INFLUENCE

Why Apologies Are Difficult – and Often Unnecessary:

Apologize, Acknowledge, Disclose

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Most of us never learned to apologize without losing face. Knowing when to apologize, acknowledge, or disclose can restore trust and balance.

In reflecting on how frequently politicians and other public figures demand apologies from others – while refusing to offer one themselves – it occurred to me how few of us learn how to accomplish the purpose of an apology without losing face or feeling defeated. Many of us have had the unpleasant childhood experience of teachers or other adults demanding that we apologize to another child in a fight–especially when we believed that the other started the altercation. Or we were forced to apologize to relatives to whom our parents believed we were rude – even when that person treated us in a demeaning way. These experiences make us feel small or weak and can lead us to regard apologies as injurious to our self-image.

Often, when we do apologize (or receive an apology), it sounds something like this: "I didn't mean it that way, but I'm sorry if what I said bothered you." The implication is that the receiver is oversensitive or has misinterpreted the action or message. This kind of apology is pro forma and rarely achieves the desired effect.

Let's consider the purpose of apologizing. Usually it's to restore trust, mutual respect, and a sense of balance in the relationship. But in order for an apology to be received as sincere, two things need to be true:

- You have said or done something (intentionally or unintentionally) that you now realize was hurtful or harmful to the other person.
- Now that you are aware of the impact of what you did, you are truly sorry and honestly wish you had not done it, regardless of what your original intentions were.

If that's the case, a simple apology without explanation or defensiveness can be given and received with grace. "I'm really sorry about what I said about you in that meeting."

But when we have been hurt or offended by what another person has said or done, we often want something more. We want to be sure that the other understands why their words or actions were hurtful and, further, that they have learned something from the experience and won't repeat the behavior. Adding that understanding and acknowledgement to an apology gives it far more power. "I can see that having me say that in front of your boss felt like I was undermining you."

But what about the many times that we say or do something that hurts or offends another person – yet we are not, in fact, sorry and continue to believe it was the right thing to say or do? A sincere apology is unlikely in this situation–you won't want to give it and if you do, the other is unlikely to believe it, thus making it a useless performance. This is where the distinction between apologizing and acknowledging is important. If you want to restore trust and balance, but don't want to apologize or feel that an apology is not needed or appropriate, simply acknowledging how the other received or interpreted your words or actions may be enough. In other words, you can say the second part (acknowledgement) without the first part (apology) and accomplish a great deal.

If you can honestly disclose something relevant to the issue that makes you just a little vulnerable, it adds considerable weight to your apology or acknowledgement: "I should have thought about the consequences of bringing that issue up in an open meeting."

Imagine how the history of our nations or our organizations or our families might be different if people learned to respond in a simple and clear way to difficult interpersonal situations with a sincere apology or a genuine acknowledgement or an honest disclosure–or some combination of these – and avoid defensiveness, explanations, or performative gestures.

So instead of "Never apologize," our watchwords can be, "Know when to apologize, when to acknowledge, and when to disclose – and then know when to stop and leave room for the other to respond."

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Founder of **The Influence Guru**, Kim Barnes is a coach, facilitator, and author with more than forty years of experience in leadership, influence, and organization development. She was a founder and, for many years, CEO of Barnes & Conti Associates, and developed or co-developed programs including *Exercising Influence*, *Inspirational Leadership*, *Intelligent Risk-Taking*, *Consulting on the Inside*, and *Managing Innovation*. She is the author of six books, including *Exercising Influence* (Wiley) and *Building Better Ideas* (Berrett-Koehler). She works with enterprise companies, government agencies, small businesses, and individuals from the San Francisco Bay Area.

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