

3 Questions To Ask Yourself When Seeking An Apology

By Anna Shields, Consensio, 9 March 2023

It isn't easy owning up to one's mistakes, but getting someone else to own up to theirs can be even harder. Politicians are famous for their non-apology apologies, and Prince Harry is reported to want an apology before he attends King Charles III's coronation. Even Microsoft's AI chatbot Bing is said to have insisted that a user apologizes for their behavior towards it. What we see in the media is also playing out at work. Workplace mediators often hear that parties want an apology and see how hard it can be to get one. Although you can't make someone say they are sorry, there are some things you can do to help. Borrowing from a workplace mediator's toolkit, here are three questions you can ask yourself to help you handle the situation and pave the way for an apology.

1 - What do I want the apology to look like?

In many workplace mediations, parties say they can't move forward until they've had an apology from a boss or colleague. "I need them to say sorry, but I know they won't," or "I need them to apologize in front of the whole team" are common sentiments. Hearing a genuine apology can be transformative, but there's often more to it than a simple "I'm sorry." We might think we have a shared understanding of an apology, but in reality, it can mean different things to different people.

Therefore, the first question to ask yourself is, what are you looking for from the apology? Ask yourself how it will help your situation. What will it mean for you? Do you want to hear the words, or do you want to understand the behavior behind someone's actions? You might be looking for your boss to demonstrate compassion or empathy, or to signal that they are taking responsibility for their actions. Or you might be looking for a recognition of how someone's actions have impacted you, and a reassurance that the behaviors won't happen again. By reflecting on what you really need, you will clarify for yourself if a sorry is what you want, and whether it will be enough.

2 - How can I get myself in the best place to receive an apology?

The next step is creating the right conditions for an apology. As much as an apology might be desired, there are many reasons why it might not be forthcoming. An apology might be perceived as an admission of wrongdoing, which exposes the apologizer to blame or consequences. This could be particularly relevant in situations involving a superior, who may feel compelled to maintain their position of authority. Moreover, if there hasn't been an open discussion about the matter, you may not fully understand their standpoint, and gaining a comprehensive understanding may alter your perspective.

So now it's important to consider the right conditions for your conversation. This means considering the physical environment where you want to have your conversation, whether it will take place in-person or online, and how you can carve out some dedicated time with the other person. Then, realistic expectations need to be set, of yourself and others. You may want an apology in writing, but that may not happen. Meeting your boss face-to-face may be your preference, but they may decline.

You will also need to bear in mind that there may be expectations from the organization. Overall, it's best not to go in with a fixed mindset. Stay open to other perspectives and the possibility that you may change what you want during a conversation, as is often the case in our conflict management work.

3 - What can I offer in return?

Frequently, it's not just one individual's actions that result in a conflict situation. If all the responsibility is directed towards one person, they will likely become defensive and less open to discussion. Showing a willingness to take joint responsibility for the situation shifts the focus away from placing all the blame on the other person and fosters empathy and connection, both of which are crucial in resolving conflicts.

The third question is to consider what you can offer in return. You could reflect that it may not have been their intention to come across as critical, but that you felt very hurt by their comments. You might identify that you may have misunderstood what they said. Perhaps there may have been things you could have done differently at the time, or recognize that there is room for improvement on your part as well. When we have an honest conversation with someone we are in conflict with, the dialogue often reveals multiple truths, so it is useful to go into these conversations with a willingness to listen.

In conflict, everyone usually has a part to play. Be aware of what you need, be flexible, and consider where your responsibility lies. It could be that, by thinking things through in this way, you realize it's not the word 'sorry' that you want, but something else that is more meaningful and offers more clarity. You may even realize that you don't need an apology after all.