

Apologizing for an Unintentional Mistake

Please note: In this article, the pronoun 'he' is used in reference to an individual, whether male or female, in place of the more awkward 'he' or 'she.'

My name is Carol Gray. I am not an expert on apologies, although admittedly I do routinely make mistakes that require them. I have a lot of experience that, along with my observations of others over the last several decades, provides an extensive apologetic background. This article shares my theories and thoughts about apologies and the seven characteristics of those that are most likely to be the most effective.

My general thoughts and theories may not apply to every culture or situation. It's important to keep in mind that there is almost always an exception when people are involved. Regardless, I will try to the best of my ability to accurately describe what I have found to be true about effective apologies *most of the time*.

According to dictionary.reference.com the most common meaning of *apology* is "...a written or spoken expression of one's regret, remorse, or sorrow for having insulted, failed, injured, or wronged another." There are three others. In this article, I am focusing on the meaning that I have quoted here.

People make mistakes with one another. It's inevitable. No human inhabitant of Planet Earth has a mistake score of zero. Some errors are intentional, and others are unintentional.

When I was three years old, I placed my sister's doll suitcase in the toilet. I intended to put it in the toilet, and I did. It was a bad idea that became an intentional mistake that made a perfectly good doll suitcase very soggy. My sister was upset.

I estimate that I have made many more *unintentional* mistakes. These are the mistakes where *I meant* no harm, I wasn't *thinking* about hurting anyone, but I *did*. For example,

I have said things “...without thinking it through” and ended up causing someone to feel unhappy or angry. Or, I’ve accidentally broken something that does not belong to me. I’ve also inconvenienced people without knowing it until it was too late and the damage was done. I’m going to narrow the remainder of this discussion to those unintentional errors that negatively impact others, and the apologies most likely to be effective.

Many people feel anxious or uneasy when they make a mistake and need to apologize. Understanding where the discomfort is coming from may help. Apologizing may be uncomfortable because:

1. There was no harmful intent, so realizing that someone was hurt is an unpleasant surprise or a shock,
2. It may be difficult to take responsibility for a mistake when it was accidental; or
3. The person hurt or inconvenienced by the mistake often feels sad or angry, and thus, likely to be not as much fun to approach or chat with as when he is calm and happy.

This is not a complete list. There are other reasons why apologizing for an unintentional mistake may be uncomfortable.

Apologizing is not *always* uncomfortable. A lot depends on the people involved and the severity of the mistake. One thing is for sure – everyone makes unintentional mistakes, and an apology is often a helpful antidote.

Before going any further, it’s important to note that apologies can take many forms. There are verbal apologies, emailed apologies, apologies attached to a small gift or flowers, or written on the inside of a greeting card. Sometimes, a person may make something like a cake, cookies, picture, or something else to include as part of an apology.

Figure 1: Seven characteristics of an apology most likely to be effective following an unintentional mistake.

The best apologies are:

1. Sincere
2. Use effective timing
3. Begin with a name.
4. Describe the mistake.
5. Express regret.
6. Acknowledge the other person's feelings.
7. Responsible.

Once a person decides to apologize, there are seven things that he or she can do (Figure 1) to increase the odds that it will improve the feelings of everyone involved.

1. The best apologies are sincere. The person who is apologizing regrets that his words or actions have hurt or inconvenienced the other person.
2. The best apologies use effective timing. First, apologizing sooner is much better than apologizing later, and apologizing later is better than apologizing a lot later. The less time that passes between a mistake and its apology, the better. Second, people learn to deliver an apology when the other person has time to talk and listen. It's risky to apologize to a person who is currently busy, distracted, or stressed by another situation. For example, a boy who tries to apologize to his mom while she is rushing to prepare a dinner party for eight eminent guests is using 'poor timing'... *unless* the boy is sorry that his frog just jumped into the filled punch bowl. It's not good news, not a good time, but mom needs to know now.
3. The best apologies begin with a name. For many people, hearing their name recruits their attention. It personalizes an apology right from the start. Waiting for an acknowledgment, for eyes to look up from a current activity or another

indication of attention is a good idea. In addition to someone's name, many people find that saying something like, "I need to talk to you. Is this a good time?" is a great way to check on timing (described in #2) before continuing by listening for the answer.

4. The best apologies describe the mistake. In my experience, there have been times when I start to apologize, and then realize the other person doesn't quite know what I am talking about. Life gets busy, many things happen, and it may take a person a while to focus on a specific event in the past, even if it is the immediate past. For this reason, the best apologies include a description of the mistake, even if the other person was there at the time. Including a description of the mistake is critical if the other person is unaware of the mistake. For example, "Remember when you loaned me your jacket yesterday? I wore it to the game. I took it off and fell into the mud and water."
5. The best apologies express regret and mean it. I have a theory about the phrase, "I am sorry." It's difficult for many people to say it because doing so feels like an admission of guilt. When a mistake is unintentional, admitting guilt often doesn't quite seem to fit the situation. "I'm sorry" doesn't always mean a person is guilty. The details surrounding the mistake do that. It often merely is an expression of regret that means, *I am sorry this happened.*
6. The best apologies include an acknowledgment of the *other person's* feelings. For the boy with the frog in mom's punch bowl, saying "*...Mom, I know you want things right for the party*" supports Mom and may turn efforts toward a solution sooner. Or, in the case of the muddy jacket, a statement like "*...I know this is your favorite jacket*" may help to minimize disappointment or anger.
7. The best apologies are responsible. They include an offer to help solve the problem, a promise to do things differently in the future, or both.
Continuing with our examples, the boy may return the frog to his cage, offer to help clean the bowl and make a new batch of punch, as well as promise to keep the frog away from future dinner parties. Regarding the jacket, including an offer to clean it is an essential part of the apology. Adding evidence of thoughts

regarding next time, as in, “I wish I had been more careful and put the jacket in my backpack” begins to rebuild trust.

I’ve listed these characteristics as a guide, a summary of my own experiences and observations of others. They are not a series of defined steps. An apology may ‘work’ without meeting all seven characteristics. That’s what I meant when I mentioned earlier that whenever people are involved there is an exception to every rule!