

learning for life

When saying ^{sorry} is not enough

by Robin Booth Life Coach & School Principal

1 I was late. My friend Kate had asked me to give her a lift to an important interview for a new job and now I was 20 minutes late. I pulled up to her driveway, she got in and I said, "I'm sorry I'm late." She glared at me.

In another instance, a colleague, Frank, had agreed to meet with an important politician that was critical to the success of our project and then had forgotten about the appointment. The next day he said, "I'm sorry. I guess I was too busy so I just forgot." I was still really angry. This had cost us the project and Frank could still sense my anger. He said, "I said I'm sorry didn't I...?"



2 In the school, 10-year-old Belinda walked past John's table and accidentally knocked over a pot of paint onto the drawing he had been working on for the last two hours. "Oh I'm so sorry, John." She said, standing there not sure what to do or say next, very aware that John was really upset.

In all of the above scenarios, saying sorry was not enough. In fact, as children we are brought up with a belief that saying sorry in a sincere tone should be enough. And although it might work for some people, there are a few other things we can say and do that will help heal these upsets in our relationships.

Here are four steps that I find useful when apologising for something:

- 1) Say "I am sorry for ..." or "I regret that..."
- 2) Convey to them how you understand this may have impacted them. If you are wrong in your understanding, they will correct you.
- 3) Promise or commit to some future action so this kind of thing will not happen again.
- 4) Ask what you can do to make up for any negative impact this may have caused them.



4 So in the above scenarios, imagine that the person apologising replies the following:

"Hi Kate. I'm really sorry I am late. I realise that this means you may be late for this important interview and it may now jeopardise your success in it. I promise that in future I will be on time and that you can count on me. What can I do to make up for any negative impact this has on you or our relationship?"

I am not saying this will always work for every person. But it conveys that you are sincere about your apology and taking full responsibility for your actions.



5 In the next scenario Frank could have said, "Hi Robin. I really regret that I forgot about that appointment yesterday. I realise that this has created a negative impression with the politician and may jeopardise our project. I promise that I will not forget in future to do the things you ask of me. What can I do to make up for any negative consequences this may have caused?"

If Frank had done this, I would have realised that he was aware that his actions had impacted our project. By asking me what he could do to make up for any possible consequences, I would have asked him to apologise to the politician straight away and see how to mend the trust in that relationship. If Frank had then done this, I would have also felt that Frank was really sincere about his apology to me and that he was making up for the consequences that his actions had caused.



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3 One of the greatest frustrations when we have been let down by someone is that when they say sorry, they often do not know how much it has inconvenienced us. There is an expectation of the automatic reply to a "sorry" which is, "that's okay". But this does not do much to mend the trust that has been undermined. How sorry are you really? Do you really know how I feel now? Do you really know what your little "I forgot" means to the level of trust in our relationship? And are you willing to risk these answers by assuming that you're 'sorry' is enough?

The trust in a relationship is undermined when the one person feels undervalued. And when we let someone down, no matter what happened and no matter the reasons, the other person begins feeling undervalued.

