**How to Apologize Gracefully**

So you've gone and done it -- stepped on someone's toes, or worse, completely alienated them with a thoughtless remark or display of bad temper. True, to err is human, to forgive divine; but what if you're not the one on the forgiving end? There is rarely a situation for which you cannot make an acceptable apology, provided that it is heartfelt and done with dignity and grace. Even the angriest person will soften if you make a thoughtful case, so swallow your pride and get to it.

1. Allow a brief cooling-off period. When emotions run high, things can escalate very quickly. This is why parents give time-outs to toddlers. Step out of the room or gently hang up the phone and let everyone involved get some air. A good rule of thumb is the bigger the issue, the more time you allow. If you've had a small misunderstanding with a coworker, let perhaps fifteen minutes pass and then swoop back in. If you've just told your fiancée that you never really wanted to get married in the first place, a few hours is a more appropriate time frame.

2. Collect your thoughts. With an apology, you need to accomplish three things: reestablish communication, accept responsibility and validate the other party's feelings. With these goals in mind, think about what you want to say. Keep it brief and heartfelt. For example: To your coworker, you might say, "John, I'd like to apologize for what just happened. I really dropped the ball on that presentation and I certainly understand why you're angry (or disappointed)." To your fiancée, you could say, "Lisa, I need to apologize for what I said. I spoke out of fear (or anger) and I can see that I've hurt you badly. I'm so sorry."

3. Ask for permission to re-establish contact. This is key, because it gives the injured party a chance to save face by having control over the situation. Say "Can we talk?" or "Is it OK if I come in?" If you are refused, take no for an answer and retreat without angry words or guilt trips. If you are invited to talk, go ahead with your apology. Sit down if possible, keep your posture loose and make eye contact. Don't try to make physical contact (such as a handshake or a hug) unless invited. Many people hate to be touched when they're upset.

4. If you are refused permission to talk, wait a bit (no more than a few hours) and then initiate a gesture. Drop off a brief note, leave one voice mail or one text, saying something like "I would really appreciate the chance to speak with you. Please let me know when you are ready." If there is no word or another refusal, you now have permission to write a letter of apology -- a snail-mail letter, not an email, a text or a voice message. Send just the note, no flowers or gifts. Depending on the level of hurt or offense, flowers can be seen as insulting or a bribe. Flowers are appropriate after your apology has been accepted and you are back in good graces.

5. If appropriate, offer to make reparations. If you caused property damage, financial loss or insulted a third party with your behavior, take immediate action to make it right. For your coworker, say something such as, "I will speak to our manager right now and let him know I'm the one who screwed up." If he feels it's necessary, you could add "I'll call the client and take full responsibility." To your fiancée, you could say, "I know I embarrassed your friend (or parents, or sister) and I will talk to them whenever you think the time is right.”

The thread of all of these strategies is respect. If you treat someone with respect, they will instinctively understand that the apology comes from place of sincerity and that you have a genuine concern for their well-being. When you validate a person’s hurt or angry feelings, the message is “I see you, and I care.” Truly, who could ask for more than that?