TLP Five-Minute Read Over Coffee – To admit a mistake or not

Should you always admit your mistake? I have delivered a lot of workshops this year on how to communicate difficult messages - and this has involved some lively discussions on exactly that question.

My starting point is 'yes'. The foundation for a professional relationship is to communicate in a clear, simple and transparent way. This includes being upfront about a mistake you have made. A core message in my workshops is highlighting there is often an opportunity when something goes wrong. How you apologize and what you do next can provide a window into your values and the values of your company. My loyalty as a customer has been strengthened by the way in which some companies have dealt with an issue.

However simplistic it sounds - if you make a mistake - own it and then move on and focus on solutions.

The challenge to this principle

Some of clients, particularly in the legal world, have challenged this. In their world admitting a mistake is a sign of weakness - which could seriously damage their credibility with a client. Apologizing was considered a little naïve!

While I did not agree with a lot of their feedback it did make me think about what I define as a **necessary nuance** to how you manage mistakes. To accept that there might be times when there is an essential trade off between your own credibility and owning a mistake or issue. To recognize the dangers in over-apologizing.

A way of highlighting what the nuance looks like is to draw out two ways of acting when you make a mistake that you for sure want to avoid!

The slippery snake model

I see a real danger in a general tendency to avoid apologizing. Namely you become slippery and disingenuous. At worst, this approach can foster a culture of burying bad news and/or sticking your head in the sand! There is also a type of false machismo about always associating 'an apology' with weakness. I don't

think that this approach provides the basis for a meaningful professional relationship.

The gushing over-apologizer!

Conversely the exact opposite can also be damaging. A blanket tendency to always apologize without a feeling for context can be counter-productive. Over-disclosure can undermine your professional credibility. Giving detailed excuses as to why a mistake happened can simply come across a defensive.

A good example of this. You notice some typos in a document sent to a client. You might just resend the document. You might not apologize. This is a judgement call reflecting the nature of the typos, when the document was sent etc.... My experience has also shown me that the essential balance between your perceived credibility v transparency does to some extent vary across sectors. While a very big generalization - different sectors do seem to attribute different associations to 'I/we apologize'.

Some people also do jobs which are inherently mistake prone. I have worked extensively with logistics companies in the last few years. 101 things can go wrong and prevent a parcel arriving on time. In this fast-paced environment some selectivity is needed in how and when you apologize.

So where does this leave me! I will always advocate apologizing as a powerful and authentic way to move forward. If I had to summarize my experience of delivering these workshops over the last 10 years - I would say that the slippery snake syndrome (as defined above) can be much more corrosive as a way of being. However, something I have learnt in my own professional journey is that *how and when* you apologize does matter. I won't fall on my sword and issue a detailed apology note - if you spot a typo in this article! I hope this is helpful and do get in contact with any questions and reflections at toby@tlp.lu. I have recently opened up my TLP Learning Zone which contains 100s of articles, videos and newsletters on business communication. If you would like to read or watch any of my content please visit the TLP Learning Zone in my website.