

Reducing Conflict 92 Apologize

By Bob Whipple MBA CPTD



One underused technique for dealing with conflict is to apologize. When you apologize it sends many different signals, as I will explain here. Of course, it is not ALWAYS good to apologize. We will explore the implications of when to use this method as well as when to avoid it.

There are several obvious reasons why an apology might be appropriate. Let's deal with these ideas first.

Apologize when you have made a mistake

If the conflict stems from something you did that was wrong, clearly you need to apologize. It may take some analysis and dialog to determine if you actually caused the conflict, so you need to keep an open mind.

It is often difficult to see or appreciate when you have made a blunder. Stay humble and search diligently for the truth. Listen well to what the other party is telling you, and do not reject these ideas out of hand. You might get a third perspective before deciding what the true issue is and how to address it.

Apologize when your words or actions have hurt someone

It is pretty obvious that where there is conflict there is going to be some damage. Look for body language signals that indicate someone is hurt. Listen to what they say and also how they say it for information.

If you determine that you did hurt someone, even if it was unintentional, you should apologize to that person. Acknowledge the impact of your words or actions and express your regret.

Apologize when you have contributed to the ongoing conflict

It is difficult sometimes to see how your actions or words have contributed to a conflict. You need to search your soul and ask if you might have prevented the conflict from occurring. If you had acted differently, could the problem have been avoided?

In this instance, getting a third opinion about the root cause of the conflict can be particularly helpful. You need to take responsibility for your contribution to the problem. Doing this will soften up the stance of the other party and they may admit partial fault as well. If you can establish mutual culpability, then you are well on your way to a

resolution. Showing empathy and care for the other person will be helpful in closing the gap in understanding.

Seek out a different path to resolution

When individuals or groups are in conflict, they normally try to establish who is right and who is wrong. That attitude polarizes all conversations and thwarts any attempt to make a real resolution. One trick here is to state clearly areas where you already agree. Start with a list of things you see the same way. Build on that list, and it will reduce the times when you are polarized.

Offer concessions or other positive steps where you can. The more you can soften your own stance, the more cooperative the other party will become.

Show value in the relationship

Use kindness and soothing language as you state your desire for a peaceful resolution to conflict. If the relationship is important to you, it is worth apologizing even if you do not feel fully responsible.

You can rebuild the relationship and move past the conflict if you use the technique of apologizing wisely.

Bob Whipple, MBA, CPTD, is a consultant, trainer, speaker, and author in the areas of leadership and trust. He is the author of *The Trust Factor: Advanced Leadership for Professionals*, *Understanding E-Body Language: Building Trust Online*, and *Leading with Trust is Like Sailing Downwind*. Bob has many years as a senior executive with a Fortune 500 Company and with non-profit organizations.