you at your cubicle and I want to say I am sorry” sounds much different than “I wanted to come and say I’m sorry that I took credit for your idea at the meeting on Monday.” The latter is the more specific apology.



**Be direct**

4. Do not skirt responsibility. There is a big difference between saying, “Someone burned a hole in your favorite shirt,” and, “I burned a hole in your favorite shirt when I was ironing.” Own what you have done.

**Be sincere**

5. Do not add the words “if” or “but” to your apology. For example, saying, “I’m sorry. If I had only known what you were going through I wouldn’t have done what I did but I didn’t know and that’s how it happened.” This apology sounds as if the person is trying to avoid taking responsibility for his actions.

**Do not guess**

6. Do not assume you understand how the other person is feeling about the situation. Asking how they are feeling or saying, “I can’t imagine how devastating it must be to not have your favorite office anymore,” is a better way to navigate the situation. However, should the other person respond by stating his feelings, do not argue with his perspective. Listen and do not interrupt. Make an effort to understand his interpretation of the situation and the effect it is having on him.

### **State how you are changing**

7. Express your commitment to change your behavior. If you are not willing to confirm what behaviours you are going to modify or change, then you are not committed to the apology. For instance, if you are not committed to changing your habit of arriving late to meet your best friend for coffee, do not say, “Sorry I arrived late.” Failure to follow through with change ultimately makes your apology hollow and ineffective. Also, do not ask for anything in return. If you are sorry it is essential that you do not use your mistake as a way to negotiate a benefit of some kind from the person you have hurt.

### **Accept all reactions positively**

8. Be prepared for different people to react in different ways. While some people react favorably to apologies and will apologize in kind, others may be indifferent, while still others may respond in cold or hostile ways. Sometimes a person who appears to be indifferent to your apology needs time to think. You will notice a shift in their behaviour even though you may assume the worst at the time. What is important for you to keep in mind is that you took the step on your end that is most important – you apologized in a genuine and sincere way. How other people react is out of your control. Therefore, do not try to force reconciliation. Allow the other person to come to terms with what has happened in his own time and way.

## Final Comment

Apologizing is a practice that is responsible for resolving numerous disputes without violence or resorting to other methods for dispute resolution. Effective apologizing involves offering a genuine, sincere apology that focuses on taking personal responsibility for all actions that contributed to negativity in the relationship.

It is essential to accept that you, like everyone else, make mistakes. Sometimes those mistakes affect the welfare of other people. When errors in judgement do affect others, an effective apology can clarify misunderstanding, reveal information previously unknown to the other person, and help both parties to positively move forward.

However, if you find that

- you are unable to resolve a conflict through effective apologizing, or
- a conflict is too far advanced for this method to bring about a satisfactory resolution

one option to consider would be a mediator. A mediator is a neutral person who can help you and the other person resolve your differences in a private setting.