



Ask an Ombudsman! The power of apologies

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This article continues a mini-series launched by the Office of the United Nations Ombudsman and Mediation Services to offer practical advice on how to deal with everyday conflicts in the work place.

Apology – A Sign of Weakness?

In our personal relationships, apologies seem to be easier than in working relationships. We may fear that apologizing to a colleague in a competitive environment might be perceived as a sign of weakness, undermine our authority or even negatively affect office dynamics.

However, an honest and sincere apology has the potential to restore dignity and diminish fear of retaliation or even desire for vengeance on the receiving end. On the giving end it can be a powerful tool to reconcile a working relationship and to initiate the restoration of trust. Accordingly, an apology can show strength of character, demonstrate emotional competence and reaffirm that both parties share values in their relationship they want to commit to.

Depending on the situation, there are certain factors that can contribute to the success of an apology:

- **When you OFFER an apology**, consider to include following elements:

1. Specify and explain the perceived offence

Example: "Yesterday during the meeting, I said..."

2. Acknowledge that the other person's feelings are legitimate

Example: "I understand that this must have felt hurtful."

3. Take responsibility

Example: "I should have addressed it differently", "When addressing it, I should have taken into consideration..."

4. Include a judgment about the offence

Example: "How I addressed it was wrong."

5. Voice your regret

Example: "I am sorry I used those words."

6. Indicate your future intention

Example: "From now on, I will try to speak in a more friendly tone / use different words", "I hope that we can have a relationship of mutual respect."

- **When you RECEIVE an apology**: The response to an apology is critical for the future relationship with the apologizing party. First consider whether or not you are genuinely ready to accept the apology.

- **If you are ready to accept the apology**: Demonstrate acceptance and

extend forgiveness by shaking hands or another method you feel comfortable with.

- If you are not ready to accept the apology: Acknowledge the value of the apology and ask for more time to heal. Indicate when you are ready to speak about the issue again.

The healing effect of an apology through restoration of trust, caring and respect can best be achieved when one has a chance to clearly define the harmful behavior, apologize and indicate how future misunderstandings can be avoided.

Our Office can assist you in this process through mediation or other methods of informal conflict resolution.

Give us feedback on our mini-series! Contact Berkan Manaigo-Vekil at: manaigo-vekil@un.org.

The Ombudsman's Office provides informal and impartial conflict resolution services and helps to resolve conflict through informal means. Find out more: www.un.org/ombudsman