Apology World Café
June 8, 2016
The Harvest from a Great Conversation

What can go wrong when leaders or others apologize?

- The apology fails if it’s clear they didn’t mean it.
- Leaders might get defensive and try to explain why they did what they did.
- They spend more time explaining than apologizing.
- They tell people how they should feel, or that they are wrong to feel the way they do.
- They don’t take ownership of what happened.
- They try to justify by saying, “I have _____ friends” or “One of the people involved identifies as __________.”
- Sometimes the “apology” doesn’t include the words “I’m sorry” or “I apologize.”
- They sometimes scapegoat others to take the attention off themselves.
- Their apology doesn’t include any indication of the action steps they are going to take to remedy the issue or to educate themselves.
- They sometimes resort to excuses like “I was drunk at the time” or “others have done the same thing.”
- They follow the #sorrynotsorry method: “I’m sorry you were offended” or “I’m sorry if anyone misunderstood.”

Principles for an Effective Apology that Restores Community

- Take full ownership of the offense. Say what you did and why it’s wrong.
- Say you’re sorry. Use the words in the opening and closing.
- In the apology, commit to educating yourself about the community or identity you offended, and say how you will do it.
- Keep it brief. Sometimes less is more. With a longer apology there is more chance of slipping into excuses and other pitfalls.
- Don’t attempt to include others in the blame or to scapegoat anyone else. Keep the focus on what you did and how you will move forward.
- Focus on authenticity over perfection. People will sense a sincere apology even if all the words are not perfect.
- Keep your word. If you said you were going to take steps toward restoring the relationship, make sure you do it.
Scenario #1

What happened:

During a show in Melbourne, musician Rob Thomas offended fans by making a joke that was perceived as racist. “I keep drinking until I think I’m a black Australian,” Thomas said on stage. After facing backlash from artists and fans, Thomas, best known as the Matchbox 20 frontman, posted an apology note to his Facebook page.

His apology:

“I did not intend to make a joke ABOUT race. I have seen people comment that after coming here for so long I should know that there is a connection between the indigenous peoples of Australia and a stereotype involving drinking. Embarrassingly, I truly didn’t. The joke I made was meant to be at no one’s expense but my own. I made a comment about drinking so much on the long flight over that I started to think I was something I’m not. I said I drank until I thought I was Australian. Then I drank so much that I thought I was a black Australian and then I drank so much I thought I was a little Australian girl. These were three things I chose at random to represent three things I’m not. I’m not Australian. I’m not black and I’m not a little girl. Again, if I had any idea of the stereotype I would have chosen another example. There was absolutely no malice even in jest.”

Our rewritten apology:

“I made the comment, ‘I keep drinking until I think I’m a black Australian.’ I apologize for this comment. It was in hurtful and made in poor taste.”
What happened:

In April 2011, NBA star Kobe Bryant was fined $100,000 for directing a homophobic slur to an NBA referee.

His apology:

“What I said last night should not be taken literally. My actions were out of frustration during the heat of the game, period. The words expressed do NOT reflect my feelings towards the gay and lesbian communities and were NOT meant to offend anyone.”

Our rewritten apology:

“Last night in the heat of the game I spoke hurtful words that were inappropriate. My frustration is not an excuse. In the future, I commit to expressing myself in a healthy, positive manner. I’m directing that the $100K go to a safe zone charity and I am also going to go to anger management training.”
Scenario #3

What happened:

Numéro magazine came under fire for an editorial spread in which a young, white model, Ondria Hardin, was featured in black face under the title “African Queen.”

The magazine’s apology:

Some people have declared that they have been offended by the publication in Numéro magazine of March 2013, of an editorial realized by the photographer Sebastian Kim called “African Queen”, featuring the American model Ondria Hardin posing as an “African queen”, her skin painted in black.

The artistic statement of the photographer Sebastian Kim, author of this editorial, is in line with his previous photographic creations, which insist on the melting pot and the mix of cultures, the exact opposite of any skin color based discrimination. Numéro has always supported the artistic freedom of the talented photographers who work with the magazine to illustrate its pages, and has not took part in the creation process of this editorial.

For its part, Numéro Magazine, which has the utmost respect for this photographer’s creative work, firmly excludes that the latest may have had, at any moment, the intention to hurt readers’ sensitivity, whatever their origin.

Numéro Magazine considers that it has regularly demonstrated its deep attachment to the promotion of different skin-colored models. For instance, the next issue of Numéro for Man on sale on 15th march has the black model Fernando Cabral on the cover page, and the current Russian edition’s cover of our magazine features the black model Naomi Campbell on its cover. This demonstrates the completely inappropriate nature of the accusations made against our magazine, deeply committed to the respect for differences, tolerance and more generally to non-discrimination.

Considering the turmoil caused by this publication, the Management of Numéro Magazine would like to apologize to anyone who may have been offended by this editorial.

Our rewritten apology:

“We the editors sincerely apologize for the publication of this image (“African Queen”) in the Numero in March 2013. Our portrayal of this concept was in poor taste. We did not take the time to think about the consequences this image would have on the public. In the future we plan to utilize those who identify with and represent diverse identities of our consumer base worldwide.”
Scenario #4

What happened:

A photo was discovered and circulated via social media of student athletes on the swim team dressed in stereotypical Mexican garb as part of a Halloween party.

The coach’s apology:

Swimming coach Rick Walker released a statement that said, “An individual who is not a member of our program entered the locker our team uses and took a cell phone picture of a photograph that was taped to the locker of one of our swimmers. This individual then circulated the picture via social media, without our knowledge, and applied their own negative interpretation. To clarify, the picture in question was a take-off on a ‘Saturday Night Live’ skit performed by the band One Direction. Our program is a shining example of diversity. In fact, one of the individuals in the picture is Hispanic. I am saddened that this photo was taken from our locker room and used out of context. To anyone who saw the photo out of context and found it troubling, please accept my apology and understand that we have a genuine, heartfelt commitment to respect and diversity within SIU’s swimming and diving program.”

Our rewritten apology:

(made by both the coach and the members of the team) “We apologize for the inappropriate actions that led up to the picture, and for the picture itself. We will use this mistake to learn and going forward, we will not condone actions that are offensive. As a team, we will strive to learn more about ourselves and our community in hopes of preventing mistakes such as this one. We are sorry and hope that you will forgive our mistake.”
Scenario 5

What happened:

Sarah Palin, the 2008 GOP vice presidential nominee, said to an interviewer that Pope Francis had made "some statements that to me sound kind of liberal, has taken me aback, has kind of surprised me."

Her apology:

“Just to clarify my comment to Jake Tapper about Pope Francis, it was not my intention to be critical of Pope Francis. I was reminding viewers that we need to do our own homework on news subjects, and I hadn't done mine yet on the Pope's recent comments as reported by the media. Knowing full well how often the media mischaracterizes a person’s comments (especially a religious leader’s), I don’t trust them to get it right when it comes to reporting on the Vatican. I do, however, trust my many Catholic friends and family, including some excellent Catholic writers, who have since assured me that Pope Francis is as sincere and faithful a shepherd of his church as his two predecessors whom I admired. I apologize for not being clearer in my response, thus opening the door to critical media that does what it does best in ginning up controversy.”

Our rewritten apology:

“I apologize to the Pope and people of the Catholic faith for my statements. In the future I will do my research before commenting.”
The National Coalition Building Institute’s Principles for Leading Diverse Communities

- Principle 1: Guilt is the glue that hold prejudice in place.

- Principle 2: Welcoming diversity means every person and every issue counts.

- Principle 11: Underneath every oppressive comment lies some form of injury.

- Principle 12: People who feel good about themselves do not mistreat others.

- Principle 17: Human beings want to be allies with one another.

- Principle 19: Risk taking and mistake making are essential for building close relationships across group lines.

- Principle 22: Listening is not the same as agreeing.

- Principle 25: Reach for the higher ground.

Six Principles of Nonviolence

Principle One: Nonviolence is a way of life for courageous people.

- It is active nonviolent resistance to evil.
- It is aggressive spiritually, mentally and emotionally.
- It is always persuading the opponent of the righteousness of your cause.
- It is only passive in its non-aggression toward its enemy.

Principle Two: Nonviolence seeks to win friendship and understanding.

- The end of nonviolence is reconciliation.
- The purpose of nonviolence is the creation of the Beloved Community.

Principle Three: Nonviolence seeks to defeat injustice not people.

- Nonviolence recognizes that people who do bad things are also victims and are not bad people.
- The nonviolent resister seeks to defeat injustice not people.

Principle Four: Nonviolence holds that suffering can educate and transform.

- Nonviolence accepts violence if necessary, but will never inflict it.
- Nonviolence willingly accepts the consequences of its act.
- Unearned suffering is redemptive and has tremendous education and transforming possibilities.
- Suffering has the power to convert the enemy when reason fails.

Principle Five: Nonviolence chooses love instead of hate.

- Nonviolent love gives willingly knowing that the return might be hostility.
- Nonviolent love is active, not passive.
- Nonviolent love is unending in its ability to forgive in order to restore community.
- Nonviolent love does not sink to the level of the hater.
- Love for the enemy is how we demonstrate love for ourselves.
- Nonviolence recognizes the fact that all life is interrelated.

Principle Six: Nonviolence believes that the universe is on the side of justice.

- The nonviolent resister has deep belief/hope that justice will eventually win.

*Taken from Kingian Principles of Nonviolence, The King Center.*