



The Politics of Hope Newsletter

*“Helping Ordinary Citizens Become
Extraordinary Public Leaders”*



The Art of Apology

By Donna Zajonc

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“I screwed up,” is the now famous line recently uttered by President Obama. He was referring to how he handled Tom Daschle’s nomination for his health and human resources secretary. Former President Bush resisted until the end of his administration to reflect on areas where he screwed up. This divergent approach to owning mistakes got me thinking about leadership and the art of apology.

Many citizens say they want their leaders to be vulnerable and admit mistakes and at the same time have a persona of self-assurance and certainty. As leaders, how do we walk this fine line between strong-willed leadership and admitting we made a mistake?

Enter the art of apology and learning how to genuinely fess-up to our mistakes. There are, however, effective and ineffective ways of apologizing. A poor apology may cause more harm than good.

The first step requires some emotional intelligence. Do you truly feel bad about a situation or do you just think you *should* feel bad? If you are not truly sorry about what you have done, don’t fake it. Take the time to reflect and try to understand how others are feeling. Consider why they may be upset and access your authentic emotions. A false “I’m sorry” may get you fewer points than not saying anything at all.

The second step toward an effective apology is to own your role in the matter and state it clearly. President Obama said “I screwed up” and went on to say, “I am frustrated, angry and disappointed in myself. I’ve got to own up to my mistake.” Some might say he did so for political reasons because his nominees were having ongoing problems with unpaid taxes. That might be the case. Owning his mistake stopped the distraction, however, and gained him high marks from most citizens.

The danger at this junction is a quick apology and urging everyone to get over it. This smacks of a superficial apology and doesn’t ring true. A hasty apology might sound something like, “Okay, I did it and I get that you’re mad. Could we please now just move on?” This is an example of low emotional intelligence and will probably annoy others more than the original slip-up.

Thirdly, once you have stated what happened and your role in the situation, it is now important to voice your understanding of how others might feel. An example of an apology from a mayor to his council might sound like: “I pushed my position on the new sewer rate increase without checking with the rest of you. I apologize. In hind sight, I wish I would have taken



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more time to listen to your concerns. If someone had treated me that way, I would feel angry and disrespected.”

It is now time to listen to what others say. Possibly you missed the target of how they are feeling. Genuine listening is a challenge for all of us especially when we know we screwed up. (I usually want to just move on to the next subject!)

The art of apology is telling the truth about your role---no blaming or excuses----and seeing the situation as an opportunity for repairing relationships. Turning a mistake into an opportunity to develop a more trusting relationship through your authentic apology is key to developing collaborative partnerships!

The next step is voicing what you are committed to in the future. Let’s use the previous situation about sewer fees. This is an example of how the mayor may state her new commitment: “In the future I will not surprise the council. I am committed to a full dialogue with ample time to consider everyone’s view.” Assuming that the mayor follows through on her commitment, this mistake and her apology may create an opening for a fresh new approach to working with her council.

Finally, you may want to ask others to accept your apology. Be prepared that everyone may not be as ready as you are to start again. Asking the other person to accept your apology will bring you even more satisfaction, especially if they accept it. This helps you complete the matter. If they don’t accept your apology, it is time to listen again or give them time and space to process your regret.

These steps are not a magic formula and for heaven’s sake apologies are not easy. But when you do find the courage to genuinely apologize, YOU will feel better and the stage will be set for powerful and trusting relationships.

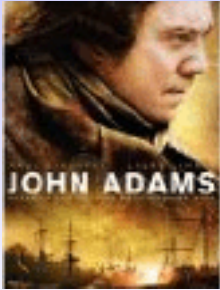


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who founded America are a few reasons to rent or buy this set. The unique and sometimes bitter relationship between Adam and Jefferson is spellbinding. I especially enjoyed Abigail's partnership and 54 year marriage with Adams. Put it on your play list today!

Coaching Opportunity

Beginning in April I have room for one new coaching client. You may be ready to experience the added power-boost that working with a coach might provide in both you work and personal life. If so, contact me for a complimentary coaching session. I look forward to hearing from you. Please email me donna@bainbridge.net or call me at 206-780-9300.

Comments?

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