

CONFLICT SOLUTIONS

Fixing Interpersonal Conflict at Work

Expert Advice to Resolve Workplace Discord

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The Conflict Resolver

Make Your Next Apology Irresistible

What a sad flop it was. Jean's effort to apologize to Doug at the start of their facilitated session went down smoking like the Hindenburg. As I saw Doug's defenses rising, I was wishing that Jean had tested this with me before the meeting. The following four points for crafting meaningful and effective apologies will help you avoid similar calamities for yourself and your employees.

Premature: Jean made a mistake so many apologizers make. She'd hoped to start the conversation with an expression of sincere regret for her role in the derailed working relationship. What was amiss, in part, was that it came too soon. An aggrieved person wants the person offering the apology to hear and understand the hurt they've experienced. The wounded individual wants to see and believe that the other person knows how deeply they were affected. After Doug shares his sense of victimhood, Jean can say with authenticity, "I see how I've hurt and embarrassed you and for that, I'm sorry." In this case, Doug can't easily accept her apology because it was disembodied from the pain she caused. Her premature, blurted apology was perceived by Doug as an attempt to short circuit his opportunity to discuss his concerns.

Pro Skill #1: Listen to and demonstrate that you've heard the other person's concerns and then apologize for the actual hurt that they experienced.

Blame: Jean, Jean, Jean! How'd you deceive yourself into believing Doug would be mollified by the world's most anemic apology formula; "I'm sorry you got upset when I..."? This shop-worn tendency people have to judge the other person's reactions (e.g. "you got upset") is a greater blunder than no apology at all. It's an apology you'll have to apologize for trying to get away with. In fact it's not really an apology at all. It's a cloaked judgement about the other person's overwrought, unreasonable reactions.

Pro Skill #2: Apologize for what you did, not how the other person reacted.

Coercive Reciprocity: Picture the terrible scene in the blood-fest movie, Reservoir Dogs, in which three men stand unyieldingly with guns aimed at chest level. You know the dialogue even if you haven't seen the clip; "Drop your gun!" "No, you drop yours!"

(Continued)

Conflict Resolution Skills for Workplace Leaders

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Don't let it come to this.

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(from front)

All stand in harm's way as each demands that the other unilaterally disarm. It's often like this with apologies during conflict. Jean doesn't think she should proffer an apology because, in the natural cycle of their conflict, he harmed her too. "Why," she asks herself, "should I apologize to him? After all, he offended me when he barged into my office last month and..."

Jean, this isn't a hostage exchange. What every resistant apologizer misses with this insular reasoning is that in the cauldron of interpersonal workplace conflict, both sides invariably treat each other poorly. By the time you sit down to work through an ongoing conflict there's sure to be shared blame. If you want peace, apologize for your piece of the problem.

Pro Skill #3: *Apologize without demanding reciprocity.*

Expect Forgiveness: To clear a path for an apology, I often ask the person about to receive one what their response will be. The nearly universal reply is, "I'll forgive and move on." This answer inverts what the apologizer usually fears - that the receiver will hear *mea culpa* and say, "Now I gotcha!" To extend a meaningful apology is to take a step toward healing a broken relationship. The giver of the apology should believe that any recipient worthy of being apologized to will be grateful and use it to move ahead.

Pro Skill #4: *Assume you'll be forgiven*

I've been pondering apologies lately because I've been honored by clients who've allowed me to help them craft, deliver and receive some profoundly impactful ones. It's astonishing to see how a well-timed and elegantly-crafted apology vaporizes anger and righteousness on the other side of the table. As an organizational leader managing discord in your world, your task will be easier if you help pave the way toward meaningful expressions of regret.

Perspective

There are more stars than there are grains of sand on all the world's beaches.