

LeadershipFAQs

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Sorry Seems To Be The Hardest Word

By Chip Espinoza, Executive Vice President, LeadershipTraQ

When was the last time you heard an apology? ... or, you expressed an apology? Was it in the workplace?

I once had a boss who could never say he was sorry. His way of making amends was to walk into my office, sit down, and offer me a LifeSaver. After the third or fourth Life-Saver episode I finally told him that I didn't want his Life-Saver. I wanted an apology! After a moment of tension, he apologized and immediately my respect for him grew. Ironically, from that encounter on it became easier for me to take criticism and direction from him.

One of the most powerful leadership acts is the apology. Arguably, it may be the greatest demonstration of both self and self-less leadership. Paradoxically, an apology is a form of vulnerability that speaks more to strength than weakness in leaders. An apology can transform a good leader into a great leader and a disillusioned employee into a committed partner.

I think we would all agree that it is much easier to be on the receiving rather than the giving end of an apology. It is hard to apologize. Leaders are very familiar with the pressure to be right and are ripe for the seduction that they can always be right. One of the first hurdles to an apology is to get over the need to always be right. Have you ever heard the idiom, *don't take yourself too seriously?* The inability to be contrite is a sure sign of taking yourself too seriously. But it is also an indication of not taking others seriously enough. An authentic apology is one way in which we demonstrate how much we value and respect our employees.

J.W. Owens Department Store was owned and operated by my Grandpa Dave and his ex-father-in-law, my Grandpa Owens (just think about those organizational dynamics). While other independent stores disappeared at the advent of national chains moving into the valley, J.W. Owens enjoyed a lifespan of over five decades.

When I grew old enough to appreciate the business acumen of my Grandpa Dave, I asked him what the difference was between his store and those with a much shorter lifespan. His response was simple, *“I can't expect our employees to care any more about the customers than I care about them [the employees].”* He did not have an MBA but he recognized a direct correlation between how he treated employees and how they treated customers.

Lest you think such sentiments are for small business, in addition to finding Starbucks at seemingly every corner, you can also locate them on the Fortune Magazine 100 Best Companies to Work For list (2003). They are not there by mistake. Howard Schultz, CEO, reminisces – *“... from the beginning of my management of Starbucks, I wanted it to be the employer of choice, the company everybody wanted to work for.”* He speaks of his core strategy as, *“Treat people like family, and they will be loyal and give their all.”*

Stand by people, and they will stand by you."

Schultz tells of a stalemate between him and Director of Retail Operations, Howard Behar. Behar had identified that customers wanted a non-fat option for their lattes and cappuccinos. Schultz tried his best to ignore Behar's suggestion but Behar demanded a reason why Starbucks should not offer a non-fat option to its customers. Schultz finally responded, *"Because they don't taste good"*.

Behar asked, *"To whom?"*

"To me," Schultz said.

Behar retorted, *"Read the customer comment cards. Our customers want non-fat milk! We should give it to them."*

Schultz replied, *"We will never offer non-fat milk. It is not who we are."*

Schultz eventually deferred to Behar and today almost half of Starbucks' lattes and cappuccinos are made with non-fat milk.¹

Schultz says he is frequently reminded about the *No Non-fat Stand*. Fortunately for Starbucks they have a CEO who has two of the qualities that Jim Collins, noted author of *Good To Great*, identified in leaders of great organizations ... a paradoxical mix of pro-

fessional will and personal humility.

There are consequences for every action - or in this context, inaction. Ken Blanchard, one of our LeadershipTraQ colleagues, points out in his book, *The One Minute Apology*, the steep price for the manager who refuses to apologize - *"A weakness not admitted over time becomes a perceived wickedness."*² It is easy to think someone is wicked when, in reality, they may simply be a flawed person who fails to admit their weaknesses. Nevertheless, perception is reality.

Apologies must live in the real world. Recently, we have had a lot of turnover at my golf club. A new manager was brought in a little over a year ago and all five golf pros are gone. The latest exodus hurt the most - my golf teacher. In spite of his relentless maligning of my game, we developed a good friendship. After tenure of nine years, he resigned out of personal principle. I asked him if anything could be done to change his mind and he responded, *"An apology."*

One of the greatest powers you possess as a leader is the apology. Use it authentically and without restraint. It is not too late!

The Taking Yourself Too Seriously Litmus Test:

You are taking yourself too seriously if . . .

- **you can't say, "I am sorry"**
- **you can't admit you are wrong**
- **you can't say, "I don't know"**

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¹ Schultz, Howard, and Dori Jones Yang. *Pour Your Heart Into It*. New York, NY: Hyperion, 1997

² Blanchard, Ken, and Margret McBride. *The One Minute Apology*. New York, NY: Harper-Collins, 2003