

# The Power of Apologies

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# What is an Apology?

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**Oxford Dictionary** originally defined “*apology*” as a defense, a justification, or an excuse.

The Greek word “*apologia*” means to make a defense for oneself.

In modern usage it has evolved to convey quite a different sense: **“to acknowledge and express regret for a fault *without* defense.”**

# What are the Elements of a Meaningful Apology?

Acknowledgement

Affect

Vulnerability

Amends

These have been called the 5 R's:  
Recognition (wrong), Regret & Remorse,  
Responsibility, no Recurrence, and  
Restitution

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# No. 1 Acknowledgement

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Acknowledgement in apology has two components:

1. **Admission** for the behavior, action, or words that created the harm, hurt, or damage to another.
2. The person is genuine in wanting to **accept responsibility** for the harm suffered.

## No. 2 Affect

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**Affect** - the root of such words as '**affection**' (*the warm feeling for those people who are special in our lives*).

We are **affected** experiencing emotion because of something. When **disaffected** we are indifferent and have little emotional involvement.

If an offending party is to truly take responsibility for harm caused, they must be **visibly affected** by what was done. Shame and regret has to be present. *The feeling has to be there!*

# No. 3 Vulnerability

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Effective apology must be delivered from a position of **vulnerability**. Apology is inevitably inadequate.

Whether or not reparations are offered, the person apologizing must recognize there is nothing they can offer tangibly that will suffice to **remedy** the damage done.

The paradox of apology is no matter how sincere, *it can not undo what was done*, yet this is what it manages to do

# Acknowledgement, Affect, & Vulnerability

Apology involves a kind of ritual exchange that enables healing. An apology needs to be a simple statement expressing regret

1. that **acknowledges** wrong-doing
2. demonstrates **affect**
3. in **vulnerability**, causes the person to relinquish power, putting the person at the mercy of the offended party.

*The hurt party may or may not accept the apology and open a road to reconciliation.*

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# No. 4 Amends

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**Amends** may be difficult for impossible for grievous harms but often practical or *symbolic amends* might have meaning for the participants. Amends will involve **something of meaning** to those harmed. Examples:

1. **Financial restitution**
2. **Commitments** (*i.e. to take counselling or treatment, to make a positive contribution to the lives of others, to assist the offended party*)
3. **Undertakings** (*i.e. never to do something again*)



“I regret deeply any injuries that may have been done in the course of events that have led to this decision. I would say only that if some of my judgements were wrong, and some were wrong, they were made in what I believed at the time to be in the best interest of the nation.”

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The Resignation Speech of  
**President Richard Nixon**

# The Resignation Speech of President Richard Nixon

This speech was a classic **non-apology**.

Why it fails:

1. The **acknowledgement** fails as it reflects a delusion about his culpability
  2. The **affect** is missing as he tried to make the speech a virtue protesting whatever wrongdoing he did was in the interests of the nation
  3. The lack of **vulnerability** in the delivery amounted to another victimization of the American people as he continued his former denial with *“If some of my judgements were wrong”*
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# Messages to Avoid when Apologizing

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1

## Avoid the words 'IF' and 'BUT'

- Example: ***"If I have offended someone I want to apologize"***

'IF' casts doubt on whether an offense occurred implying it is about hypersensitivity of others.

Example: ***"I apologize, but you should know better"***

The word 'BUT' redirects part of the responsibility to the offended person.

# Messages to Avoid when Apologizing

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2.

The party apologizing should avoid focusing on him or herself or presenting themselves as a victim.

Example: ***“I have suffered a lot from this too”***

While taking responsibility the offended party wants **sympathy** for the harm caused to him or herself. This seriously reduces the **sincerity** of the apology.

# Messages to Avoid when Apologizing

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3.

Avoid the passive voice.

● Example: ***“Mistakes were made”***

This provides a smokescreen for the offender to hide behind, helping him or her sidestep responsibility.

# Messages to Avoid when Apologizing

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4.

Avoid seeming to know how the offended person thinks or feels.

Example: ***“I am aware of your anger and frustration”***

This is presumptuous and may be insulting and re-injure the victim.

# Messages to Avoid when Apologizing

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5.

Avoid sending double messages.

- Example: ***“I am completely overwhelmed by the misfortune and prejudice I have caused you”***

The victim is left wondering ‘*is the offender so overwhelmed he or she is not capable of providing a sincere apology?*’

# Messages to Avoid when Apologizing

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6. Avoid going on and on. Include all the elements clearly and stop to listen to avoid diluting the responsibility by attempts at self-justification.



Does the Toronto Maple  
Leafs Apology Work?

“

On behalf of the ownership of MLSE, we want to thank you for your unwavering passion and loyalty. Like every fan of the Toronto Maple Leafs, we are disappointed with the results of this season.

It starts with a *double message*: a thank you, and then it presumes to be aware of every fans' **disappointment**.

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“

The Toronto Maple Leafs are a public trust with the greatest fans in the world. We have fallen short of everyone's expectations and for that we are sorry.

Now we are invited to *feel good about ourselves* as the greatest fans in the world. It touches on the **affect**: their sorrow for their failure.

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“

We take full responsibility for how this team performs on the ice, and we make no excuses. The way this year ended was unacceptable. Results are the only measure of success in sports and the results speak for themselves.

There is an R word here: **Responsibility.**

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“

Ownership believes in the plan for the Maple Leafs. All the resources at our disposal will be used to make sure that the entire organization is focused on making the Leafs a successful playoff team. We are 100% committed to ensuring we ice a team that competes with the NHL's best.

The management *does* want to make amends and provides a **commitment** to the future.

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Passion, hard work, and accountability will always be the hallmarks of our organization.

The Toronto Maple Leafs are privileged to have such passionate, loyal fans. We do not take that for granted. Our entire organization wants nothing more than to deliver a team that makes you proud.

Yours Sincerely,  
Lawrence M. Tanenbaum O.C.  
Chairman of the Board

# Rating the Toronto Maple Leafs Apology

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## What would you give it on a scale to 100%?

The most common responses:

- *As an apology it's too long; the fans are unimpressed.*
- *Fans say the apology is not provided from a position of vulnerability as the organization presumes the support will be there regardless of the team's performance.*
- *Fans say the commitment to the future is too vague and lacks details about the real change necessary.*

# The Apology Act S.N.L 2009, c-A10.1

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Newfoundland & Labrador does have an **Apology Act** to promote the early and effective resolution of disputes by *removing concerns* of the legal impact of apology.

By this Act an apology made by or on behalf of a person in connection with any matter (*both intentional and unintentional actions*) **does not** constitute an express or implied admission of fault or liability by the person in connection with that matter.



# The Apology Act S.N.L 2009, c-A10.1

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The apology is not admissible in any court (*including arbitration*) as **evidence** of the fault or liability.

The Act **does not** prevent admissibility of an admission related to matters covered by federal law. For example, the criminal code.

The law does not **obligate** a person to offer an apology.



Thank you!

To learn more about apology in mediation go to **www.**  
**adraxiom.com**