

# The Power of An Apology

BY CANDY TYMSON



The call for an apology when someone feels they have been unjustly treated has become a major issue in our society today. Already this year we've had the Governor General, a Senator, the Church and many more making public apologies for their actions (or inaction) — so why is an apology so important?

And why is it that most people feel they need to justify

their position when really all the other person is looking for is an apology? They don't care why you did it — they just want you to acknowledge the impact your behaviour had on them.

I know a man who has been in personal conflict for some 18 years. It first started when he was a teenager and just seemed to get worse and worse. Do you know someone like that? No offer of assistance helped. Personal development programs just seemed to make him unhappier and so he turned to drugs for relief from his pain — and the downward spiral began ...

Many years later the time had come when my friend felt that he was ready to confront the issues and so a meeting was set up between him and his father. My friend was feeling angry, and was also nervous about how the meeting would go, so he sought my support to mediate the session. (I must confess I was also feeling anxious about how it would go!)

### Meet in a Neutral Environment

The meeting took place in a neutral environment, a park. After allowing his son time to speak, uninterrupted, about how he felt and what had troubled him for so many years, the father said: "Son, I apologise for not being there when you needed me. I am so sorry that I was so caught up with my career that I wasn't there for you. I truly do love you — can you forgive me?"

It was miraculous. All he wanted to hear was that his Dad was sorry and that he loved him. They hugged, and for the first time in years, really started to talk.

The apology created the space for other issues to be discussed in a rational manner. They talked about things that had happened and what it meant to them both at the time. The father discovered that his son had been hurt by certain incidents and actions of which he wasn't aware — and an understanding resulted.

### Is An Apology Needed?

In business too, we often do things that are inappropriate or

upsetting to someone else. We may criticise someone's work in front of their colleagues; miss an important deadline; let others down by not doing what we said we would do; say something hurtful — in the guise of "I was just joking ..."

It's not easy to apologise but the results can be very powerful. Try this:

- Meet in a neutral place
- Let them talk, and really listen
- Don't justify your position
- Seek clarity if needed
- Apologise and ask for their forgiveness

### Let Them Talk & Really Listen

Have you noticed that when you are really mad that often all you want is to be heard? When I run customer service training programs this is the first thing we talk about in handling complaints. Just let the person get it out! Give them room to discharge their emotions and respect their need to communicate their feelings. It's surprising how often it happens that once they have "got it off their chest", the issue no longer has the emotional charge it had and a solution can be worked out.

### Seek Clarity

Often we are surprised by what others say and genuinely had no idea that our behaviour had offended. At these times it is good to ask appropriate questions to clarify what is being said. You could say: "let me check with you if ..." or "is what you are saying ...?"

There is often a tendency to take things personally by reacting emotionally to what is being said — and doesn't this just make the situation worse? What impressed me about the man and his father was that the conversation took place in an environment of respect. No one was accusing the other — they were simply seeking clarification as to how it was for the other person, and that really worked.

### Asking for Forgiveness

"But why should I apologise and ask for forgiveness — it wasn't my fault". How often do you hear people saying that! Be honest, do you think of the other person's needs and concerns before you take action? When do you stop to think about the words you use and the impact they may be having?

Is there someone to whom you owe an apology? Whether it's a big thing or just a small incident, have the courage to apologise — it has the power to change your relationship forever.

(Need to update your Communication Skills? Candy runs regular workshops; contact her for details.)

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