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The Art of the Apology

The apology is an important tool for leaders—their decisions impact lives, and mastering the art of a genuine apology can help strengthen relationships.

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One inevitable consequence of leadership is that daily decisions may impact employees adversely. Whether it's a decision made personally or by someone on their team, leaders can use the art of the genuine apology as a tool to strengthen relationships.

"An apology shows that you're humble and you accept that you make mistakes," says Jose Costa, CEO of [For Eyes](#), an optical retailer with more than 110 stores across the United States.

As human beings, leaders are vulnerable. They need to show their team honesty, says Chris Adams, principal of international hospitality firm [Ellis Adams Group](#).

"We call it [radical candor](#)—making sure we're honest with each other, and that's the only way we can progress and grow as a brand," he says. "So we talk about apologies and being able to acknowledge when we mess up."

Apologizing is not the same as saying, "I'm sorry." Nancy Friedman, a leading customer service and communication expert, says there's a difference in usage that implies different things.

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—Jose Costa, CEO, For Eyes

"'I'm sorry' appears dismissive to most people," says Friedman, president of [The Telephone Doctor Customer Service Training, Inc.](#) and author of nine books on communication and customer service. "In expressing an apology, we acknowledge the failings or faults, and that's critical."

Taking ownership of your role in the situation is the most important part of the apology, says Frankie Russo, CEO and president of leading full-service marketing firm [Potenza, Inc.](#) and author of *The Art of Why*. The second part, he says, is opening yourself to ask, "What can I do to make it right?"

"Owning my part, asking what I can do to make it right, and as much as possible acting on it, that's the full circle of the apology," he says.

Russo acknowledges that opening up to the question of how to make things right can be scary. But, he says, being a rapidly growing company comes at a cost—and genuine apologies have helped him cultivate loyalty and grow strong relationships with his team.

"But I don't take an apology lightly," he says. "So I don't give them too often."

Costa agrees that a leader has to be careful not to overuse apologies. Otherwise, there's the risk of the apology coming across as fake and insincere.

"There's a moral and ethical compass that determines when the apology is correct," he says.

Costa feels that as the company leader, he may also need to apologize for [mistakes](#) made by someone else on his team. In one recent example, operations management made changes to the labor structure at the company-owned stores, heavily impacting many long-term employees. Once Costa learned about the impacts of those cost-cutting measures, he personally made retractions, along with public apologies, in every affected market.

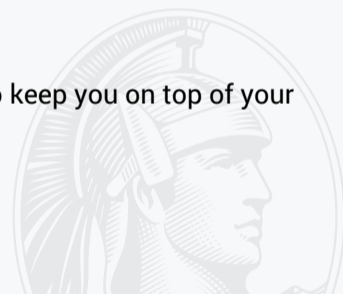
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"They [operations] were looking at numbers without thinking about the human impact," he says. "It was first about apologizing, and then making it right by working with a group to come up with a solution that was

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Delivering an Effective Apology

Russo says that an apology has an emotional arc and it shouldn't be rushed, because it could feel cheap to the recipient.

"It needs to be sincere and thought out," he says. "I specifically want to highlight where I could have done things better, and share a sense of sympathy or empathy for the person I'm addressing."

Deborah Sweeney, CEO of online legal filing service [MyCorporation.com](#), also feels certain situations need extra time for a thoughtful response.

"I want to think about it and have a good response, so I take a moment," she says. "Sometimes I need a day—and I tell them, 'Give me a day to get back to you.'"

According to Sweeney, having a thoughtful response starts with listening carefully.

"I work hard to [listen](#) so I can understand where the other person is coming from," she says.

Sometimes, it helps to explain the decision, she adds, because employees may then see things differently.

“Most times, I’ve thought decisions through, but they only hear the outcome and not the process,” Sweeney says. “Sometimes it’s valuable to reassert that I’ve thought it through. You’re more than just apologizing for the lack of communication—you’re improving communication.”

Adams believes that if a leader doesn’t truly listen to the other person—and instead is focused on formulating a response—the apology becomes generic.

“We want to make sure we apologize for the right things... and speak to the heart of what happened,” he says.

Adams says that before he apologizes, he gets to the root of the problem by collecting all the data and getting “all three sides of the story.” Once he has all the pieces, he moves swiftly with the apology.

“The longer you let a problem persist, the bigger the problem becomes,” he says.

Friedman agrees. She says the immediacy is important because “the closer the apology is to the happening, the more effective it is.” One other component she finds critical is the tone. She advises against “winging it,” even if you have to write down a few of the key words.

“An authentic apology needs to have the right tone of voice, which could mean you have to practice it,” she says. “I don’t mean practice it like a play—think it over in your mind, how you’re going to approach it.”

Experience helps fine-tune the clarity of the message, but mastering the art of the apology doesn’t necessarily mean that delivery gets easier. As Adams explains, leadership maturity, for him, means he has even more heart for the people who work for him.

“You never want to see your people hurting,” he says. “The bigger the company becomes, the more I focus on making sure I’m a great leader, the more difficult it becomes to have those conversations because it shows you care.”

Photo: Getty Images

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