

GROWERTALKS

Growers Talk Business

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Never Say You're Sorry

Art Parkerson



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I'm an expert at apologizing—probably because I have to do it so often.

At a meeting last fall, one of my employees got upset with me. She didn't like a decision I'd made and she lost her temper.

I was surprised. I seldom get told off anymore. When meetings go sideways, leaders think it's their job to quickly restore order. "Stick to my agenda, people!" But I didn't shut her down immediately. I let her fume. I remember glancing around the room and seeing all the shocked expressions. I was a little concerned our coworkers thought I had lost control, but I don't own and run a business because I want to control my employees. We're a team assembled to make money (and have fun). Teams work best when they know how to challenge each other.

I tend to avoid difficult conversations, but I suspect that just makes them worse. Confrontation should be frequent enough not to be dramatic, but rare enough to never feel like nagging. Arguments should be brief enough to not be arduous, but not so hurried that people feel unheard. Correction should be kind enough that the target sees you truly want what's best for them, but not so soft as to be toothless.

And apologies? Those are difficult conversations, too. The next morning, I went to speak with the employee who had challenged me.

"I'm sorry," she said.

Good start.

"... if you felt like I was rude ..."

This is a classic move. You could call it the Non-Apology Tactic. I've been using this "I'm sorry if you felt ..." maneuver since I was a young boy. There's no downside: you get to seem like you're all humble and contrite, while at the same time denying any responsibility. Your mistake is actually the offended party's fault—which is great, except it's not any deal at all.

There's a formula for a good apology that too few people know. Every apology needs three things. If you leave out one of the three, it's not really an apology at all.

1. Admission of guilt. This doesn't have to be complicated. Simply finish the sentence, "I was wrong to ____." You

fill in the blank. If you can't easily fill in the blank, then you probably don't think you did anything wrong. But if you didn't do anything wrong, then what are you apologizing for?

My kids fill in the blank with things like, "I was wrong to: eat your cookie/punch you in the stomach/say you were stupid." Myself? I tend to say things like, "I was wrong to: ignore your advice/forget to do that thing I promised to do/not consider your feelings."

2. Express remorse. Just because you did wrong—and you know you did wrong—doesn't mean anything. "I was wrong to eat your cookie" is not an apology. It's a statement of fact. Who's to say you won't do it again?

Have you ever noticed that what we say and what people hear can be different? We tend to assume that's down to willful bad listening, but maybe we aren't careful enough to communicate clearly. When apologizing, all the burden for clarity falls on the one offering the apology.

The next thing you say should be, "I regret that" or "I wish I had handled it differently" or maybe even "and that wasn't fair to you."

What if you don't feel remorse? You can still apologize, but not unless you empathize. You have to show you've considered their feelings, the ramifications, the consequences. Failure to do so leaves a huge gaping void in the apology.

You can't give space for the other person to imagine they heard, "... and I'd do it again, too."

3. The ask. "Will you please forgive me?" This is a magical phrase. Don't change the wording. There's no synonym or analogue. Don't forget to say it.

Once spoken, the burden for resolving the conflict—for restoring the relationship—is squarely on the other party. The ball is in their court. You've surrendered. You've given them all the power. That may sound like a bad idea, but the pressure of this burden makes most people extremely uncomfortable. This isn't a trick to pull, but it's remarkable how these words transform anger, hurt and resentment into compassion, grace and peace.

This alchemy normally works, but not always. Some people are perfectly happy to hold a grudge. Some people will demand restitution. Some will say one thing and do another. You can't change other people, but if you do the three steps correctly, you'll generally succeed in resolving conflict, respecting others and improving yourself.

So what did I say to the employee who lost her temper? What do you do when someone offers you a Non-Apology? I don't think you should patronize them by explaining the formula for a genuine apology. That won't help. But you also shouldn't act like they've offered a genuine apology if they haven't.

Unfortunately, the only proper response to a Non-Apology is a reprimand. You have to walk them back through the first two steps. Tell them what they did wrong. Tell them why it was wrong. Finally, tell them what you expect in the future. Do it as gently as possible. **GT**

Art Parkerson lives and works at Lancaster Farms, a wholesale nursery in Suffolk, Virginia. To say hello, write to art@lancasterfarms.com.