



# Book Effective Apology

## Mending Fences, Building Bridges, and Restoring Trust

John Kador  
Berrett-Koehler, 2009  
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## Recommendation

Mistakes and misconduct are no longer private matters. With video-sharing websites and the proliferation of cellphone cameras, technology can expose every blunder and make it fodder for public opinion. Now, more than ever, it’s crucial to admit when you’ve made a mistake, earnestly say you’re sorry and back up your regret with action. John Kador explains how. He outlines the five elements of an effective apology – “recognition, responsibility, remorse, restitution and repetition” – and describes how to use them. He reinforces his suggestions with real examples of people who’ve succeeded or failed in an attempt to apologize. *BooksInShort* recommends this book to managers in every field and to anyone who wants to build strong relationships. And if it does not meet your needs, well, someone owes you an apology.

## Take-Aways

- Apologizing is essential to building and maintaining healthy relationships.
- An apology is an effort to reach out and admit that you were wrong.
- Apologizing is a skill anyone can master.
- The objective of an apology is reconciliation and the repair of a relationship.
- People are reluctant to apologize for fear of seeming weak, guilty or vulnerable.
- Recognition, the first step in apologizing, involves specifically identifying the offense.
- Accepting responsibility and exhibiting remorse are crucial elements of an apology.
- Making restitution means trying to mend the damage done by the original offense.
- No apology is sincere without a promise not to repeat the transgression.
- When, where and how to apologize are important considerations.

## Summary

### Being Human Means Saying, “I’m Sorry”

The art of apologizing is essential to maintaining relationships. Mistakes are unavoidable and no human being is perfect, so knowing how to apologize is a vital skill. An appropriate, timely apology can neutralize bitterness, heal hurt feelings, reduce the chance of litigation, and restore and renew relationships. Sometimes, an apology can make a relationship even stronger. Moreover, denying misbehavior can carry big risks and refusing to apologize may have a heavy cost. Leaders once avoided apologizing, seeing it as an admission of weakness or guilt, but today’s society views an apology as an expression of strength, morality and integrity, and when leaders err, they must pony up and say they are sorry.

“Effective apology is not easy. Some apologies are better than others, and some apologies are worse than no apology at all.”

An apology is an effort to reach out and admit that you were wrong. “Apology is a practice” in that it requires action. Feeling bad isn’t enough; you have to act on that emotion. Apology requires the person at fault to communicate openly with the injured party. Lastly, apology involves humility because you must place the victim’s feelings above your own.

## Repair and Renewal

The objectives of a heartfelt apology are reconciliation, relationship repair and renewal. The goal is not to present rationalizations, defenses or proof that you were right. An effective apology goes beyond merely stating that you are sorry. It requires the following steps:

- Factually describing the context of the misbehavior.
- Naming the specific offense.
- Being accountable for it.
- “Expressing a shared commitment to moral principles” that it overstepped.
- Making restitution.
- Vowing not to repeat the transgression.

“Apology is the practice of extending ourselves because we value the relationship more than we value the need to be right.”

The social demand for apologies is greater than ever for two reasons: First, globalization has created cultural collisions that are bound to result in misunderstandings. Second, mistakes are no longer private. Cellphone cameras and video-sharing websites like YouTube can instantly broadcast anyone’s mistakes. People have become intolerant of lies, spin, cover-ups and unfairness; now they demand acknowledgement, affirmation and apology.

“Throughout human history, endless cycles of revenge and untold suffering have resulted from the denial of effective apology.”

Most people feel the greatest degree of harm when insults to their dignity leave them feeling humiliated and diminished. Apology is the most effective process for alleviating the damaging effects of humiliation. Apology reassures the injured party that he or she is “safe” and “not at fault.” It demonstrates that “both parties continue to share the same values” and that the offender suffers as a result of his or her transgression.

## The Hardest Words to Say

People often are reluctant to apologize for their misdeeds. They fear appearing weak or vulnerable. They worry about being judged, misunderstood or disrespected. They feel ashamed of their actions and embarrassed to expose them. Some individuals hesitate to enter any potentially emotional or confrontational situation. Others don’t want to face the consequences of their actions or damage their reputations. Many such fears are unfounded. Most people accept apologies gracefully, without excessively punishing the person who is at fault.

“Today’s most urgent leadership challenges demand the ability to apologize when you make a mistake.”

In the past, common wisdom cautioned professionals against apologizing because others might interpret it as an admission of guilt or liability. That thinking is changing. New evidence shows that doctors and other professionals who practice transparency and take part in disclosure programs end up in court less often than those who “deny and defend.”

## “The Five Dimensions of Effective Apology”

Effective apologies contain the “Five Rs”: “recognition, responsibility, remorse, restitution and repetition.” Recognition, the first step, requires identifying the offense in specific terms. Ask yourself these five questions:

1. “What was the impact of my behavior on the victim?”
2. “What social norm or value did I violate?”
3. “Do I have cause to apologize?”
4. “Do I have standing to apologize?”
5. “Should apologies include explanations?”

“Offering an apology is like tossing a lit firecracker and hoping it’ll be caught and maybe – just maybe – will become, through the gentle power of acceptance, an instrument of healing.”

A college professor received a research grant. When he concluded the project, his department’s account still held some of his grant money. The research committee agreed to let the professor use the money to update his laboratory, but when he tried to access the funds, the account was empty. It turned out that the department chairman had used the money to fund his own research. When confronted, the chairman said, “I’m sorry for taking grant money that was rightfully yours. I screwed up.” The professor was unhappy with this weak apology because the chairman never recognized the real offense: his underhandedness and lack of respect.

“‘I’m sorry’ are the two most powerful words of any apology.”

Although trying to explain how and why you erred is tempting, explanations actually dilute apologies. They support your wish to justify or rationalize your mistake rather than identifying the hurt party’s need for repair. The exception is when you explain without trying to clear your name. For instance, when former Senator John Edwards’s affair with a campaign photographer made headlines, his public apology included this explanation: “In the course of several campaigns, I started to believe that I was special and became increasingly egocentric and narcissistic.”

## Responsibility

The second element of the apology process is accepting responsibility for the offense without trying to place blame or rewrite history. Do not seek absolution. Instead, focus on what the victim needs to receive to heal. Accept full accountability so you can repair the relationship.

“By acknowledging, naming and ultimately accepting our mistakes, we embrace our humility and make room for our true selves, imperfect and all too human, just like everyone else.”

When football player Steve Smith broke a teammate’s nose during practice, he said, “I will not put myself into a position where I have to defend myself, to state my side of the story. There’s no side. There’s only one side, which is lack of judgment on my part. That’s really all I have to say. I have no excuse.”

## Remorse

The next step is to show remorse by saying, “I’m sorry” or “I apologize.” Remorsefulness is the feeling of guilt or shame that you experience when you realize that your actions caused another person pain. You can’t feel remorse for something that someone else did. You can only be remorseful about your own actions, and even that requires seeing the victim’s perspective.

“Whining and tweaking and...spinning are all gone when you take responsibility for your own role – no more, no less – in what goes on.”

When Dubai police officers arrested a British businessman for having sex in a public place, he expressed his remorse at his trial: “I readily admit that my conduct and behavior was inappropriate and beyond the bounds of acceptability. I am deeply ashamed of my actions, and the offense and trouble they have caused. I sincerely hope that this statement will show my honest and abject remorse and genuine contrition regarding my conduct.”

## Restitution

After you say you’re sorry, the injured party will want to know what you’re going to do to make things right. Restitution is your attempt to fix the misdeed. It restores the relationship by mending whatever item or piece of business the offense ruined. If it’s just a repair or replacement, take care of it – and don’t cut corners. The quality of your restitution shows how much you value the relationship. If you spilled ink on someone’s shirt, buy a new one and throw in a tie. If you broke someone’s vase, replace it. If you embezzled money, the court will make you return it, usually with a formal apology.

“Accepting an apology is in many ways as moral an act as extending one.”

Because restitution is a concession of guilt, you may worry that the victim will demand even more compensation than you offer. That’s not what typically happens. Often, making restitution actually reduces the possibility of legal action against you.

## Repetition

The final element of apologizing is assuring the harmed party that you won’t repeat the misdeed. Show that your gaffe taught you a lesson. When announcer Johnny Miller made an anti-Italian remark about golfer Rocco Mediate, he addressed public protest by saying, “I apologize to anyone who was offended by my remarks. My intention was to convey my affection and admiration for Rocco’s ‘everyman’ qualities and had absolutely nothing to do with his ethnicity. I chose my words poorly and in the future will be more careful.”

## “When, Where & How”

When you are planning to apologize, ask three questions:

1. **“When should you apologize?”** – In general, apologizing right away is best, particularly for a simple offense like spilling a drink. But, prioritize the injured party’s needs. In some cases, waiting until everyone calms down is a better tactic. In other cases, it’s never too late to apologize. Sometimes people apologize for offenses committed in the distant past.
2. **“Where should you apologize?”** – The best apologies are delivered face-to-face. However, when that’s impractical, an apology by phone with a follow-up letter will do.
3. **“How should you apologize?”** – To be sure the apology is good, practice it or write it down.

## “Ten Apology Do’s and Don’ts”

When apologizing, keep these 10 rules in mind:

1. “No ifs or buts.”
2. “Use the active voice.”
3. “Don’t joke.”
4. “Don’t assume.”
5. “Don’t ask, ‘What can I do to make it right?’”
6. “Take turns.”
7. “Begin the apology with ‘I.’”
8. “Use the person’s name.”
9. “Don’t ramble.”
10. “Don’t argue.”

# The Art of Apology

Apologizing is a skill anyone can master. Improve your ability to recognize behaviors that require an apology by tracking your interactions in an apology journal. Ask yourself three questions before apologizing:

1. “What is the transformation in me that is required right now?”
2. “What courage is required of me right now?”
3. “What is the price I am willing to pay?”

“There are three things that are real: accidents, human fallibility and apology.”

To apologize well, you must learn to have empathy for the injured party. Get into the head and heart of the person you offended by switching the pronouns you use. If you replace “you” with “I,” you can experience the other person’s feelings. For example, Susan asked Robert to call her by her full name, but he continued to refer to her as “Susie.” He thought she was overreacting until he asked himself how he would feel if she addressed him as “Bobby” in a business meeting. This simple act of reversal allowed him to empathize with Susan and change his behavior.

“Apology is humanity’s perfect response to imperfection.”

List the people who deserve an apology from you. Include anyone you’ve maligned, mistreated, betrayed or offended. Once you have a list, begin making amends. If your instincts tell you someone is upset with you, explore the situation, even if that person is initially silent. Bring the offense into the open and apologize; don’t let it fester under the surface and ruin the relationship.

## About the Author

**John Kador** is author of several books, including *The Manager’s Book of Questions* and the *New York Times* bestseller *Net Ready: Strategies for Success in the E-economy*. He’s ghostwritten books for several *Fortune* 1000 executives, and is a speaker and consultant on leadership issues.

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