

## **Learn to apologize . . . or be sorry**

by Boyd A. Byers

“Sorry seems to be the hardest word,” Elton John sang in 1976. I’m sorry to have to tell you this, Elton, but times have changed.

Pop culture pundits decreed 2006 as the Year of the Apology. From actor Mel Gibson to comedian Michael Richards (Kramer from *Seinfeld*) to Congressman Mark Foley to Miss USA Tara Conner, public apologies for misbehavior have become a new art form. One Hollywood writer distilled the practice to this formula: confession + contrition = comeback.

If apologies can help celebrities and politicians get back in good graces, can they also work for employers? Perhaps so — at least in some situations, and if done correctly.

### ***Timing is everything — when to apologize***

As you know from your own experiences, both personal and professional, it’s more difficult to remain angry at someone who has screwed up if he admits his mistake, says he’s sorry, and promises not to do it again. A well-timed, well-phrased apology has an almost magical power to calm a dispute. It shows compassion, generates credibility, and brings everyone out of the unchangeable past and into the present. Studies show that a patient is less likely to sue his doctor for malpractice if the doctor apologizes or expresses sorrow or regret over a bad outcome. The same principle may hold true for employment-law claims.

When an employee makes a complaint about how she’s been treated, it’s important to investigate and follow up with her. If you conclude management made a mistake or a coworker acted improperly, you should tell the employee, let her know you’re sorry about what happened, and take appropriate corrective action. But what do you do when the complaining employee is wrong or the evidence is inconclusive? Even then it can be appropriate to make a “nonadmission” apology, or at least extend your empathy. Failure to acknowledge the employee’s concerns may send a message that no one cares and make her even more bitter or unhappy.

It may be appropriate to express remorse when communicating a layoff driven by economic factors, but don’t apologize for the layoff selection process itself. Avoid the “s” word when firing an employee for disciplinary or performance-related reasons. In those cases, the only place an apology is likely to get you is on the witness stand. Of course, you still can express understanding that the employee is upset, while being firm and taking ownership of the decision.

### ***It’s all in the delivery — how to apologize***

Just as a good apology can put out a fire, a bungled apology can be like pouring gasoline on one. Here are some things to think about when making workplace apologies:

**Be sincere.** An apology that's not genuine and heartfelt is worse than no apology at all. Consider this before making one employee apologize to another.

**Don't blame the victim.** "I'm sorry my words hurt you, but I think you're being too sensitive" is more likely to arouse anger than bring peace.

**Call a spade a spade.** "I was wrong; I'm sorry" is powerful stuff.

**Don't admit fault if you're not at fault.** But express understanding and try to find common ground when you can. For example, "I understand you believe you didn't get the promotion because of your race. As you know, the company doesn't tolerate discrimination, and we take reports like this very seriously. We've investigated your complaint and didn't find any evidence of discrimination in the selection process. Thank you for bringing your concerns to our attention." Or "I tried to give you clear instructions; I'm sorry if they were confusing."

**Focus on the future.** "I know you feel offended by your coworker, but our investigation couldn't verify your allegations. We've talked to your coworker about these issues, and we'll continue to monitor things. Please let us know if you have any problems going forward." Or "I didn't realize that would upset you; I promise not to do it again."

**Be cautious.** Choose your words carefully, even script them in advance. Avoid admissions of liability. Contrast "I'm sorry your boss said those things to you" with "I'm sorry your boss sexually harassed you." Talk things over with your lawyer beforehand to make sure an apology is really the best course of action and to help word it in a way that will be helpful, not harmful, both now and in any future legal proceedings.

### ***He said it***

*A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.*

— King Solomon (attributed), Book of Proverbs