



Saying the unsaid

Real and honest reflections on the personal struggles and opportunities of being a leader.

“Sorry”

In all of my life, and in my leadership, I am not sure I have ever heard anyone talk about how to say ‘sorry’. Perhaps that’s because it’s obvious you may think? Maybe, but I’m not sure it is obvious. If it was, perhaps we would handle conflict in a healthier way?

If you have ever found yourself in an argument with a colleague, a partner or a child, you will know that apologising can be a very awkward experience. Awkward not because of the words, but because of what is going on inside our brains.

How many of these run through your brain when you know you have to say ‘sorry’?

1. They will think I am weak if I apologise.
2. I don’t want them to think I am responsible for all of this, because I’m not!
3. I don’t like how I feel when I apologise. I don’t want to feel vulnerable or like I did something wrong.
4. I’m not even sorry, I just want peace and I’m the only one who can end this.
5. This is my chance to say, ‘sorry BUT...’ and justify myself.
6. If I apologise and then they respond in a way I don’t like, I’m going to be so cross.
7. What if they think that me saying sorry means they are right?
8. ‘Sorry’ seems like such an inadequate word for the hurt I think I have caused.

When we play out any of these things, we can then fall into some big ‘sorry traps’. These things tend not to work so well.

5 Sorry Traps

- 1) **Placing the blame on someone else by shifting our apology to apologise for what they thought NOT what we did.** This can make people mad and pour petrol



on the fire. “I’m sorry if you couldn’t handle the truth” is not the same as saying, “I am sorry for the way I delivered the facts, I think it lacked sensitivity”. One is an apology for our behaviour, the other is an attack thinly veiled as an apology.

- 2) **Making excuses and getting defensive.** The favourite one here is the ‘sorry but’ sentence. A word to the wise here, if you follow ‘sorry’ with a ‘but’ you are about to undo the apology. “I’m sorry but if you hadn’t... then I wouldn’t have...”. “I’m sorry but you were oversensitive”. We find this is one of the favourite devices of young people. I wish that we could say this is something we grow out of but sadly, often it isn’t. No ‘sorry buts’.
- 3) **Saying ‘sorry’ in such an angry and resentful way or getting sarcastic or exaggerating so that the sorry is totally unconvincing.** Ever heard something like this? “I’VE SAID SORRY ALREADY WHAT DO YOU WANT, MY HEAD ON A PLATE?!” or, “I’ve said I’m sorry and that I can’t change what I said now. Sadly, my time travelling machine is having its MOT so I can’t just hop in that and travel right back to the past until next week”. Or how about, “oh, here we go, this is the part when I say sorry and then you just can’t let it go because you just want me to suffer!” Urgh. I’m cringing even writing this.
- 4) **Getting into an all or nothing mindset.** Sometimes we get into polarised positions where we think either ‘I need to apologise for ALL of this situation’ or ‘I will apologise for none of it’. This comes out as, “I’m sorry, this is all my fault, everything I do is awful” or “I can’t see where any of this was my fault so what am I meant to say sorry for?”. It is possible to find the nuance in the half-way place by saying, “this whole thing has clearly gone very wrong and I am sorry for my part in that. I should have been clearer at the start which might have made this more manageable and I’m sorry that I wasn’t clear”.
- 5) **Insisting that other people apologise before you do.** This is an apology stand-off. This may come out as, “I am going to apologise but first of all I want to see if you want to apologise for anything you have done to contribute to this breakdown in our relationship”. This may not go down well. What this says is, ‘you first, and when I think you are sorry enough then I will apologise’. The problem here is that they may not do this, then we remain stuck. Someone must go first and since we



cannot control other people's thoughts or words, it may have to be you that takes the initiative.

That's how we don't do it, but how should we do it?

According to Roy Lewicki, lead author of the study on apologies at Fisher College of Business, there are 6 components to an apology if we want it to be effective. Researchers tested how 755 people reacted to apologies containing anywhere between one and six of the following elements. The 6 elements were:

- 1) Expression of regret
- 2) Explanation of what went wrong
- 3) Acknowledgement of responsibility
- 4) Declaration of repentance
- 5) Offer of repair
- 6) Request for forgiveness

All are important but not all have equal status. There are two that are essential: acknowledging responsibility and an offer of repair. People want to know you see it and you want to sort it. In other words, "see it, say it, sorted" to quote the most annoying transport slogan there is (according to The Times, not just according to me!).

After those two, the next 3 that tied in terms of effectiveness were: expression of regret, explanation of what went wrong and a declaration of repentance. The least effective element was a request for forgiveness. Apparently, Lewiicki's research showed you can leave that one out and still have an effective apology. There will be some of us that are relieved about that!

It isn't just making an apology that we struggle with though, it is also ACCEPTING apologies that we are not so good at either. If someone has come to us to say sorry, then we need to receive it in a way that helps resolve the conflict/issue.

4 Steps to Receiving an Apology

- 1) **Thank them for apologising.** It takes guts to do so.
- 2) **Acknowledge that they have owned it.** "Thanks for recognising/admitting..."
- 3) **Forgive them and tell them you have.** "I want to put this behind us now".



- 4) **Accept them and give them a way to get back to normal.** Perhaps, something like, “shall we grab a coffee at lunch” or “save me a seat at the meeting!”, these are little things that symbolise that normality is coming. That said, there are some situations where we can forgive but not enter back into the same situation or relationship because it is not good for either of us. What we need to avoid is listening to someone’s apology and then turn it into a rant back at them, outlining all the reasons why they are right to apologise and for us to engage in a monologue about all of their faults.

Next time you need to apologise, or are at the receiving end of an apology, perhaps some of these tips can help bring restoration, forgiveness and a way forward.

PS I have tested this out on my kids too (9, 11, 13) with positive results so far, although you can imagine the eye rolls when I brought out my notes!