



TenStep Supplemental Paper

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On Saying Sorry

The benefits of training employees in how to apologize

Some organizations have always believed that being in business means never having to say you are sorry. This belief fuels an attitude where employees, ranging from shop-floor workers to the top management, habitually evade admitting mistakes, or if they do regret having done so. However, with society growing increasingly litigious, it is time to dislodge this belief.

The benefits of an apology

Human resources experts confirm that organizations that learn to express contrition can successfully control their litigation costs. That aside, learning to say sorry provides a definite business advantage.

Expressing regret mollifies unhappy customers, resentful ex-employees and disgruntled business partners. Experts also believe that the right amount of contrition helps:

- Fix problems that may otherwise fester, only to escalate later
- Reduce the loss in productivity, tensions and stress that are bound to occur when employees focus more on covering up mistakes than on their performance

The first of apologies

The health care industry was the first to realize that apologizing could curb escalating litigation costs. The director of medical-legal affairs of one health management organization said, "We are getting at the core of why people sometimes end up filing suit. In addition to their physical pain, their emotional needs have to be met. They want to know that somebody understands what they are going through."

While in some cases 'bad news' is a result of a medical mistake, in most cases it is not. However, most doctors, at fault or not, are always tense or uncomfortable disclosing bad news. Additionally, the implicit threat of a lawsuit makes it more difficult for them to admit medical mistakes.

Apologies!

Today, this medical company trains its physicians on how to personally apologize to patients and convince them that amends will be made. However, teaching employees to apologize does not mean training them to bend on their knees or bow their heads in regret. Besides intensive hours of communication training where doctors learn how to disclose information on medical mistakes or unsuccessful treatments, they are creating a new cadre of employees. Known as ombudsmen/mediators, these employees undergo an 80-hour course in mediation and communication skills.

Once trained, these ombudsmen/mediators coach doctors on how they can effectively communicate with their patients in difficult situations. As go-betweens, these



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ombudsmen/mediators follow up on doctor patient meetings to ensure that all patient questions are answered and needs met.

Penny's worth

The medical organization in our example spends approximately three million dollars a year to operate the program. While the organization has yet to measure the impact of the program, one trainer says, "A medical error that is litigated typically costs \$300,000, excluding legal fees and insurance costs. One that is settled in mediation might cost a tenth of that". When the company avoids a lawsuit, it more than pays for the training of an ombudsman/mediator.

The art of apologizing

Teaching employees to apologize or express regret does not begin and end with formulating a training program - it takes a shift in management attitudes and building a corporate culture where employees do not fight admitting mistakes. This is only possible when the organizations do not consider admittance as a sign of weakness and punish the employee.

What must be kept in mind when training employees in contrition is that the apologies should sound sincere, assuage the aggrieved party and simultaneously reduce the likelihood of lawsuits.

Catching up

On cue from the health care industry, well-established businesses are now realizing the effectiveness of public apologies. One car manufacturer sent a bedside apology to a woman paralyzed in an accident caused by faulty tires. They settled the lawsuit for one third of the amount the woman had originally filed for.

It is heartening that organizations are training their employees to apologize for disappointing performance or mistakes. However, a recent study revealed that while 60 percent of unhappy customers wanted apologies, only a meager five percent received one.

Getting good with the sorry

Organizations often lack sincerity when they apologize. As the co-director of a university ethics program said, "When the person tells you, 'I am sorry for any inconvenience,' that is hollow and of no particular consequence. If someone says, 'I am sorry and here is what I am going to do to pay for the mistake or fix things,' that is the real apology."

The good news is that accepting mistakes is more common among Asian businesses. The President of a Japanese Internet provider took a 50 percent salary cut for six months when his company inadvertently leaked the names of their subscribers.

Avoiding an apology

Training employees to apologize offers a business advantage; however, many organizations still avoid saying they are sorry. Studies conclusively prove that 70 percent



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of patients sue because they are frustrated by the apathetic behavior of their doctors or the hospital.

The benefits of an apology

Legal consultants believe that apologies are effective conflict, complaint and internal dispute resolution tools. However, for organizations to use them successfully, they need to bring about a change in corporate culture. While corporate leaders must take responsibility for their mistakes, they must also be willing to listen to and help fix subordinate 'mix-ups.'

Towards effective apology training

- Train employees to apologize only when due.
- Organizations must match the stature of the apologizer to the nature of the injury or harm. For instance, in case of a serious damage, it makes sense for the CEO to render the apology.
- Be sincere. Train employees to empathize so that they can understand the pain, fear or hardship the person undergoes.
- Train employees to be honest while sharing information. Clear explanations in contrast to vague or evasive responses are less damaging. A patient long-suffering from flu was eventually diagnosed with malaria. The doctor gave him a jargonized explanation for the delay in diagnosis. Later, the patient overheard nurses talking about how his reports had been misplaced. The patient felt cheated and angry. This evasion became a self-esteem issue, with the patient suing both the doctor and the hospital for negligence.
- Corrective action must follow contrition. Most organizations do not have the infrastructure to support or make amends for apologies.
- Provide suitable compensation wherever applicable.
- Most importantly, train employees to apologize without conceding any liability. In some cases, the admission of mistakes has been used as a basis for lawsuits. As one trainer says, "You say that you are sorry for what happened, not that you are sorry for having violated the law".

In the current business scenario, apologizing is no longer considered a sign of weakness. Investing in training employees on the art of apologizing can provide organizations with better business returns.