

Advisor

The Newsletter of Effective Communication

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Experience

My Bad. No, Honestly. Bad. ▶
Personally, I think he should have... ▶

A Lost Art? ▶
Media Matters for Educators ▶

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My Bad. No, Honestly. Bad.



Some years back, as the rising cost of malpractice suits began to be felt in the medical community, researchers wondered why some doctors were sued for malpractice far more often than others. After gathering data and controlling for variables, like years of experience and types of practice, it was discovered that doctors who had better communications skills, who practiced active listening, expressed compassion and demonstrated good bedside manner were less likely to be sued.

Skip ahead 20+ years and meet the [Sorry Works! Coalition](#). This is a group of doctors, hospitals, insurers and the like who have joined together to provide what they call a "middle-ground solution to the malpractice crisis." They advocate that medical professionals admit mistakes and apologize for them. This movement is known as "disclosure and apology," and it is gaining ground and [media attention](#).

Certainly disclosure and apology works for those in other industries as well, such as Jet Blue Airlines CEO, David Neeleman. This past February, when travelers were kept as long as 11 hours on planes on the ground, the outpouring of anger was immediate. Despite less-than-polished TV performances and direct-to-YouTube video (which drew mostly cynical comments), he shocked Americans by doing what so few business leaders before him have done. He said, "I am sorry, and here is how we will fix it." Most major media observers and water cooler pundits gave him high marks for effort, saying the bar had been raised, and declaring this the dawn of a new era in customer relations. (Although, as we were publishing this newsletter, Neeleman [stepped aside](#) as CEO.)

How did something as elementary as an apology become the new tactical strategy for business? Very likely, it was the medical community that began

Quick Bites

A Lost Art?

Not all apologies are created equal. The weasel apology has proliferated in recent years. That is the apology that says the words "I'm sorry" but doesn't really apologize for anything; for example, "I'm sorry if my words offended anyone." This admits no wrong and puts the onus on the listeners. It was their choice to be offended, after all. Or how about "I'm sorry that you are hurt." Again, sorry about those pesky results, but no reference to the cause. Perhaps there is no cause? Certainly, I didn't cause any hurt. And then there is the popular in Washington and Hollywood apology which at first seems to accept blame but, on further examination, actually seeks to deflect blame because it was really the alcohol/prescription meds/childhood trauma/low blood sugar that was really

to demonstrate that there was a real bottom-line advantage to the apology. For example, *The Detroit News* reported in 2004 that the University of Michigan Health System says it has cut its annual tab for attorney fees from \$3 million to \$1 million since initiating the policy in 2002.

Does this infer that lawyers and accountants have kept the words "I'm sorry" away from their CEO's lips?

Yes, it does, and for sometimes justifiable reasons. The contention that an apology is an admission of guilt does have basis in law. That is why there has been a legislative push to enact laws that make it clear that an expression of regret or compassion or an apology cannot be construed as an admission of guilt. Currently, 29 [states](#) have laws to protect those who say they are sorry, but these laws are generally specific to health care professionals.

Nonetheless, there are take-aways here for all organizations. People sue because they are angry and hurt. People sue when they suspect they have not been told the truth and that it will take a courtroom to get the facts. People sue when they feel they were treated callously. *It is emotions, not facts, that lead to lawsuits because the facts may be unknown until after the trial.* Even those with a justifiable claim to damages may be inclined to settle out of court if they believe they are being treated fairly and respectfully.

Humans are, by and large, very forgiving. The phrase "I'm only human" is an acknowledgment that everyone makes mistakes, everyone is fallible. But as people who believe in equality, we Americans are also adamant that everyone is equally responsible for his or her own actions and must be held accountable. Admit, apologize and amend; simple, effective and absolutely *pre-elementary*.

Now go tell your sister you are sorry you knocked down her blocks and that you won't do it again. And then pick them up.

- ▶ The Ammerman Experience has been preaching the gospel of honest compassion, care and concern for more than 30 years. If you or your colleagues could use some help in discerning the best practices of communicating this essential quality, call or [write](#) . .

[Back to top](#)

Personally, I think he should have...

A brief controversy erupted this spring when General Peter Pace, Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, made comments about his belief in the immorality of homosexuality to the *Chicago Tribune*. Since 1993, the Armed

the root cause. Given the contemporary climate, this might be a good time to review the rules of remorse, for we seem to live in a world where the apology is increasingly common, but a genuine *mea culpa* is hard to find. Sensibly enough, the [University of Colorado](#) has created a guide to the apology for both the giver and the receiver.

[Back to top](#)

Media Matters for Educators

The shooting deaths last October of five Amish students in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania, and the more recent tragedy at Virginia Tech, underscore this fact: a crisis can happen to any organization – large or small, public or private – even schools and universities. Increasingly, educators are facing events and issues that call for effective crisis management and media skills.

Here's how The Ammerman Experience can help: As the leading provider of communication skills training for the education community, we have a portfolio of eight different workshops designed specifically for school districts, colleges and universities. Among them are Media and Crisis Communications, and Crisis Management Team Training.

If you'd like more info on our innovative, interactive professional development offerings for academic institutions, give us a call. Or, if your firm is involved in "Adopt-a-School" or similar education-support programs, why not consider sponsoring one of these workshops for the district or

Forces of the United States had a policy known as "don't ask, don't tell."

General Pace, in response to many questions about his remarks, said later that, "In expressing my support for the current policy, I also offered some personal opinions about moral conduct. I should have focused more on my support of the policy and less on my personal moral views."

He did not say he was wrong, only that he lacked focus. And he did not apologize, for which he received further criticism.

Some praised Pace for his candor, but many others felt the interview reflected poorly on the man and his understanding of his obligations to his employer.

The phrase "in my personal opinion" is common and usually means:

- A. I am about to say something I probably shouldn't.
- B. I lack knowledge, but I want to talk, so I will give you an opinion.
- C. I know I am saying something indiscreet, but I can't be nailed for it, because I invoked the personal-opinion clause.

While A and B offer a look into the speaker's ego, C simply is not true. We are held accountable for our words. There is no "olly olly oxen free" for grown-ups.

The question, then, is this: When *is* your personal opinion relevant? In a personal conversation.

Problems occur when people fail to understand where a professional conversation ends and a personal one begins. People think they work among friends when they are in fact with co-workers. There is a difference. People also don't realize that when media interviewers chat and act friendly, they may be trying to get your guard down so you will say something highly quotable and maybe controversial.

And why do they want controversy and scandal? It translates into profits. The day that Anna Nicole Smith died, TV viewership skyrocketed. CNN had a million more viewers that day, and *Entertainment Tonight* viewership was up 15 percent for the month. As moneymaking-businesses, the media go after their customers aggressively, like anyone else in a highly competitive field.

There are times when a personal opinion is warranted. For instance, if you have a TV or radio program or a published column with your name in the title, you probably can share your personal opinion, but even then, discretion is strongly advised. Look what happened to *Imus in the Morning*.

Seriously, though, ask yourself, "Would this person be talking to me if I were unemployed?" If the answer is no, your personal opinion is neither required nor desired.

[Back to top](#)

college in your community?
Helping prepare them to properly manage a crisis and interact with the media may be one of the most valuable community relations contributions you can make.

[Back to top](#)

2007 Ammerman Individual Enrollment Training Dates

Effective Media Communications

June 12
August 21
September 18
October 11
November 6
December 4

Effective Presentations

June 13
September 19

Advanced Media Skills

November 7-8


EMC Refresher

June 14
September 20

The above schedule lists Ammerman individual, public workshops. For available dates for private (buy-out) training dates, please contact The Ammerman Experience at 1.800.866.2026.

The Ammerman Experience public workshops are scheduled on a first-come, first-served basis, and are available to a limited number of attendees to ensure maximum personalized attention. To register for a course, contact our office at 1.800.866.2026.

[Back to top](#)



Our firm is a pioneer in understanding the link between effective communication and professional success. What we've learned and what we teach can improve your performance . . . and that of others in your organization.

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