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The Art of Apology

By: Dave Hingsburger

“I work constantly in other people’s spaces and other people’s places,” remarked a direct support professional when discussing some of the stressors that come with the job. She’s right, of course; by the nature of the profession, you are in constant relationship to other people in all sorts of different environments. Now, even for the most social person, even for the most mild-mannered and calm, trouble is going to visit. Hurt is going to happen, mistakes are going to be made, words will hurt, and actions will cause dissent. That is the natural way of things.

All of us will be called to apologize to a co-worker, to a supervisor, or to the person we support. The call to apologize, and the need to make things right are a huge part of the human condition. It is said that humans are pack animals, that means we care for those who are part of our pack. We watch out for the wounded, and we are careful with our teeth when at play. We don’t want to hurt another member of our pack.

Anyone who has dogs for pets will recognize the force of the pack. Like human beings, dogs are also pack animals. They seek a place within the pack and, in fairly short order, adapt to their role in your family group. But you will also notice that dogs, because of their feeling of belonging, will sometimes make themselves very vulnerable to you, in the belief that they are always safe. Dogs also react with hurt and alarm when human beings do things that they find hurtful. So, with pack animals, we can make ourselves vulnerable, and we can be hurt by those around us. The best way to maintain pack integrity is when everyone in the pack acts with integrity. But we are human, and we slip up.

Like it or not, those you work with and work for are part of your pack. It is inevitable that you will do or say something that causes hurt, and it is inevitable that you will have a need to apologize for something said or unsaid, something done or not done, something shared or not shared. You will want to ‘right’ the situation after something went wrong.

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Before we get into how to apologize, stop and recognize something important. That call you feel to try to fix the situation says a lot about you. It says that you recognize that you make mistakes, you see how your behaviour impacts other people, and it says that you are willing to put yourself into a really uncomfortable situation to make it better. Good on you.

In general, there are three things you want to achieve with your apology:

- 1) Show regret. This doesn't mean you are putting regret on show, it simply means that you want the person to whom you are apologizing to understand you regret what happened.
- 2) Acknowledge hurt. When someone has been hurt by action or inaction, what they most want to hear is that their feelings are legitimate, not to be explained away by excuses. Acknowledging hurt is a painful thing to do. "I hurt you" are the three little words of apology.
- 3) Promise change. The most powerful apology is change. It is easy to promise change but to be tasked with making change happen in how you do what you do, react the way you do, choose the words you choose to say – that's hard.

And remember THIS IS NOT ABOUT YOU. Your focus is on the person to whom you are apologizing. It is easy, as you will see, to make this all about you but be firm in your mind before even beginning.

Apology shows your ability to see the value in others, to see the power in our words and behaviour, and sees a way through to change.

Crafting an apology:

- 1) Intend to apologize. Take some time to think about what you want to say in your apology. Apologies are very slippery things and can slip out of your mouth as excuses, or as explanations, or as explosions of need. What you need to be clear on is the behaviour that you are apologizing for and that is it. You want your apology to be cleanly focused on what YOU did. That will allow this to be an actual apology.

We have all heard politicians' apologies. "I'm sorry that you were offended by my remarks." This is NOT an apology. This is shifting the blame; it is no longer about what was done, it is about what and how the other person reacted. It is a fancy way of simply saying that the other person, the person you seek forgiveness from, is thin skinned and is someone who takes things too personally. "If you weren't such a snowflake, this wouldn't be a problem."

Also, by focusing in on your behaviour, it will allow you to apologize for that behaviour, not an exaggeration of it. Often, when we are uncomfortable, we can over-exaggerate our wrongdoing to the point of farce. Going this way from the get-go leaves the person you are with in the situation of calming you and mitigating the incident with you. This is the kind of attention seeking that has a goal of shifting the gaze back to you, making you the focus of the discussion, and allowing you to be 'let off the hook' for the exaggerated claim, while not allowing the victim of your behaviour to receive much, if any, attention.

So focus! Think about what you did, what actually happened, think about the behaviour that caused hurt and apologize for that. It is as big as that, and it is as little as that.

- 2) Awkward! Yep, this whole encounter is going to be awkward. You need to be at peace with not being at peace and comfortable with not being comfortable. Often, the apologizer will have spent some time with preparing, and while you have been preparing, the other person has probably not thought about it as much as you might think they have. So, while you have come to apologize with a bit of preparation, the other person may be surprised by the fact of the apology. Situation is at high alert for weirdness, and we become awkward. Just embrace it.

Do not try to gain your balance with humour. This is not a situation to be laughed off, the awkwardness adds to the sincerity and makes the encounter feel real. Just ride out the feeling of awkwardness or name it if you need to, “This is a bit awkward but ...” more than that, and you risk trivializing the whole process, and there will be little gained from the interaction.

Think about it – apologies are supposed to be awkward, and we know this because that is what they are, so claim that going in, know it is going to be there, honour its role in the whole process of apology.

- 3) Express remorse. It might be time to remind ourselves what ‘remorse’ means. Remorse is deep regret for a wrong committed and, as such, is a really big deal. Remorse can overwhelm an apology because it is about the apologizer not their victim. So, it is important to remember to keep this in perspective, express remorse, be clear about it, and then be done with it. Once again, we can be in a situation where the victim caretakes the victimizer, and that cannot happen. You may feel it deeply, you may feel it profoundly, but state it briefly. Let the victim hear your regret but not be drowned in the emotion that comes with it. Some of the work that needs done is done on your own time.
- 4) Take Responsibility: You did this. No matter the situation. No matter the pressures. No matter your temper or temperament. You did this. Part of the problem in human services is that there are so many places to hang blame.

I’m sorry, but we were short staffed.
I’m sorry, but the supervisor didn’t inform me.
I’m sorry, but so-and-so was acting up all day.
I’m sorry, but I was just letting off steam.
I’m sorry, but the overnight staff was half-an-hour late.
I’m sorry, but I got saddled with all this paperwork.

The thing is, all these examples may be true, but they are meaningless. We all have to deal with situations that are unfair, and we are all called to be our highest selves all the time. Yeah, yeah, yeah. But still your response to the situation is under your control; you won’t want to admit it, but the stressors of human services do not give you license to act in an inhumane way. Hurting another is never really an option on the table.

Taking responsibility means saying, ‘I did this’ without qualification or excuse. You made the choices you did. You made the decision to behave in a negative way. You were at the center of what happened. AND you acknowledge you could have done it differently.

- 5) Listen: This is in almost every list when it comes to human interaction. It is vital that we learn to listen because that's the only way to growth. After you have said your piece, it is time to let them talk. They need to know that you are listening without defensiveness, and that you are taking in what is being said. Hearing someone, from your pack, that you have hurt is difficult. But do it, without interruption, without explanation. One question you might need to ask is, "What can I do, right now, to make things better?" ... This is a way of putting some control back in the hands of the person hurt by you.
- 6) Change: Take on board all you have learned through this process and actively work to grow. Change is after all the only real apology, and it is not immediate but something that shows itself in the long term. This is one of the major reasons why apologies benefit the giver. You get to see yourself, albeit briefly, as others may see you, and you get to evaluate who you are in relationship to others. So many of us surround ourselves by friends and family who fill our heads with our infallibility. So many of us post Internet memes that tout the idea that hurting others is an ideal "I say what I want and, if people don't like it, they can just move along." If you think about it deeply enough, you do not want to live in that meme.
- 7) Forgive yourself: If you have truly regretted what you have done, if you have communicated that, if you have listened and learned. If the whole process was imbued by good faith. Then. Let it Go. You cannot control any reaction but your own. But you know your own heart, and you know when you have honestly tried. And if you did. It is done now (except for the changing).

Whew, that is a bit of work. Apologies are often tough. But life without apology is life without self-evaluation.

There are two more things that need to be thought about in regard to the process about to happen:

- 1) Time and Space: It is increasingly hard to have uninterrupted time with someone else. You really need to strive for this here. Nothing takes the wind out of an interaction when, just as you have started, a phone rings, a knock comes on the door, or a text announces its presence. This is something, if the person you are apologizing to agrees, that you need to set aside time and intentionally create quiet. Phones come with a 'hush up' mode, and that is probably best here.
- 2) Apology is democratic: We work in a field where people with disabilities have suffered enormous wrongs at the hands of those who were in a position of trust. We also work in a field where apologies for people with disabilities are often not forthcoming. We need to be clear here when that apology can work its magic with anyone, including those you serve. I have been told that apology is admitting that staff did something wrong, and that's a sign of weakness. My response? "Weakness? It's a sign of strength." People with disabilities are in our care, are vulnerable to us, and often bear the brunt of our moods, our words, and our attitudes. Apology is the first step on the way to letting go of the reins of tyranny, that makes it worthwhile.

Summary

Working so closely with others in service to those who are vulnerable to us in so many ways, means that mistakes will be made, feelings will get hurt, and the 'spirit' of the place can be destroyed. We are humans, so that means we can be nasty, we can be oblivious, we can be arrogant. So, then, we are capable of hurting others. Apology is an important tool in the social skill toolbox. Go check and look, if you are like many of us, that tool is a bit more rusty than it should be.

About the author

Dave Hingsburger, M.Ed., is the former Director of Clinical and Educational Services at Vita Community Living Services. Dave lectures internationally and has published several books and articles in reference to disability. He provides training to staff, parents, and people with disabilities regarding sexuality, abuse prevention, self-esteem, and behavioural approaches. He has developed 'Disability-Informed Therapy' as part of his work towards creating safe spaces for people with disabilities to live and work.

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