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ready-to-use NEWS

Apology-writing tips and how to make the most of a mistake

We all make mistakes. It's uncomfortable and can be seen as a deficit, but how you deal with it shows your leadership quality. Do you own up to it, gloss over it, blame someone else? Whether your school printed a flyer with the incorrect date, a staff member was heard using offensive language, or sensitive information was shared erroneously — an apology is warranted.

Here are the ways to demonstrate great leadership when you or someone on your team makes a mistake:

- Acknowledge the mistake. Leaders who own up to their mistakes show strength and humility.
- Learn from your mistake. Don't let the fear of making mistakes deter you from trying new things. A good leader will take risks to try a new idea.
- Teach others. Share your mistake with your peers and what you learned from it. Sharing the lessons you learned builds connection and trust with your network.

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Plan ahead for apologies

You have a crisis communications plan, but do you have a strategy when you need to issue an apology? If you've never had to make a public apology, you may not have a PR plan to issue an apology. With a plan in place, you'll be able to respond as quickly as you can.

It's good to respond immediately to a mistake or blunder. But if you're not ready, plan to issue a statement acknowledging the situation and that you'll issue another statement shortly. Here are some suggestions to get you started:

Create a template

Apologies need to be personal, but research says they are most effective when they contain certain elements. Create a letter template to avoid forgetting an important element when you're under pressure.

A study in 2016 found six elements contributed to a convincing apology. Some elements of an apology were far more effective than others. Asking for forgiveness was the least convincing form of apology, while acknowledging responsibility was by far the most effective. Strive to include as many of these elements as possible in your apology.



(Over)

1. Express regret. Use “I” statements. Don’t say, “I’m sorry you felt this way.”
2. Explain what went wrong. Be direct, provide details and take ownership.
3. Acknowledge responsibility. Don’t blame someone else or make excuses. Don’t say “but.”
4. Declare regret and promise it won’t happen again.
5. Offer repair or a remedy. Say how you are correcting the mistake or taking steps to prevent a repeat occurrence. Be proactive with an appropriate solution. You might not be able to heal a person you offended, but the gesture demonstrates your sincerity.
6. Request forgiveness and the opportunity to regain trust and/or repair a situation.

Read more about the study’s findings here: <https://news.osu.edu/the-6-elements-of-an-effective-apology-according-to-science/>.

Include internal audiences

Remember to include staff in your apology plan. If you need to issue a public apology, you should also be transparent and honest with staff about the situation.

Develop specific plans for different apologies

A staff person offending a parent will need a different apology than a school board meeting accidentally not being recorded. Consult with HR, your legal team, and other necessary departments to decide on the best apology strategy. Every situation will need to be addressed individually, but it’s best to have a plan in place to save time.

Plan as a team

Get everyone on board before a mistake happens. In the middle of a crisis is not the time to discuss the best apology strategy. Make sure everyone agrees on the apology plan and process.

Contributed by Erin Good, communications consultant