



The WordchipperSM

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I'm sorry

If you have a couple of decades or more of recall, you may remember some of the lyrics to the 1960s popular hit song about apologies. It was recorded by Brenda Lee, who is still *Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree* every year. Here's the chorus to the Ronnie Self and Dub Albritton song:

**"I'm sorry, so sorry
Please accept my apology
But love was blind
And I was too blind to see"**

Hearing that number on one of those '50s music stations recently, I was reminded of the art and science of apologies. There is a right and a wrong way to do apologies, as pointed out by Sharon Ellison in her book, *What Do You Mean When You Say: I'm Sorry*, available through the website managerwise.com, or order it from your favorite bookstore. Ms. Ellison recommends we stay a long way away from "pseudo" apologies. Those can make you really sound bogus without taking real responsibility for bad behavior. This approach can actually be worse than not doing any apology.

What does she mean by a phony apology? Here's a brief list:

"The excuse apology. Example: 'I'm sorry I didn't call. I've been busy.' Translation: 'Please understand that other things were more important than you.'

The denial-of-intent apology. Example: 'I'm sorry you took it that way. It wasn't what I meant.' Translation: 'It's too bad that you misinterpreted what I said.'

The generic apology. Example: 'I'm sorry if I offended you.' Translation: 'I can't think of anything I did wrong, but I'm happy to apologize to get back in your graces.'

She tells us to apologize only when we mean it and then specify clearly what we're saying "I'm sorry" for. To give an effective apology, say exactly what you did that was inconsiderate or disrespectful. She writes: "Don't tell the person that, however it 'looked' or 'sounded,' it wasn't your real intention. And don't bring up some other issue that suggests the person to whom you're apologizing contributed to or caused the problem."

That reminds me of my 4 rules for handling a public relations crisis:

- 1. Tell it all**
- 2. Tell it quickly**
- 3. Tell what you're going to do about it**
- 4. Say you're sorry**

The above steps are not guaranteed to get your company out of trouble, but it's a shot you must take. If you don't, or if you do any of the above rules half-heartedly, I can almost guarantee A) the problem won't go away and B) it will get worse. I learned this the hard way through over 30 years of managing "PR" problems for a large company. Although trust in the company or product at issue will stay damaged for a long time after a crisis, this four-step beginning will usually get you out of the newspapers and off TV news within a week or so. And, when you do rule #4, the *mea culpa*, make it very sincere, as Sharon Ellison recommends all apologies should be. We all know second apologies don't work very well. Ask former President Bill Clinton.

AND FINALLY, BRIGHTEN SOMEONE'S DAY: "To say, 'well done' to any bit of good work is to take hold of the powers which have made the effort and strengthen them beyond our knowledge." – from Phillips Brooks (1835-1893), an Episcopal bishop and author. He produced a number of books on writing and giving sermons but is probably best known for creating the timeless Christmas carol, *O Little Town of Bethlehem*.