

Bestselling Author of *The Manager's Book of Questions*

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effective apology



mending fences,
building bridges,
and restoring trust

An Excerpt From

***Effective Apology:
Mending Fences, Building Bridges, and Restoring Trust***

by John Kador

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introduction: apology is the first resort

“I’m sorry, I never apologize,” the CEO said to me.

The speaker was the chief executive of a well-known, publicly traded software company. It was at that moment that I decided to write the book you are holding.

The CEO had called me to help him with a speech. His company was getting hammered for launching a marketing campaign that, in its implementation, was more exuberant than strictly legal. He needed a speech to defuse the situation. I had written a number of speeches for him, and now he asked me what he could say to handle the crisis.

Let’s see. Someone in your company made a mistake. Everyone knows it was a mistake. Why not admit it, say you’re sorry, and tell the world what you’re going to do to fix the problem?

The CEO would have none of it. “I’m sorry, I never apologize.”

Why is it so hard for leaders to apologize? I’ve written dozens of speeches for senior executives and until recently most would rather gargle with razor blades than say, simply and directly, “I made a mistake. I’m sorry.” Given the prevailing attitudes about apology and leadership, there is nothing surprising in this. No doubt, too, the CEO had a team of attorneys on speed dial whose job it was to caution him about the costs, legal and otherwise, of apologizing.

But these attitudes about apology are changing. Leaders can always be depended on to do the right thing—after they have tried everything else. One of the goals of this book is to

demonstrate the benefits that leaders and their organizations accrue when apology is considered as the first resort, not the last.

This book is about apology: the benefits when it is available, the problems when it is missing, and the opportunities that abound when apology is effective. It serves as a comprehensive user's manual, reference, and practical guide to using apology to build trust and honor relationships between individuals, within teams, and throughout organizations. The book also tracks the profound shifts in the perception of apology: from a sign of weakness and vulnerability to a signal of confidence, transparency, and accountability.

Effective apology is not easy. Some apologies are better than others, and some apologies are worse than no apology at all. The book gives readers a practical, step-by-step approach for crafting apologies to meet specific circumstance. It guides readers in what to say, how to say it, and—most of all—how not to make a bad situation even worse.

My goal is to give you the definitive “how-to” book on effective apology. It is not a collection of apology phrases and formulas that can be assembled to defuse specific offenses. Step-by-step instructions can build excuses, but not apologies. Nor will this book be any help to those who want to apologize on the cheap or otherwise hedge their bets. It is, rather, an account of how practicing wholehearted apology will lead to better outcomes for both parties and for the world we share. I will show that apology:

- Is in the apologizer's best interest
- Should be the first resort, not the last
- Is a sign not of weakness but of strength
- Although not without costs, is cheaper than reflexive defensiveness
- Is a critical skill for leaders in order to develop accountability
- Promotes transparent leadership

Perfect Response to Imperfection

Apology is humanity's perfect response to imperfection. Yes, it's an obligation we owe to those we have mistreated, but apology is also a gift that benefits those who owe the apology. Practicing apology is not easy—none of us likes admitting we made a mistake—nor does it come without cost, but apologizing pays off for the apologizer in surprising ways. Apology sends the clearest signal that we have the strength of character to reconcile ourselves with the truth. Apology is the most courageous gesture we can make to ourselves.

Yes, there are costs to apology, but stonewalling also imposes costs. Our institutions and relationships suffer when we lie or try to limit our responsibility instead of cleaning up the mess we made. The first lesson of this book is that the costs of apology are never as dear as the costs of lying, denial, and defensiveness.

Who Should Read This Book?

The book will help anyone who has the desire to build, repair, and cultivate more authentic relationships. You may feel that apology comes easily to you. If so, this book will help you craft apologies that will give you and your partners an even sturdier foundation for trust. Or you may see evidence that your apologies are not well received. You may suspect that your failure to apologize effectively damages your relationships and limits your opportunities for leadership. If so, this book gives you a model for crafting effective apologies for every occasion, both business and personal, in good times and in times of crisis. You may believe that leaders shouldn't apologize. Nevertheless, your instincts may be telling you that your reluctance to apologize creates difficulties for you. For you, this book offers evidence that apology, far from making leaders look weak, serves to make leaders appear more transparent, accountable, humble,

and ultimately more worthy to be followed. This book demonstrates that effective apology is in your rational self-interest.

This book's focus is on leaders, managers, and the people they serve, but it embraces apology in the broader context of all human relations. The central message is that the ability to say "I'm sorry" facilitates the basic building blocks of relationships: trust, transparency, accountability, and humility. For many leaders, admitting mistakes and apologizing may seem like overwhelming tasks. This is understandable. Leaders have received many wrong-headed messages about apology. The book provides unmistakable support for the proposition that apology, far from being detrimental to leadership, creates the conditions for building, rebuilding, and sustaining trust and loyalty. After reading this book, your understanding, mastery, and fluency of apology will be improved—as will your awareness of non-apology and its consequences.

Three Questions for the Reader

When I pick up a book and consider whether I should buy it, I ask myself three questions: What's in it for me? Why should I care? And why should I believe the author? I think it's only fair that before I ask you to invest in this book, I take a crack at answering these three questions.

What's in It for Me?

It benefits you to say you're sorry when you make a mistake. I know that's not the way most people think of apology. Few people are comfortable apologizing. We understand on some level that apology is an expression of admirable qualities—compassion, empathy, humility, self-awareness—but when it comes to actually practicing the art of apology, we find ourselves hesitating. It's understandable. Western society sends out deeply conflicting signals about apology. On the one hand, we value humility, owning up to mistakes, straight talk, and candor. On

the other, when things go wrong, the first thing we tend to do is look for someone else to blame.

In kindergarten, we teach our children to say they are sorry when they make a mistake, but how many parents model relaxed apology when they are at home or at work? We know that the cover-up is worse than the underlying offense, yet when we're caught the cover-up sometimes looks mighty attractive. We value apology in the abstract, but turn our backs on it in practice, especially when apology is seen to impose costs.

Throughout this book I suggest that apologizing is in your rational self-interest. Yes, apology is a debt you owe those you mistreated. And it needs to be done right for their sake. But you should apologize for your own sake first, because it benefits you on every level to do so, and it results in more effective apology. The real benefit of apologizing is that it brings you face-to-face with the consequences of your actions and forces you to confront the facts. People of integrity operate based on a sense of justice. In this case, justice means honoring the facts, and if the facts are that you violated your sense of decency, a direct apology is the best way to reconcile your conduct with your values and begin to recover what you have lost.

Whatever offenders may have gained by their offense, they have lost something at least as valuable. The damage works both ways. When you betray your values by making a mistake that someone else has to pay for or offend someone either accidentally or intentionally, a little bit of your soul is at stake. People who refuse to apologize cheat themselves most of all. They trample their own sense of justice. The costs show up in many ways—as anxiety, barriers to intimacy, sleeplessness, strained relationships, difficulties at work, and even, as we will see, in your paycheck—but the costs of not apologizing always show up.

Apology is an attitude as well as a practice. It's a marker of confident leadership. It's the catalyst for restoring broken

relationships and a pathway for personal growth. This book is intended to help you think about the value and importance of apologies and learn how to practice confident apology with friends, family, and coworkers. Making mistakes is not the key issue. Everyone makes mistakes. It's what we do about the mistakes we make that determine whether we move forward or look back. In this book, I suggest that the great power of apology is its ability to help us look forward. I call it the *transformational power* of apology: the mysterious power of apology to heal a broken relationship so fruitfully that the relationship is renewed with possibilities that weren't available before the offense. *Apologies have more power than most of us realize to restore strained relationships, free us from vengeful impulses, and create possibilities for growth.* This book is my contribution to bringing best practices to apology.

Why Should I Care?

Apology is a critical skill for our time. It promises to make every interaction go better. In times of crisis or scandal, the socialized reaction of people is to deny. Many leaders hate to apologize, offering elaborate defenses instead of accepting responsibility for mistakes. Leaders are afraid that admitting a mistake or wrongdoing will damage or destroy the group or organization for which they are responsible—particularly if there is the threat of litigation. As this book shows, the greater risk is in defensiveness and denial. Evidence abounds that we are squandering many opportunities by not knowing when to apologize, how to apologize, and how to make the apology stick. Moreover, the book describes how society's understanding of apology is shifting. Apology was once avoided as an admission of weakness and defeat. Today, apology is increasingly regarded as an expression of strength, character, and integrity. This book tracks this profound change in the understanding of apology.

Why Should You Believe Me?

I've witnessed the power of apology with my own eyes in countless professional and personal settings. In my more than twenty-five years of journalism, writing books and speeches, and consulting, I've been exposed to the inner workings of hundreds of companies and executives as they wrestled with offenses large and small. I've guided hundreds of clients through crises both professional and personal. For years I wrote a newspaper ethics column. I received hundreds of letters and emails from readers who described situations in which they were either the offender or the offended. Some of the offenses were monstrous. Yet time and time again, I saw how a well-spoken apology defused resentment, created goodwill, and, more times than not, mysteriously transformed a relationship ruptured by mistrust and disappointment into something stronger and more durable than it was before. This is the transformational power of apology that I described earlier: its capability to heal a broken relationship and make it stronger.

I give credit to my willingness to apologize for the success of my marriage and the excellent relationship I enjoy with my two children. Multiple studies agree that men, in general, have a much harder time apologizing than women. That's too bad, because I've seen firsthand how my family has been strengthened by my decision to apologize when I've made mistakes.

How This Book Is Organized

Before we get too far, let me say a word about how the book is organized. The book is divided into three parts. Part I—Practicing Apology—defines apology and examines how apology is being transformed by political and technological changes of the twenty-first century. Part II—The Five Dimensions of Effective Apology—introduces the basic building blocks that in various

permutations combine to create effective apologies. In five chapters, I discuss what I call the five Rs of apology: *recognition*, *responsibility*, *remorse*, *restitution*, and *repetition*. In these chapters you'll find many real examples that illustrate how the five Rs cooperate to create effective apology.

Part III—Apologize for Results—describes how to make apology work in the real world. Chapter 8 addresses many of the mechanics of effective apology, including when to apologize, how to apologize, and in what medium (for example, in person, letter, telephone, email) to say you're sorry. Just as it's not easy to offer a graceful apology, it's not always easy to accept an apology gracefully. Chapter 9 describes how to accept an apology gracefully—and how to reject one, when it's warranted. Rejecting an apology generally ends a relationship. I hope you are never put in a position where you feel you have to reject an apology, but if you are, this chapter offers you some guidance. Does accepting an apology mean that you forgive the offender? Apology and forgiveness are inextricably linked, but they are not the same. Chapter 10 explains the differences between them and what accepting an apology means in the context of forgiveness, repentance, and reconciliation.

I encourage readers to issue wholehearted apologies. Chapter 11 contrasts wholehearted apology with half-apology and non-apology, providing plenty of examples of each. If you want a quick lesson on the do's and don'ts of apology, turn to Chapter 12. Most apology mistakes fall into one or more of ten categories; some are mistakes of commission, others are mistakes of omission. I illustrate each of the ten types of mistake with actual examples of defective apologies taken from today's headlines.

Chapter 13 is inspired by the many questions about apology that my talks on the subject generate. I gather some of the more frequently asked questions in this chapter, along with answers that invite further discussion. The chapter concludes

with a list of provocative open-ended questions that discussion or book groups can use to explore the many fascinating aspects of apology. The concluding chapter—What Can I Do Now? Five Apology Practices—describes five steps for integrating apology practices into your routine. This chapter includes some final reflections on the future of apology.

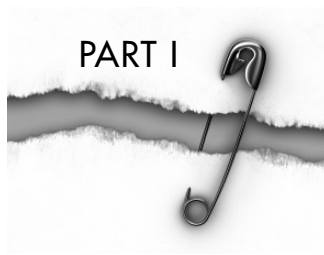
Effective Apology

The message of this book is that although mistakes are inevitable, a well-timed apology can defuse resentment, heal the parties, reduce litigation, and restore the relationship to a new footing so it sometimes emerges stronger than it was before. Apology is not cost-free, but it's more affordable than the alternative.

Does anyone doubt that there is more apology today than there was twenty-five years ago? But we need not just more apology; we need more effective apology. Every time you turn on the news, there's a story about someone apologizing, needing to apologize, or not apologizing enough. Institutions and governments are apologizing for deeds past and present. We're apologizing, all right, but are we doing it as well as we could be? Evidence abounds that we are squandering many opportunities by not knowing when to apologize, how to apologize, and how to be effective when apologizing.

In this book we consider apology as an instrument for repairing human relationships, both personal and societal. As long as we recruit our friends, family, lovers, employees, colleagues, and neighbors from the human race, we will inevitably be hurt, victimized, or offended. Most of us strive for rather more perfection than we can reliably deliver. We are damaged by acts deliberate and unintentional. Since we don't want to be mired in permanent resentment, this certainty underscores the healing importance of apology. We may not get through the day unscathed, but most of the assaults to our relationships can be healed. Let's

put our hearts together and learn the art of apology. Together, one apology at a time, we can build purposeful human cultures that harness our energies to benefit the rapidly shrinking world we share.



PRACTICING APOLOGY

Today's most urgent leadership challenges demand the ability to apologize when you make a mistake. The capacity of leaders to apologize can determine their ability to create the kinds of high-trust organizations required to navigate challenging times. Apology is a leadership skill, and like any other skill, it can be improved with reflection and practice.

In this first part of the book, I define apology, track how attitudes about it have shifted in the past ten years, and discuss why effective apology is so difficult. Apologies are loaded with all the hopes, desires, and uncertainties that make us human, and, at the moment of genuine apology, we express these most clearly. Thus we have endless hesitations about apologizing.

Apologizing is more than just good public relations. Something deeper is at work. Effective leaders understand that there is strength in humility. All organizations are edging toward a higher standard of accountability. At the same time, the revolution in communications and globalization is pushing organizations to greater transparency. The combination provides a fertile ground for those who manage apology well and a toxic ground for those who don't.

CHAPTER 1

the age of apology

In October 2007, the track and field sensation Marion Jones—who won five medals at the 2000 Summer Olympics in Sydney—made a startling revelation. Jones admitted that she took performance-enhancing steroids, and that she had lied when she previously denied steroid use in statements to the press, to various sports agencies, and—most significantly—to two grand juries. She apologized on the steps of the U.S. District Court in White Plains, New York:

It is with a great amount of shame that I stand before you and tell you that I have betrayed your trust. I want all of you to know that today I plead guilty to two counts of making false statements to federal agents.

Making these false statements to federal agents was an incredibly stupid thing for me to do, and I am responsible fully for my actions. I have no one to blame but myself for what I have done.

To you, my fans, including my young supporters, the United States Track and Field Association, my closest friends, my attorneys, and the most classy family a person could ever hope for—namely my mother, my husband, my children, my brother and his family, my uncle, and the rest of my extended family: I want you to

know that I have been dishonest. And you have the right to be angry with me.

I have let them down. I have let my country down. And I have let myself down. I recognize that by saying that I'm deeply sorry, it might not be enough and sufficient to address the pain and the hurt that I have caused you. Therefore, I want to ask for your forgiveness for my actions, and I hope you can find it in your heart to forgive me.

Having said this, and because of my actions, I am retiring from the sport of track and field, a sport which I deeply love. I promise that these events will be used to make the lives of many people improve; that by making the wrong choices and bad decisions can be disastrous.¹

This glimpse into a private tragedy played out on an international stage demonstrates the power and the limits of apology. Jones had violated a number of ethical and legal norms and then lied about it. To her credit, the apology she crafted for her family and fans is a textbook example of an effective apology. In her apology, Jones specified what she did wrong (“making false statements to federal prosecutors”), took personal responsibility (“I am responsible fully for my actions”), expressed remorse (“by saying that I’m deeply sorry”), offered restitution (“I am retiring from the sport of track and field”), and promised to learn from the incident (“I promise that these events will be used to make the lives of many people improve”).

Apology isn’t a get-out-of-jail-free card. Jones was sentenced to six months in prison and her track and field career is ruined. So why did she apologize? What did it get her? Why should anyone admit mistakes and put themselves in situations likely to be difficult and humiliating at best and risky at worst? Apology is difficult for everyone, but the stakes are higher for celebrities

and leaders. If apologizing signals weakness and vulnerability, why should leaders ever apologize? Leaders are expected to be strong and competent. If leaders admit mistakes, will it rattle their followers, making matters even worse? What becomes of a leader's individual and institutional reputations if he or she apologizes?

In this book, we'll explore how to overcome the difficulties of apologizing and affirm why practicing confident apology is in our self-interest. Apologizing makes many people so uncomfortable that they either avoid apology or apologize badly. This is a double liability, because the ability to apologize effectively is critical in today's interconnected, high-velocity world. Just a few years ago, the mistakes we made were generally limited to a handful of people in a small part of the world and quickly faded. But today, thanks to digital video cameras and platforms such as YouTube, the mistakes we make may become instantly available for consumption around the globe and preserved for as long as media and memory survive.

What Is Apology?

Apology is the practice of extending ourselves because we value the relationship more than we value the need to be right. Effective apology is not about the situation that prompted it, but about the relationship that requires it. I will have more to say about what apology is, but for now I want to emphasize its healing qualities. The purpose of apology is to mend what deserves to be mended. In operational terms, three attributes give apology its healing capability:

- First, apology is a *practice*. Apology is a disposition to act; it is something you can observe and measure. Apology may start as a feeling, a desire to make matters right, but apology requires a commitment to move that desire into practice, to actually take on the great

courageous task of showing compassion to others. It's something that we *do* in the context of a relationship. It's an observable dynamic that a wrongdoer shares with the wronged. An intention to apologize is a start, but it's not apology until you actually do it. If the experience is internal or through an intermediary, what you have is confession. Confession is good, but it's not apology.

- Second, apology requires us to *extend* ourselves, to stretch toward something *bigger* than us, in the service of a relationship. As we contemplate the apology, that something may be unresolved, but we apologize anyway. We are aware that extending ourselves demands vulnerability. It requires tolerance and sacrifice. Sometimes, as we will see, apology is costly, although by no means as costly as the alternative of lying or denial. Most of all, apology demands that we extend ourselves by actually *doing* something. We cannot talk our way out of situations we acted our way into.
- Third, apology challenges us to be *humble*. Humility does not mean thinking less of ourselves; it means thinking of ourselves less often. In the context of apology, humility means we engage the person we mistreated as essential to our own well-being. The offender finds that by being willing to treat the victim as an equal, he or she becomes more authentic. The willingness to embrace our humility provides us with excellent grounds for forgiveness.

Now we are ready for the definition of apology:

We apologize when we accept responsibility for an offence or grievance and express remorse in a direct, personal, and unambiguous manner, offering restitution and promising not to do it again.

Wholehearted Apology

If you're going to apologize, you may as well do it completely. Half apologies only make things worse. This book encourages what I call wholehearted apology—unapologetic apology, if you will. Wholehearted apology is not easy to define (I give examples in Chapter 11), but when you are the recipient of such an apology, you know it. Wholehearted apology is inherently satisfying. At its core, wholehearted apology requires a commitment: to place more value on the repair of a relationship you have strained than you place on the need to be right.

Wholehearted apology emphasizes compassion for the victim rather than redemption. That means you are grounded in the experience of the other person. You accept responsibility for the consequences of your hurtful words, attitudes, and behaviors. Your authentically remorseful statements are free of self-loathing and a self-centered preoccupation with guilt. Your focus is not on a mission of personal redemption (although that might come) nor of moral or opportunistic advantage. For one instant, you abandon all formulas, answers, beliefs, expectations, and efforts to achieve a predetermined outcome. What remains is self-awareness.

Wholehearted apology doesn't rationalize, defend, or mitigate. It specifies what the offender did wrong and accepts moral responsibility. It expresses regret for the conduct, using direct words such as "I'm sorry" or "I apologize." It also includes meaningful restitution and a commitment not to do it again. Wholehearted apology is not a mindless, feel-good exercise that throws us on the mercy of predatory victims. In the long run, it's actually less costly than half-measures or outright refusals to apologize. By apologizing, we align ourselves with reality; we feel better about ourselves and act with more integrity. Apologizing not only helps restore a broken relationship but also reveals possibilities that weren't apparent to the parties before.

Apology Is Both Transactional and Transformational

Apology has transactional and transformational qualities. Apology is transactional in that it restores the balance in a relationship that has been strained by the offense. For example, you are late for an appointment. When you arrive, you apologize to me. I accept your apology. We get down to business and our relationship continues. It's the transactional quality of apology that lubricates society and prevents day-to-day frictions from grinding civilization to a halt. This exchange of apology and forgiveness is a potent and desirable form of conflict resolution that has been embedded in most judicial and religious systems throughout the world.

Apology is also transformational in that it has the power to change the nature of broken relationships so that when they are repaired, they are stronger in a number of dimensions than they were before the breach and apology. For example, you are late for an appointment. When you arrive, you apologize to me. I use your apology as an opportunity to talk to you about other issues in our relationship that I find difficult. You consider my grievances, agree that they are accurate, and apologize for those offenses as well. I accept your more comprehensive apology. As a result of this difficult but rewarding conversation, our relationship is transformed, liberating possibilities that simply weren't accessible to us before.

When you no longer think of apology as a bargaining chip, or as a token to be exchanged for forgiveness or the hope of restoring the situation to exactly as it was, then you are ready to think of it in its transformational sense. Transformational apology calls for a willingness to sacrifice on behalf of the wronged party and the inherent value of the relationship.

No apology is equal to the task set before it. No matter how sincere or effective, an apology cannot actually undo the damage the offender has caused. Shattered vases don't suddenly become intact. Nor do shattered relationships. Generous restitution can

sometimes restore damaged property or reimburse economic loss, but the victim can never be made whole. The relationship can never go back to what it was before. So why do we assign apology so much value? Because although we admit that an apology cannot undo what has been done, transformational apology can sometimes get close. It does so by redefining the relationship so that the offense becomes part of the foundation for a new relationship. On some level that defies strict rationality, the wrongdoer and the wronged enter into a process that, by a ritual exchange of shame and power, effectively eradicates the wrong and restores the parties to a position from which they can act with unprecedented flexibility. Sometimes you need a breakdown in order to have a breakthrough.

Apology Expresses Empathy

Before we go on, let's take a minute to distinguish empathy from sympathy—because empathy, not sympathy, is what effective apologies should drive for. Sympathetic statements may sound like apologies, but they are often not apologies at all. For example, a statement such as, "I'm sorry that your aunt is in the hospital," is an expression of sympathy. It's a nice thing to say, but it's not an apology unless you are responsible for putting my aunt in the hospital. Apologies may express sympathy ("I'm sorry I stood you up; I know how painful that is, because I've been stood up many times myself") but when they do, they often become more about the offender than about the victim.

The point is for the offender to be clear whose pain matters. In an effective apology, it's the victim's pain that matters. The offender sympathizes with the victim when the offender suffers with the victim. When the offender is sympathetic to a victim, the offender implies that his or her sympathy is shared with the victim, as if the pain belonged to both parties. Sympathy is the offender's feeling what the victim feels through *the offender's* experience. Empathy is the offender's feeling what the victim

feels through *the victim's* experience. An effective apology requires the detachment that empathy provides. In empathy, offenders “borrow” the victim’s experience to observe, feel, and understand them—but not to take it on themselves. By being a participant-observer, offenders come to understand how the victim experiences the offense.

The following examples illustrate the distinction between sympathetic and empathic apologies:

Sympathetic Apology: *I'm sorry I lied to you. I've been lied to as well, so I know how bad it feels.*

Empathetic Apology: *I'm sorry I lied to you. I want to make sure I understand how you experience my betrayal.*

Sympathetic Apology: *I apologize for losing the cell phone you let me borrow. When I lost my cell phone I felt completely lost.*

Empathetic Apology: *I apologize for losing the cell phone you let me borrow. There are so many ways this loss can be a problem for you. What are you most concerned about?*

In an effective apology, the offender seeks to *understand* the victim’s experience as if the offender were the victim. In a sympathetic apology, the offender experiences feelings on the basis of shared suffering, as if he or she were the victim. Effective apologies tend to be effective because of the quality of empathy they communicate.

What If the Apology Is Insincere?

Can we protect ourselves from fraudulent apologies? I don’t know, but I suggest counterfeit apologies may not be as big a problem as some people think. Most victims welcome apologies even when they are suspicious of the offender’s sincerity. We expect apologies to be self-serving on some level, but we desire

them anyway. Even the most cynical among us are defenseless against the stories we want to hear. Apology is intrinsically satisfying.

For victims who are loath to accept an apology for fear that the offender might not be totally sincere, I can only suggest that we can never be certain of the contents of another's heart. That's why we listen carefully to the apology statement itself, but then focus on the action that follows. An effective apology contains within it the answer to the question, "How am I to be held accountable?" Effective apology is much more than saying "Sorry." The process of apology includes a number of steps that require the offender to consider the consequences of his or her conduct for specific individuals. These steps include engaging the victim in corroborating the factual record of what actually occurred, identifying what the conduct was, accepting responsibility for the conduct, expressing a shared commitment to moral principles that the named conduct violated, offering meaningful restitution, and promising not to do it again. The willingness of an offender to take these steps is the truest test of sincerity. An apology *informed* is good; an apology *performed* is better.

I know that many people posture apologies they don't mean for all kinds of reasons. Shouldn't we be wary of these postured apologies, lest we reward opportunistic apologizers? No. I believe that accepting such apologies may be the optimum course we can take. When we respond to a postured apology with acceptance, a curious development sometimes occurs. Offenders frequently dive into apology thinking they can control the process, but the apology process often takes over and controls them. The insincere apologizer is overtaken by the process itself and converted on the way there. The very act of apologizing, sincerely or not, is transformational.

People speak of "a simple apology," but there is no such thing. To acknowledge a transgression, seek forgiveness, and restore balance to the relationship is a complex act. Apologies

are prompted by fear, guilt, and love—and by the calculation of personal or professional gain. They are shaped by culture, context, and gender. They may be base and self-serving or generous and high-minded. And when extended in public, they amount to a performance—to which different audiences react in different ways.

What, then, constitutes an effective apology? Above all, an effective apology must be complete in form and presentation. An effective apology is a series of coordinated actions. It's about delivering the right words, with the right body language and tone of voice, followed by appropriate restitution and a promise not to repeat the offense. Just as actions determine the quality of one's character, actions determine the quality of one's apology. Recipients of apology are not content with words; they want to see action. Effective apologies aren't informed, they are performed. At the end of the day, the effectiveness of an apology is determined solely by the recipient. Most recipients will want to see evidence, not just posturing and promises but palpable evidence that the offender understands the nature of the wrong, rejects it, values the relationship, and has changed. Such apologies are usually best offered in a timely manner, and they include the following five dimensions: recognition of the offense, acceptance of responsibility, an expression of remorse, an offer of restitution, and a promise that the offense will not be repeated.

Apology on the Rise

By every measure, apology is on the rise. Everywhere you find people apologizing, criticizing the inadequacy of apologies, or demanding apologies. In many ways the escalation of apology is a good outcome. It signals the final gasps of a world that has systematically maintained its power and privilege at the expense of women, people of color, sexual minorities, and other oppressed groups. Stated simply, the demand for so many apologies today is compensation for not nearly enough apology in the past.

There are many other reasons for the increase in apology. First, like it or not, the global community is crowding us closer together. Friction is inevitable as cultures and values collide. We may be citizens of a particular country, but we are increasingly jammed together in a single, interwoven global economy in which the impulse to exploit and profit is developing faster than our ability to work and live together. Mistakes, offenses, and misunderstandings are entirely predictable. Apology allows people to resolve grievances and defuse conflicts without resorting to violence or revenge. Apology is a lubricant absolutely essential to the development of a global ethic.

It's in the public sphere that the apology wars are being fought. The very distinction between "private" and "public" apology is disappearing. Many of the walls that once demarcated private spaces in our society have crumbled. Our celebrity-obsessed culture degrades lines that were formerly respected. Our legitimate desire for transparency lifts the veil from activities that were formerly considered private but are now squarely available for criticism in the court of public opinion. The days of "he said, she said" ambiguity are coming to a close. At some point in the past, the phrase "off the record" had some meaning. Today, nothing is off the record.

Second, digital technology is contributing to the increase of apologies. Technologies such as camera cell phones and the video sharing service YouTube have invaded formerly private spaces, resulting in tectonic shifts in communications, accountability, and privilege. Apologies that once could be transacted discreetly between parties in private (and later denied, if necessary) are increasingly broadcast for all to scrutinize. Technology dramatizes offenses for all to see, so starkly that even the most recalcitrant must express their remorse. Picture the images of detainee abuse at Abu Ghraib in Iraq. Only the photos, not the acts they depicted, extracted an apology—such as it was—from then-President George W. Bush.

The failures of our leaders also contribute to the increase in apology. I am speaking of the self-serving individuals leading our institutions: political, financial, religious, and social. Much of the demand for apology today is a challenge to leaders who have betrayed our trust and a desire to correct current abuses of power. Some of these demands are an attempt to resolve abuses of power that occurred in years past. People in power, having escaped being held accountable, are now expected to be responsible not just for themselves but also for the historical sins of the institutions they represent.

The rise in apology is part of modernity's dealing with systemic unfairness. We are seeing a wholesale dismantling of practices that have long silenced victims and denied their humanity. This is human progress in the truest sense of the term. When formerly disempowered groups seize their power, right away they want two things from their former offenders. First, they want the offenders to corroborate the historical record and acknowledge that great moral values were violated. This is the basis for all truth and reconciliation commissions. Second, they want the offenders to acknowledge their complicity in this great wrong and to apologize.

Recently a number of governments and institutions have issued apologies for injustices of the past. Public apologies serve an important role in the interconnected modern world. One of the main appeals of public apologies is that they corroborate facts that have long been in dispute. For victims, just corroborating the record is important. The apology establishes that, yes, the perceived injustice was real. The apology itself is often merely icing on the cake. It's likely there will be increasing demands for governments and institutions to hold themselves accountable for past injustice. The best public apologies acknowledge the injustice for what it is in the present as well as in hindsight.

We live in an age of heightened sensibilities, percolating resentments, and unresolved battles. This noxious brew breeds

4. I handled things very badly and I'm sorry. I intend to work very hard to earn your trust so that someday it may be possible for you to forgive me.
 unlikely likely
5. I want to apologize for acting like such a jerk. So, do you accept my apology?
 unlikely likely
6. I acknowledge that my actions hurt you. I am particularly ashamed that I betrayed you by [name the specific offense here].
 unlikely likely
7. Yes, I hurt you and I'm sorry, but here's what happened.
 unlikely likely
8. I'm sorry. I value our friendship and I ask only that in the coming months you allow me to demonstrate that I keep my word.
 unlikely likely
9. I'm sorry for the inconvenience. My secretary is normally very reliable.
 unlikely likely
10. You were right and I was wrong. I behaved very badly that night, and now I'm here to apologize. I'm sorry for losing my temper. I'm sorry for saying the ugly things I said. Most of all, I'm sorry for not coming to you right away.
 unlikely likely

Scoring Instructions

For odd-numbered statements score 10 points for each item you marked "unlikely" and 0 for each item you marked "likely." For even-numbered statements score 10 points for every item you marked "likely" and 0 for each item you marked "unlikely."

Statement	Score
(10 points for “unlikely”)	
1	_____
3	_____
5	_____
7	_____
9	_____
Subtotal	_____
Total	_____

Statement	Score
(10 points for “likely”)	
2	_____
4	_____
6	_____
8	_____
10	_____
Subtotal	_____

Results and Analysis

0–20 **Clueless.** Who’s your apology coach? Attila the Hun? The apologies you offer are defensive and begrudging. You have only a rudimentary understanding of what apology is, much less what it can do. You need a basic primer in Apology 101. Start with Chapter 1 and don’t stop until you have a good understanding of the five dimensions of effective apology.

30–50 **Novice.** Your grasp of apology is rudimentary. It’s likely that your relationships at home and at work have suffered. If you aspire to leadership, apology is a critical skill you must master. Review the examples of wholehearted apology in Part III of this book. Give particular attention to Chapter 12, “Ten Apology Do’s and Don’ts.” It will help you craft your apologies, which will help to improve your relationships.

60–80 **Accomplished.** Well done. You practice effective apology at home and at work. Your leadership is at a powerful level because of your skill with apology. On occasion, it’s possible that your apologies are not as effective as possible. Chapters 8–14 will help you tune your apologetic instincts even further.

90–100 Expert. Congratulations! Your AQ demonstrates that you apologize at a world-class level. You have a complete understanding of the technical and emotional qualities of apology. Further refinement will help you communicate even more authentic apologetic meaning during times of tension and crisis. Please study Chapter 10, on apology and forgiveness, to refine your apologies even further.

Take the Apology Quotient quiz online! You can find it and additional resources on apology at www.effectiveapology.com.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Apology is a practice.
- We apologize when we overcome our universal resistance to acknowledge being in the wrong and instead accept responsibility for an offence or grievance, expressing remorse in a direct, personal, and unambiguous manner, offering restitution, and promising not to do it again.
- Apology demonstrates accountability, humility, and transparency.
- Apology is difficult in part because we fear that it makes us look weak.
- Apology is both transactional, in that it restores what has been broken to what it was before, and transformational, in that it creates opportunities that didn't exist before.

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Mending Fences, Building Bridges, and Restoring Trust***

by John Kador

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