

PROFESSIONAL INSIGHT

I'm sorry, was that an apology?

When is an apology not genuine?

By Doug McCarthy

It is purported that as Canadians we say “sorry” a lot – more as a courtesy than as an apology. Two people arrive at an entrance at the same time, then step back to let the other through with a polite “sorry,” which actually means: “Excuse me, you go first.”

However, there are times when a person says, “I’m sorry,” claiming to be making an apology when, in fact, they are not. Consider the many examples of apologies by politicians, which usually start with something like, “I am sorry if anyone took offence at my comments.” These apologies are sometimes followed by excuses or disclaimers.

Another example is of a woman who was fired by her employer for cutting all her hair for a charity fundraiser. This was apparently a violation of a vaguely worded dress code. The news of the firing went viral, causing the employer to issue a public apology, which said, in part, that he was “sorry for failing to resolve the issue” before the worker contacted the media.

There are also apologies expressed in a passive-aggressive tone of voice, much like the use of the word “fine,” which is used when unable to resolve a disagreement. For instance, a woman was upset with the service she received on her automobile. When she complained to the manager she was dismissed with the phrase, “Well, I’m sorry you feel that way.”

In “What It Means To Be Sorry,” an article that appeared in the *Mediation Quarterly* in 2000, Carl D. Schneider outlined the elements of a good apology, which are paraphrased below:

- Using the word “I” when apologizing, without deflecting blame to anyone else or any other thing;
- Naming the offence and being specific;
- Accepting unqualified responsibility without excuses; avoiding the use of “I’m sorry but...”;
- Expressing sincere regret from the heart, acknowledging that the apology does not reduce the hurt that has been caused;
- Assuring that the wrong will not happen again;
- Taking direct and immediate action for reparation and being aware that mere words may not be enough;

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Apologizing in a timely manner, verbally, and in person, avoiding indirect methods such as text, Twitter, email, or voice mail. Apologies are difficult, delicate and need to be thought out and effectively conveyed. At the same time, it is important to understand that when we apologize we relinquish our power and put ourselves at the mercy of the offended party who may not accept our apology. That is why making an apology is often an act of courage.

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