

Does Sorry Have A Place in YOUR Ag legacy?

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It wasn't the first time their discussions had gotten heated while talking about the farm. They had argued before, but always got over it and calmed down by the next day. But Victor knew this time was different. He was certain, right after he shoved his son across the room, following his one-too-many comments about his age and how he couldn't keep this up anymore.

Reed didn't really mean it when he chewed his dad out about being too old. He had let his frustration with not being allowed to make decisions get the better of him. But as he limped out of his parent's kitchen that night, those thoughts were far from his mind.

Harriet tried to reason with Victor. She argued that he needed to apologize to his son. It didn't matter who was right or wrong. It happened and it needed to be addressed before it ripped the family and the farm apart. Truth was, Victor couldn't keep things going without Reed, and he knew it. But that didn't make it any easier to apologize to him. If anyone needed to apologize it was Reed.

The next morning, Reed stood outside his parent's kitchen door a long time, but couldn't bring himself to go inside. He turned instead and walked back to his truck.

In the heat of the moment, it is easy to do or say things that we later regret. Stress can cause us to lash out at someone in anger or frustration. Emotions can be even more raw around those we care about, where we feel safe, and, consequently, allow our emotions to be more real, often boiling over. How can Nick and Steven find a way to address this rift between them and confront the hostility and feelings of disrespect in their relationship?

Saying "I'm sorry"

Saying "I'm sorry" is an act all too often overlooked in our daily interactions and there can be many obstacles that keep us from saying these simple words. Some may see it as being weak or giving-in if they admit that they are sorry to someone else. In reality, it often takes more courage to be the one to go first and you might find that the other person feels the same way.

It is also important to express that you are genuinely sorry and care about the other person, promising to make amends and not repeat the mistake.





Should you apologize?

You may feel that you don't need to apologize or maybe that the other person should apologize to you. Sometimes it is about being the one to make the first move. "To preserve or re-establish connections with other people, you have to let go of concerns about right and wrong and try instead to understand the other person's experience," says Dr. Ronald Siegel, assistant professor of psychology at Harvard Medical School.

This requires not only that someone takes the initiative, but also that another person takes the time to listen, to really try to understand the situation from the other person's perspective. In the book *Difficult Conversations*, this is referred to as the Third Story or the experience from the other person's perspective.

To learn more about listening and the Third Story, see the Ag Legacy newsletter entitled: *Difficult Conversations: How Do We Discuss What Really Matters?* at AgLegacy.org, under Newsletters.

Obstacles

Why is something that we are constantly reminding our kids to practice, so difficult for us to say? What are some of the obstacles that keep us from saying I'm sorry? Some of those stumbling blocks might include that we:

- Don't Realize We Hurt Someone: We didn't realize in the moment that we hurt someone by our actions or words.
- Don't Think About It: We don't feel that the situation warrants an apology. Thinking that they will get over it.
- Are Stubborn: Thinking if anyone is going to apologize it should be them, not me.
- Are Proud: This gets in the way all too often.
- Feel Ashamed: Here admitting that we need to apologize means facing the fact that we hurt someone else. Facing that fact can be harder than keeping it bottled up inside.
- Feel Afraid: We do not know how the other person will react. This uncertainty can keep us from wanting to face them and apologize.
- Lack Self-confidence: Confrontation is difficult. Admitting fault can compound those struggles and force us to face the fact.



What an apology does

Admitting you are wrong is difficult. It can be tempting and easier to hold it inside and ignore it. It takes a bigger person to admit failure. Saying you are sorry suggests vulnerability. But vulnerability can be a bridge to honesty and accountability. These are the two elements on which trust is built (Willkomm, 2019). The Harvard Mental Health Letter lists some benefits of offering an apology (Harvard Mental Health Letter, 2008):

- Validates that an offense has occurred and designates fault;
- Restores dignity and power;
- Shows that the offender feels badly and cares about the person who was hurt;
- Begins a healing dialogue based on shared values; and
- Promises reparations and corrective actions



Offering a genuine apology

According to Dr. Aaron Lazare, a professor of psychiatry and former chancellor of the University of Massachusetts Medical School, an effective apology contains four elements, while an ineffective apology usually misses the mark on at least one of these areas (Corliss, 2021):

- **Acknowledge the Offense:** Take responsibility for the offense, whether physical or psychological, and confirm that your behavior was not acceptable. Avoid using vague or evasive language or wording that minimizes the offense or questions whether the other person was really hurt.
- **Explain What Happened:** Explain how the offense occurred without excusing it. Sometimes the best strategy is to say there is no excuse.
- **Express Remorse:** If you regret the error or feel ashamed or humiliated, say so. This is all part of expressing sincere remorse.
- **Offer to Make Reparations:** If you have damaged someone's property, have it repaired or replace it. When the offense has hurt someone's feelings, acknowledge the pain and promise to try to be more sensitive in the future.
- **Listen:** Take time to listen to the other person and try to better understand their experience. This will help you validate their emotions and begin to rebuild trust in the relationship.

Examples of appropriate wording (Corliss, 2021)

Effective Wording	Why it Works
<i>"I'm sorry I lost my temper last night. I've been under a lot of pressure at work, but that's no excuse for my behavior. I love you and will try harder not to take my frustrations out on you."</i>	Takes responsibility. Explains but does not excuse why the mistake happened. Expresses remorse and caring, as well as promises reparation.
<i>"I forgot. I apologize for this mistake. It shouldn't have happened. What can I do to avoid this problem in the future?"</i>	Takes responsibility. Describes the mistake. Makes the person feel cared for and begins a conversation about how to remedy the error.
Ineffective Wording	Why it Won't Work
<i>"I apologize for whatever happened."</i>	Language is vague. Offense isn't specified.
<i>"Mistakes were made."</i>	Use of passive voice avoids taking responsibility.
<i>"Okay, I apologize. I didn't know this was such a sensitive issue for you."</i>	Sounds grudging. Thrusts the blame back on to the offended person as overly sensitive.

Robert Gordon discussed the dose appropriate sorry in his TED Talk entitled The Power of the Apology. Not every sorry needs to be long and drawn out. If you bump someone on the train, a simple "I'm sorry" is sufficient. However, when apologizing for getting angry and lashing out at someone, a more formal apology is likely needed.

The wording of the apology also is important, as it can convey sincerity or a lack of commitment to real change. Consider the examples presented in the table to better understand appropriate and inappropriate wording when apologizing.

A truly heartfelt apology occurs when our words convey what we are sorry for and what we are going to do to make it better. It allows us to put ourselves in the other person's place and try to understand the situation from their side. It requires us to make a sincere effort to change and not repeat the action we are apologizing for. Another piece of advice: if you are going to apologize, make it count. Continually apologizing for the same actions makes the apology hollow and not meaningful.

There is no guarantee that offering a heartfelt apology will immediately repair a damaged relationship or that the other person will reciprocate the feelings or even offer forgiveness. However, it can help to alleviate your own feelings of guilt, anger, frustration, etc. In addition, you will have the satisfaction of knowing that you have done your part to make the needed repairs.

What an apology does not do

Offering an apology allows you to accept your role in the situation. It does not let the other person off the hook. As the saying goes: it takes two to tangle. While there are cases where another person's actions are completely unprovoked, more often than not, both sides share a role in and a responsibility for escalation of a situation.

When the other person is not sorry, forgiveness may be required on your part. See the Ag Legacy newsletter, Should Forgiveness Have a Place in Your Ag Legacy? for more on this important topic.

Think about it

The days following their blow-up were awkward as Victor and Reed tried to move forward. It was obvious that the event had become a roadblock in their relationship. Harriet was worried that it would drive them apart and she knew that she and Victor couldn't handle the farm without Reed. She talked to Victor about her concerns. He admitted that he had been thinking the same thing.

One evening, Victor stopped off at Reed's house. After sitting in the truck for a while, he knocked on the door. Reed was hesitant when he opened the door, but saw the look on his Dad's face. Victor said he was sorry for losing his temper and before he could say anything else, Reed embraced him and expressed the same feelings.

Is this enough? What other steps should Victor and Reed take in order to make this a heartfelt, sincere apology?

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