Choose to Apologize

For most of us, it is fairly easy to apologize when the incident is minor. You bump into someone on the street, you break a glass, or you were not fully listening to someone. An “I’m sorry” is said and life goes on comfortably. You have acknowledged your error, and the other person feels doing so is all that needed.

It gets much more difficult when your actions have been negative or harmful to someone else. Sigmund Freud noted, his daughter added, and psychiatry has further studied that a normal and natural reaction is for humans to use Defense Mechanism, “strategies that are unconsciously used to protect a person from anxiety arising from unacceptable thoughts or feelings”. Children are taught that they must always be good. When they are caught doing something bad, they are usually punished and feel guilty and see themselves as bad. Consequently each of us early on learn ways that we can get rid of both of those feelings. These defense mechanisms we carry with us into adulthood.

The following are some of the most common in communication:

* Denial- to refuse or block reality from awareness. The alcoholic will not admit in any way that alcohol has caused any problems.
* Projection-to ascribe your unacceptable thoughts, feeling, and motive to another person. A spouse may accuse the other of not listening where they are the one not doing the listening.
* Rationalization- to distort the facts to make an event less threatening, to make excuses, to minimize. An abuser hits his wife. He explains to the police officer that she had done these things to him first.
* Displacement- to redirect feelings, thoughts about one person to a totally other person or object. Your boss is continually putting you down. You go home and start an argument with your wife.
* Intellectualization- to use reasoning to explain away the negative results. You are diagnosed with cancer and constantly complain about the endless medical procedures.
* Repression-to unconsciously keep threatening feelings from your consciousness. You were constantly criticized by your mother as a child. Now as an adult you tell your friends that you had the best mother.

Now let’s see how these strategies affect civil communication. Someone says or does something that is harmful or hurtful to another. Rather than admit to their behavior and apologize to the person, a defense mechanism is used. The harmed remains unresolved. Consequently any further conversation is compromised. The harmer is much in the same position. While these mechanisms can hide some of the truth, there is still an undercurrent of guilt. Their communications will be constricted. Also this can influence all other communications as one wonders who else really knows the truth.

As we all probably do use some defense mechanisms, we all become less encouraged to engage in civility. Rather being an open individual who pays attention, listens, works on being more inclusive and shows respect, we are guarded. We are more likely to participate in gossip in order to get an edge on another. We will stop making an apology when we have acted inappropriately.

It is the tool of apologize that prevents the above from happening. First it asks us to stop using these defense mechanisms. They may help us to feel better about ourselves temporarily. They are not sustainable unless we repeat using them over and over again. We will probably even add to those that we had used as children.

Secondly, we need to commit ourselves to making an apology when we become aware that we have acted in the wrong. To help us to do this, we need to rid ourselves of the myth that we can be perfect at all times. We are all human beings and make many mistakes. We do not need to hide from ours. Rather if we embrace them, we are able to learn from them, and be less likely to make the same again. Still we remain imperfect, but we are honest with ourselves.

 Apologizing frees us to be open to others. Therefore we can be honest, comfortable, and capable of using all the tools of civility. Each time you do, it becomes easier the next time. Others will see your behavior and begin to give their own apology.

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