CHAPTER 11

obstacles to wholehearted apology

Ego is usually the main obstacle to getting apology right. The ego is the organized part of our personality structure that provides, among other things, the defensive function. To the extent that apology makes us vulnerable, apology threatens the ego. Though we may want to offer a wholehearted apology, our egos frequently dial the apology back. In extreme cases, we end up doing the old bait and switch. We advertise a genuine apology but deliver something less authentic. The problem is not in the dispatch, it's in the delivery. This chapter is about recognizing how the defenses mounted by our personalities can get in the way of our efforts to apologize.

Wholehearted apology doesn't make us as vulnerable as we may fear. It's actually in our interest to approach apology with an emphasis on compassion for the wronged party instead of the protection of our own narrow interests. There's nothing wrong with acknowledging that apology doesn't come naturally or easily. We have to work at it. In other words, we must first understand how our good apology intentions get sidetracked.

Apologies can be divided into three categories. The first category is *wholehearted apology*. These are apologies that recipients find immediately satisfying. The second category is halfhearted apology. These derive from the ego's need to hold something in reserve. With a halfhearted apology, the offender

seeks to reap the benefits of apology without earning them. People see these as *almost* apologies. It's not always clear what these statements are lacking, so victims begrudgingly accept them, but the relationship ends up suffering. Non-apology is the third category. These take the form of apologies but are not apologies at all, in the sense that what they offer with one hand they take back with the other (that's why we also call them *back-handed apologies*). If we understand the many ways in which apology statements can be subverted, we can avoid backsliding when we apologize. The table plots the elements of these three categories against the five dimensions of apology.

Comparison of Wholehearted Apology, Halfhearted Apology, and Non-Apology

Apology Dimension	Wholehearted Apology	Halfhearted Apology	Non-Apology
Recognition	Specify the offense Concede the facts	Hint at the offense Argue the facts	Defend the offense Dispute the facts
Responsibility	Accept responsibility	Share responsibility	Sidestep responsibility
Remorse	Express personal remorse	Posture impersonal remorse	Withhold remorse
Restitution	"Pay the uttermost farthing"	Offer words without action	Question the motive of the apology-seeker
Repetition	Explicitly pledge to not repeat the offending conduct	Offer an incomplete pledge to not repeat the offending conduct	Commit to repeat the offending conduct

Wholehearted Apology

Wholehearted apology is the most meticulous and conscientious expression of apologetic meaning. Let's review wholehearted apology in terms of the five attributes of effective apology. Wholehearted apology:

- Includes a detailed factual record of the events related to the offense, specifying the offense in plain language without a hint of defensiveness. If there is more than one offense, the apology names each one, taking care not to combine separate offenses. The apology also identifies the moral code or principle that the offender violated. The apology reaches for agreement among the parties about what the facts are, and concedes the facts, if necessary. (Recognition)
- Accepts undiluted moral responsibility for the offense on behalf of the offender. (Responsibility)
- Categorically expresses regret for the conduct, communicating that the offender believes he or she made a mistake and that he or she wishes that the mistake could be reversed. (Remorse)
- Takes practical responsibility for the offense. The offender undertakes to provide remedies, in the form of monetary payment if appropriate, and redress in an attempt to restore victims to the condition they enjoyed before the injury. In undertaking this redress, the offender operates on the principle of generosity, even sacrifice. (Restitution)
- Signals that the offender has learned the error of his or her ways and expresses the commitment that the offender will reform and forbear from reoffending and will demonstrate this commitment by resisting temptations to reoffend. (Repetition)

Representative Geoff Davis Apologizes for Calling Barack Obama "Boy"

In April 2008, the heated competition for the Democratic presidential nomination flared even hotter when Representative Geoff Davis called Senator Barack Obama "boy" during a Northern Kentucky dinner. Davis was quoted as saying:

> *I'm going to tell you something: That boy's finger does not need to be on the button. He could not make a decision in that simulation that related to a nuclear threat to this country.*

The image of a white man—younger than his target and, as a U.S. representative, occupying a position lower in status than that of a U.S. senator—calling Obama "boy" was inflammatory. The word "boy" is considered extremely offensive by many African Americans, as it was used by Southern whites in the Jim Crow South to assert a claim of racial superiority. To Davis's credit, he recognized this history and immediately handdelivered a wholehearted apology to Obama's office:

> *My poor choice of words is regrettable and was in no way meant to impugn you or your integrity. I offer my sincere apology to you and ask for your forgiveness. Though we may disagree on many issues, I know that we share the goal of a prosperous, secure future for our nation. My comment has detracted from the dialogue that we should all be having on legitimate policy differences and in no way reflects the personal and professional respect I have for you.*[1]

This is a perfect example of how a quick apology successfully defused what could have been a very divisive conflict. Because Davis immediately apologized in so wholehearted a manner, the incident failed to become a crisis. In the 2008 election, at a time when voters swept thirty incumbent Republicans out of Congress, Davis handily defended his seat.

Hugh Grant Apologizes on The Tonight Show

British actor Hugh Grant showed the world the advantages of wholehearted apology. In June 1995, the tousle-headed actor was arrested for engaging in oral sex with a Hollywood prostitute. In such cases, many celebrities with a brand to protect go into crisis mode. But instead of hiding behind publicists, going into seclusion, giving excuses, and blaming the media, Grant showed that fans will embrace a celebrity who offers a candid apology. With his characteristic tongue-in-cheek stylishness, Grant apologized right away. He went on every talk show possible, he apologized to his girlfriend, and the public applauded him.

He started by appearing on *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*. Leno started the interview by asking, "What were you thinking?" The words Grant chose were direct, but what really worked for him were nonverbal signals. Grant allowed himself to appear awkward and contrite and thoroughly embarrassed:

> *I think you know in life what's a good thing to do and what's a bad thing, and I did a bad thing. And there you have it.*

Later, on *Larry King Live*, Grant said:

> *I could accept some of the things that people have explained: "stress," "pressure," "loneliness"—that that was the reason. But that would be false. In the end you have to come clean and say "I did something dishonorable, shabby, and goatish."*

This disarming performance worked. The apology helped transform Grant from a marginal British character actor to a genuine international movie star. Former New York Governor Eliot Spitzer, who had his own encounter with a prostitute, could have learned something from Hugh Grant. I'll discuss Spitzer's apology in the next section.

Halfhearted Apology

What halfhearted apology gives with one hand, it takes back with another. It's like someone safely on shore who throws a drowning man twenty feet offshore a fifteen-foot rope and cannot understand why the drowning man is unsatisfied. "Why are you so upset?" the man on shore yells. "I met you more than halfway." Halfhearted apology adds insult to injury. It's actually worse than offering no apology at all, for in the guise of offering healing it redoubles the offense.

Let's look at halfhearted apology in terms of the five dimensions of effective apology. Halfhearted apology:

- Hints at the offense at the heart of the injury and argues the facts. There is no attempt to corroborate the factual record. The offender interprets the facts on the basis of self-interest and mitigating moral culpability. (Recognition)
- Attempts to share responsibility, implicating the victim with the offender, or fracture moral agency. (Responsibility)
- Shades the issue of personal regret, veering into an expression of general sympathy that obscures the offender's direct causation of the offense. (Remorse)
- Resists taking practical responsibility for the offense beyond words. The offender does not undertake to provide significant remedies, in the form of either money or other redress that requires sacrifice. (Restitution)
- Generally disregards the issue of repetition. If the apology does reference the issue, the promise is general and indefinite. (Repetition)

Many of the apologies we offer tend to come out as halfhearted apologies. Because we make common mistakes, the effect of the apology is quite different from our intention.

Halfhearted apologies may be common, but the good news is that there's usually a simple way to rescue them. Here's how you do it: just stop after the apology. That's all. Just apologize and then shut up. Almost without exception, halfhearted apologies start out fine and then are sabotaged by a wholly unnecessary follow-up. So quit while you're ahead.

How to Avoid the Telltale Signs of Halfhearted Apologies

Halfhearted apologies tend to sneak up on us, so we must be vigilant. Here are the most common categories of halfhearted apologies and how to recognize them:

The Explanation Apology

I'm so sorry I didn't phone when I said I would. I got another call.

Translation: Please understand that I consider someone else more important than you.

Better: *I'm so sorry I didn't phone when I said I would.*

Listen for an explanation, which almost always turns into an excuse and hardly ever satisfies the wounded party.

The It's-Not-What-I-Meant Apology

I'm sorry you took it that way. It wasn't what I meant.

Translation: I think it's too bad that you had difficulty understanding me correctly."

Better: *I'm sorry I wasn't more careful to be clear about what I meant.*

Listen for the phrase "it's not what I meant" or "I didn't intend it that way." Genuine apology concerns itself with the consequences of our behavior, not our intentions.

The Counterattack Apology

I'm sorry I didn't phone when I said I would. Have you been feeling insecure about your relationships lately?

Translation: Maybe you're upset about my not calling because the real cause is your own insecurity, not anything I did.

Better: *I'm sorry I didn't phone when I said I would.*

This is an attempt by the offender to deflect his or her responsibility by shifting responsibility to the victim. A genuine apology accepts 100 percent of the responsibility for the offender's participation.

The I-Want-To Apology

I want to apologize for acting like such a jerk. So, do you accept my apology?

Translation: Maybe if I say I want to apologize the victim will think that I really did.

Better: *I apologize for acting like such a jerk.*

Listen for the phrase "I want to apologize." Frequently the intention to apologize is there, but it's little more than an intention. The apology itself is missing in action.

The "Stuff Happens" Apology

I'm really sorry for what happened. It was a mess.

Translation: The whole thing was out of my control.

Better: *I'm really sorry.*

Listen for a variant of "stuff happens." Former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld used the phrase in response to criticism that the United States did not do enough to prevent widespread looting in Iraq. "Stuff happens" is an attempt to sidestep responsibility by suggesting that it isn't anyone's fault. The goal

is to obscure the fact that the offender started the chain of events that spiraled out of control.

The Devil-Made-Me-Do-It Apology

I'm sorry. I say stupid things when I'm drunk, but I don't mean any of it. It was the beer talking. I don't know what got into me.

Translation: It wasn't really me that said those stupid things. It was someone I barely recognize who deserves the blame.

Better: *I'm sorry. Getting drunk is no excuse.*

Look for mention of an addictive substance or supernatural force. On the most superficial level it's an attempt to blame the offense on the addiction. *The booze . . . it was the booze talking*, as if the responsibility lies with the substance. On a deeper level, this attempt to evade responsibility represents nothing less than an attempt to split the offender into two parts. First there is a blameworthy part that gets to absorb all of the responsibility. Then there's a blameless part that disassociates itself from the derelict behavior. It is with this blameless part that the apologizer identifies. The goal in this fractured agency apology is to suggest that the apologizer, speaking on behalf of the "good" self, did not actually commit the harm. The new honorable self has left the old rebellious self behind to take the blame.

The Indirect Apology

On behalf of the CEO, I would like to apologize.

Translation: The CEO considers this matter too insignificant to worry about.

Better: *The CEO will be making a statement today at 2 P.M. . . .*

The only appropriate person you can apologize on behalf of is yourself. Any apology that starts, "On behalf of the CEO . . ." is

an apology that can properly be discharged by none other than the CEO. The indirect apology satisfies no one. Even if there is a very good reason why the appropriate person isn't offering the apology, you can represent that at some future point the appropriate person will apologize directly; in the meantime the offender has authorized you to express how sorry he or she is. Note: It is appropriate for individuals to apologize on behalf of the *institutions* they represent. In most cases, the apology should come personally from a senior executive.

The Blanket Apology

For anyone offended by what happened, I can only say it's unfortunate and I'm sorry it happened.

Translation: Whoever you are, whatever you're upset about, I really don't care.

Better: *I intend to apologize privately to all of the parties I offended. Until then, please know that I am very sorry for my behavior.*

Look for clues such as "anyone" and "all." When you can't tell who's doing the apologizing or identify any specific objects of contrition, you have a blanket apology.

The Apology in Advance

There are so many people to thank. I apologize in advance for anyone I fail to appreciate.

Translation: I can't be bothered to remember the people who make me look good.

Better: *There are so many people to thank. Please bear with me as I'm going to do my very best to appreciate everyone who contributed.*

The very essence of apology supposes accepting responsibility for an event that has already taken place and promising

not to repeat the behavior. Apologizing in advance is just moral laziness.

Passing-the-Buck Apology

I'm sorry for the inconvenience. My secretary is normally very reliable.

Translation: Don't blame me; it was my secretary's fault.

Better: *I'm sorry for the inconvenience. Here's how I'd like to make it up to you.*

Any apology that includes a name other than your own is suspect. Appearing to apologize but blaming someone else is the lowest form of apology. It's a despicable apology that shifts responsibility to someone else, especially when it's someone lower in status. Either you accept responsibility or you don't.

New York Governor Eliot Spitzer Resigns

On March 12, 2008, New York Governor Eliot Spitzer issued a statement following allegations that he had hired a prostitute. After a short preamble, he said:

I am deeply sorry that I did not live up to what was expected of me. To every New Yorker, and to all those who believed in what I tried to stand for, I sincerely apologize. . . . Over the course of my public life, I have insisted, I believe correctly, that people, regardless of their position or power, take responsibility for their conduct. I can and will ask no less of myself. For this reason, I am resigning from the office of governor.[2]

Spitzer's apology may appear wholehearted. He says he is sorry, he accepts responsibility, he offers restitution in the form of an immediate resignation. What else can we ask for? The

first thing that makes this a halfhearted apology is that Spitzer misses the mark on recognition. By failing to explain what he did with an appropriate degree of specificity, the listener is left to speculate about what conduct, exactly, merits the apology. The term he earlier gives for his apology—"private failing"—will not do. For any public official, much less a governor who came to authority on a platform of ethical behavior, to hire a prostitute—in violation of the law—is a public matter of the first order. An inability to acknowledge this admittedly unsavory fact undermines the effectiveness of the apology.

Had Spitzer sought my advice, I would have suggested he articulate what he is apologizing for and why he believes what he did was wrong. Crafting a wholehearted apology would have required the addition of just a few extra lines:

> *I specifically apologize for violating a solemn oath I gave to my wife and to the public. I hired a prostitute, which is illegal in New York State, morally wrong by every value I hold dear, and destructive to the lives of everyone associated with the practice. By secretly supporting an industry I have publicly denounced and by violating the rule of law, I have betrayed the citizens of New York, as well as my marriage, my wife, and my children.*

No doubt Spitzer, a lawyer himself, and his team of advisors were reluctant to be specific lest the apology be deemed a confession if he is charged with a crime. As we will see, there is evidence that this fear is much exaggerated and that, in fact, detailed apologies often reduce the odds of criminal sanction. Despite its halfhearted character, Spitzer's apology appears to have taken the wind out of the sails of his political enemies. In November 2008 the Justice Department announced that Spitzer would not face federal charges related to this incident.

Video Apology Follows Taco Bell "Fire in the Hole" Incident

Wholehearted apologies are delivered face-to-face. Halfhearted apologies are often mandated by court order, composed—and sometimes delivered—by attorneys, and hardly ever offered directly to the victim. That's the complaint a Florida fast-food worker had about a YouTube apology posted by two teenage boys who threw a 32-ounce soft drink at her as a prank.

In July 2007, Jessica Ceponis was working at a Florida Taco Bell when two teenage boys, ages fifteen and sixteen, pulled up to the drive-through window. They ordered a 32-ounce soft drink. Ceponis filled the cup and handed the driver the drink. Then the paper cup, brimming with liquid, flew back through the window, hitting her in the jaw, and soaking her uniform with soda. She heard the boys laugh and yell, "Fire in the hole!" as they drove quickly away.

Ceponis was a victim of a "fire in the hole" assault, a prank that some young people videotape and post on websites such as YouTube. Ceponis didn't know that she was a random victim of a certain kind of practical joke; she assumed it was a personal attack. At first she got depressed. And then she got angry. After she discovered that "fire in the hole" pranks often made their way to the Internet, Ceponis took off her soaked Taco Bell cap and put on a detective's hat. In due course she found that not only had the miscreants posted their video, but one of the boys had also provided a link to his own MySpace page. Pretending to be a fan of "fire in the hole" videos, Ceponis sent the boy an email and communicated with him until she had the names and addresses of both boys. Then she picked up the phone and called the police.

Both boys were charged with assault as juveniles and were ordered to perform one hundred hours of community service, pay Taco Bell for the costs of cleaning up the mess, and post an

apology video on YouTube. This the boys did. In the apology video, the boys issued this apology in voiceover over a highly stylized reenactment of the incident:

> *On October 2, 2007, my friend and I were charged in juvenile court. We take this opportunity to apologize to the victims and take full responsibility for our irresponsible behavior.*[3]

Did the apology fit the crime? Ceponis doesn't think so. It's easy to see why. Although the boys mouth the right words, the script itself appears to have been negotiated by lawyers, not the boys themselves. Their faces were never shown. Ceponis never received a direct apology.

To be fair, the boys were prosecuted as juveniles, which meant their identities are protected by law. No apology video mandated by the court could identify them. Moreover, the lawyer for one of the boys said that they wrote personal letters of apology, which the lawyer claimed to have personally handed to the state's attorney handling the case. That the letters were never forwarded to Jessica Ceponis is entirely believable. On a segment on *The Today Show* on NBC, the lawyer, Tony Hernandez, spoke directly to the victim:

> *I would like to take this opportunity on behalf of the family and my client to apologize to Jessica; what you went through is absolutely unacceptable.*

Ceponis nodded as he spoke, but she still wanted to hear the apology, in person, directly from the boys who assaulted her. It's a limitation of our juvenile justice system that defendants who want to apologize to their victims are prevented from doing so by rigid privacy considerations.

Yes, Jesse Jackson's Apology Was Lyrical, But Was It Effective?

In 1984, Jesse Jackson, a candidate for president, referred to Jews as "Hymies" and New York City as "Hymietown." Both terms are disrespectful and offensive to Jews, especially in light of the fraught history between African Americans and Jews in America. Jackson danced around the issue, but at the Democratic Party convention in San Francisco that summer, Jackson delivered a powerful speech that included a most lyrical apology. Or was it? Can you find an apology here?

> *If, in my low moments, in word, deed, or attitude, through some error of temper, taste, or tone, I have caused anyone discomfort, created pain, or revived someone's fears, that was not my truest self. If there were occasions when my grape turned into a raisin and my joy bell lost its resonance, please forgive me. Charge it to my head and not to my heart. My head—so limited in its finitude; my heart, which is boundless in its love for the human family. I am not a perfect servant. I am a public servant doing my best against the odds. As I develop and serve, be patient: God is not finished with me yet.*[4]

It pains me to criticize such lyricism. There is no reason why apologies cannot wax poetic and still be effective. But the lyricism must not be a substitute for specificity. In this statement—at best, it's an implied apology—Jackson does not name any specific offense he might have in mind or identify any victims he offended. Two big fat conditionals start the first and second sentences. Although Jackson asks for forgiveness, nowhere does he actually say he apologizes for anything. Elegant as it is, the statement is more a progress report on Jackson's moral and spiritual development than an apology.

Non-Apology

A non-apology may have the form of an apology but has no apologetic meaning. Apology-like statements that are non-apologies come in a variety of forms. They can be tricky to recognize because they often appear in the guise of apologies. In the most common form of non-apology, the offender says that he is sorry not because of anything he did, but rather because an aggrieved person is requesting the apology, expressing a grievance, or threatening some form of retaliation. Regardless of their form, all non-apologies either deny that a mistake has been made or admit that there was but refuse to acknowledge responsibility for those mistakes.

An increasing body of research shows that well-timed apologies actually decrease the probability of litigation. Thirty-four states have enacted laws excluding expressions of sympathy after accidents as proof of liability. Most state and federal jurisdictions now recognize that apology is a public good that actually decreases the pressure on court dockets.

Let's look at non-apology in terms of the five dimensions of effective apology. Non-apology:

- Rejects the proposition that there was an offense for which the apologizer has standing. It disputes the facts and defends the actions of the offender. It has no interest in establishing agreement for a factual record. (Recognition)
- Sidesteps accepting responsibility except in the most impersonal, noncausal way. It rejects the proposition that the offender violated a moral value or principle. (Responsibility)
- Avoids expressing personal remorse. It may offer impersonal expressions of sympathy and regret. (Remorse)
- Rejects providing restitution. To demands of restitution, non-apology responds by questioning the motives of the victim. (Restitution)

- Suggests that in the same circumstances the offender will follow the same course of offensive conduct. (Repetition)

"Mistakes Were Made"

The classic construction of a non-apology is "mistakes were made." For economy of language, passivity, and evasion of responsibility, you can't beat this phrase. Politicians, in particular, have a hard time resisting this rhetorical device, whereby a speaker acknowledges that a situation was handled poorly or inappropriately but seeks to evade any direct admission or accusation of responsibility by using the passive voice. The statement frames the acknowledgment of "mistakes" in an abstract sense, with no direct reference to who actually made the mistakes. It's as if the mistakes made themselves. There is nothing new about this phrase. Here are a few examples of this device from 1876 to the present:

In a December 5, 1876 report to Congress, President Ulysses S. Grant acknowledged the scandals engulfing his administration by writing:

> *Mistakes have been made, as all can see and I admit it.*[5]

President Ronald Reagan used the phrase in the 1987 State of the Union address while discussing what came to be known as the arms-for-hostages scandal within the Iran-Contra affair. He said:

> *And certainly it was not wrong to try to secure freedom for our citizens held in barbaric captivity. But we did not achieve what we wished, and serious mistakes were made in trying to do so.*[6]

Following the deaths of seventy civilians in Afghanistan in October 2006, NATO's International Security Assistance Force commander General David Richards addressed reporters in Kabul. He was quoted as saying:

> *In the night in the fog of war, mistakes were made.*[7]

Pete Rose "I'm Just Not Built That Way"

Pete Rose, the former Cincinnati Reds baseball player and manager, is the poster boy for non-apology. Fourteen years after he was convicted of gambling on baseball games, after more than a decade of denying and stonewalling, Rose finally admitted that the charges were true. He went on to say:

> *I'm sure that I'm supposed to act all sorry or sad or guilty now that I've accepted that I've done something wrong. But you see, I'm just not built that way. So let's leave it like this: I'm sorry it happened and I'm sorry for all the people, fans, and family it hurt. Let's move on.*[8]

Even though he technically used the words "I'm sorry," nobody accepted Rose's apology as either effective or sincere. And why should they? From the first sentence to the last, Rose's statement is combative. When he finally gets around to expressing the apology, the best he can do is refer to some nebulous and passive "it" and say he's sorry for all the hurt it caused. The actions that *Pete Rose* took are conveniently absent.

Some weeks later, after much jeering, Rose came closer to the mark when he said this:

> *I would like to apologize to the fans for abusing their trust.*

"I would like to apologize" may sound like an apology, but it is no more an actual apology than saying "I would like to lose weight" will make you suddenly slimmer. What Rose offered is an intention to apologize, which is a good start but far from an apology itself. Pete Rose had a reasonable chance to redeem himself, but he blew it. Rose's desire to be elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame will be frustrated not so much by his gambling—that could be forgiven—as by his refusal to take responsibility and apologize.

The Limits of "I'm Sorry"

I have said that the two words "I'm sorry" form the most powerful apology phrase in the English language. That's true, but for all its power, the phrase "I'm sorry" doesn't work unless it is accompanied by all the other tokens of effective apology. This requires that we pay attention to what comes before and what follows. The phrase needs to be linked to a framework that coordinates recognizing the offense, taking responsibility, expressing remorse, offering restitution, and promising not to do it again. When "I'm sorry" loses its apologetic specificity, it is because we have unconsciously allowed it to take on one of several non-apology meanings.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The ego is usually the main obstacle to getting apology right.
- In wholehearted apology, the kind that recipients find immediately satisfying, the offender:
  - Offers a detailed factual record of the events related to the offense, specifying the offense in plain language without a hint of defensiveness
  - Accepts undiluted moral responsibility for the offense on the offender's own behalf
  - Categorically expresses regret for the conduct
  - Takes practical responsibility for the offense
  - Signals that the offender has learned the error of his or her ways and promises not to do it again
- In halfhearted apology, the offender:
  - Hints at the offense at the heart of the injury and argues the facts
  - Attempts to share responsibility
  - Shades the issue of personal regret
  - Resists taking practical responsibility for the offense beyond words

  - Disregards the issue of repetition
- In non-apology, which may take the form of an apology but has no apologetic meaning, the offender:
  - Disputes the facts and defends the offender's actions
  - Sidesteps accepting responsibility except in the most impersonal, noncausal way
  - Avoids expressing personal remorse
  - Rejects providing restitution
  - Suggests that in the same circumstances the offender will pursue the same offensive conduct