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## The Art of Public Apology

[Patrick Field](#) May, 2007 CBI Reports While it is easy to say, “accept responsibility and admit mistakes,” it turns out it’s not so clear how to do so. Public apologies present researchers and consultants with a series of interlocking and difficult questions.

**Recent news got us thinking.** President Bush apologizes to veterans about the conditions at Walter Reed Hospital. Jet Blue leaves passengers stranded on a plane for several hours during a Valentine’s Day snowstorm; the CEO apologizes in person and the company follows up with full-page apology ads in major newspapers. The new Governor of Massachusetts finds himself apologizing for a large, expensive inauguration, expenditures on new office furnishings and a new Crown Victoria town car, and for calling Citigroup on behalf of a sub-prime lender to put in a “good word.” In Europe, the wife of a former Italian prime minister writes a letter to a major newspaper, demanding a public apology for his serial flirtations. Meanwhile Britain and Iran each demand the other apologize for the capture of British sailors. What motivates these expressions of—and demands for—sorrow and regret? In our work helping leaders and groups to reach better agreements, what advice would we give to those who wish to offer a public apology?

Private and personal apologies, as difficult as they can be, are a necessary part of maintaining relationships. We all apologize to friends or family members when we have done something thoughtless or harmful. In the growing field of restorative justice, apologies also play an important role. Though a perpetrator may not have had a relationship to the victim, the act of apology may become an important part of the community effort to restore balance, increase trust, and restore dignity and respect for the victim—, as well as for the perpetrator.

While it is easy to say, “accept responsibility and admit mistakes,” it turns out it’s not so clear how to do so. Public apologies present researchers and consultants with a series of interlocking and difficult questions:

- What exactly is a “public apology” in a culture of mass media? What purpose (s) does it serve? To whom should it be directed?

- How are public apologies similar, or different from, personal apologies? How does a leader apologize to thousands or millions of people—or to their governments?

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- Can corporations and governments truly give a meaningful apology, since meaningful apologies are deeply personal and personally delivered?

- How can an individual apologize on behalf of a corporation or government, when in fact, numerous people may have contributed to the problem (and in some cases the people at fault are long since dead—consider recent debates in state legislatures wrestling with the question of apologizing for the institution of slavery)? If the “heartfelt” nature of an apology is essential to its meaning, 1) how can personal feeling be conveyed through mass media; 2) can it ever be really heartfelt if the targets of the apology perceive the intent to be “strategic” (getting back votes, credibility, customers, or shareholder value); and, 3) can one offer advice on apologizing without tainting the genuine, heartfelt, sincere expression?

- Do apologies “weaken” the offerer, when the individual who apologizes (whether a CEO or governor) needs to be seen as strong, powerful, decisive, and capable in order to exercise her or his role?

- Can public apologies be made without opening the company or government to liability and civil or criminal proceedings? (Many good defense attorneys would say, “Just let me do the talking.”).

We offer the following advice about apologies, though we think there is much to be learned about what works, what doesn't, when to apologize, and when perhaps not to. In our experience, effective public apologies are:

- Clear and specific
- Personal
- Visible and direct
- Non-defensive
- Genuine
- Accompanied by action

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## **Apologies must be clear**

Apologies should be succinct, specific, and detailed. They must be clear about that for which the offerer is sorry. The Massachusetts Governor's first attempt at a public apology regarding office and automobile "upgrades" didn't work so well. "I am so sorry that we all have spent the kind of time we have on what we have spent time on, and I am sorry to have been responsible for that," the local media outlets reported him saying. What exactly was he apologizing for? In order to be clear, he might have instead just said: "I am sorry I spent money and time on my office upgrades rather than first and foremost on the people's business."

## **Apologies must be personal**

"I apologize on behalf of the Giant Corporation," just doesn't feel sincere, heartfelt, or real. On the other hand, when a high-level Air Force official came to a community dramatically affected by groundwater pollution from an Air Force base, he said in a large public forum: "I am sorry we polluted your water. I am sorry we have not dealt with investigation and cleanup in the way we should have. I will take responsibility for ensuring that the Air Force makes your community whole again." The statement was personal and filled with "I" language.

## **Apologies must be as visible and as direct as possible to those harmed**

Quiet apologies later reported by the media aren't likely to be felt, believed, or trusted. If an organization's action has caused hurt, harm, or offence to many, then, the apology has to be made as directly as possible to the many. Do it in front of lots of real people, hard as that may be. Look straight in to the camera. Apologize in a physical location that is appropriate. Apologize to real people who you harmed or represent those you harmed. For instance, President Bush recently went to Walter Reed, in front of the cameras, to face and apologize to actual, flesh-and-blood veterans.

## **Apologies must be non-defensive**

Apologies cannot and should not offer explanations (that can come later), defenses, deflections, or

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blame. Too often, like a school child in the principal's office, the offerer of an apology muddies the waters with excuses. However relevant these may be, they make matters worse and, unfortunately, a poor apology may be worse than no apology at all.

Massachusetts Governor Patrick tried to have it both ways in his apology for making a call to Citigroup on behalf of a business in which he had previously had a financial interest: "Even though I made this call solely as a former board member, and I believe that was clear to Mr. Rubin, I appreciate that I should not have made the call. I regret the mistake." Arguably, the statement would have been clearer if he had simply said, "I did not think clearly enough about the way the call might be perceived. I should not have made it. It was a mistake. I am sorry."

### **Apologies must be genuine**

Perhaps the most important word of advice to any CEO, Governor, or spokesperson is this: if you are not really sorry, for goodness sake, don't pretend to be. Apologies do have important functional value for one's shareholders, constituents, or others. But they cannot and must not be false. The public, at least the American public, can be surprisingly forgiving. But, they can also see through half-hearted apologies, wording that looks like P.R. copy, and any "mommy made me say it" efforts. If it isn't felt, it isn't real, and if it isn't real, that will be conveyed one way or the other.

### **Apologies alone are not sufficient**

Any apologist must determine the extent of harm and injury done (preferably, not only to themselves, but to others) and offer appropriate and "fair" mitigation, corrections, or compensation. So, after apologizing directly verbally and in newspaper ads, Jet Blue CEO David Neelman, stated: "We have begun putting a comprehensive plan in place to provide better and more timely information to you, more tools and resources for our crewmembers and improved procedures for handling operational difficulties in the future." Apologies are a necessary and important step, but often if and only if, followed up by direct, specific, substantive corrections.

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