

## Cleaning Up Your Act!

**By Stuart White**  
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I hate mistakes, especially my own. Mistakes should never happen but they do. When I get something wrong I feel that by failing to spot the error in time I have let myself down and accuse myself of negligence. Obviously this philosophy transcends to my staff wittingly or not – they get the message that almost anything is acceptable except errors. Now it's a tricky one for a management consultant because a mistake-free environment is dangerous. Why? Well if mistakes come with such severe consequences (in this case the Boss's disapprobation and disapproval) then people will go out of their way to avoid trying new things and taking risks – and that's not what I want in my business. So my philosophy has been adapted somewhat – mistakes can happen, but admit to them, don't shift blame and always apologise. Mea culpa, don the hair shirt and move on.

With this background you can just imagine how extremely irked I was this week when we uncovered a mistake that should have been detected and corrected. A combination of technological and human error resulted in a disappointed client and an equally disappointed me. With nowhere to hide, I sincerely apologized to the client, offered no real excuse except admitting the error and agreed it should never have happened. Fortunately my client was forgiving – gracefully so - thanked me for my honesty and I thanked them for theirs. They made sure I understood that mistakes like the one which had occurred could not be tolerated in the future, with which I was in complete accord. Issue dusted, problem corrected, relationship restored and forward we go. Later in the week the tables were turned and a service provider of mine aggravated me with mistake after mistake. Deadlines not met, insufficient effort put into the assignment given, just sub-standard work. Frustrated I called the Managing Director, who immediately did a Stuart. He apologized and went about correcting the problem, then went further by phoning me that evening at 8 o'clock to apologise again for the "sloppy service." It's really hard to argue with a sincere apology. It's not just in the saying of the word – it's when there is true repentance and concern, you just have to forgive. To err, after all, is human but forgiveness is not just a divine right.

Then you have the antithesis of this situation – the grubby side of doing business you might say. The time came for the year-end cleaning of the HRMC office carpets, always arranged for the afternoon of the day we close in order to give the carpets plenty of time to dry! Unfortunately for us as it turns out, instead of calling our usual, reliable Cleanall Services, someone in the office called, by mistake, another “Clean Company”. They duly arrived on the appointed day, did the job and we closed our doors for the Christmas break. On our return some 2 weeks later, within a couple of days it was evident that some sticky residue had been left on the carpets which was attracting all manner of dirt. The “Operations Manager” – (read Cleaning Machine Operator, I suspect) – came in to assess the problem and that is where the fun and games started. It was suggested that we had walked on the carpets when wet (remember that the office had been closed for 2 weeks), perhaps it was the shoes that our people were wearing, it was the black rolling wheels on our office chairs or perhaps the chemical that had been used 12 months before to clean the carpets that were the culprits. Whatever it was – it certainly wasn’t their mistake. To try and correct the problem the carpets were unsuccessfully cleaned twice more after that and to crown it all, on the last attempt the cleaning operator managed to burn the carpet in our executive boardroom!

And how was all this dealt with by the owner of the cleaning company? The lady concerned has suggested that we are difficult clients, that she has cleaned our carpets 3 times (at our unreasonable insistence apparently, not because the job wasn’t done properly and therefore for which we should have paid) and that it was business policy that the cleaning bill must be settled before she would consider replacing the carpet! Don’t you just love it – pay for the mistake and we will consider rectifying it – unheard of! When my FD suggested that perhaps she might like to claim from her professional insurance cover to replace the carpet, she retorted that she did not have insurance “as this type of thing has never happened before”. To date no accepting responsibility, plenty of attempts to shift blame, the likelihood of an apology as far away as Timbuktu and a 3-week wait for the Operations Manager to return from leave to investigate why carpets were cleaned 3 times!

The way we apologise or don’t and how we handle wrongdoings or transgressions is so critical in business, I am amazed that more people don’t ‘get it’. The importance of apologies is essential to modern society. From a young age the word ‘sorry’ is learned before others in our essential vocabulary. We say sorry when we bury the puppy and nearly kill it, we say it when we play with matches and set a room alight and even when trivial mishaps occur. Yet, as we get older our apologies become more abstract and defensive and less an acceptance of responsibility than a demand that the wrong person forgive us. And this is not limited to individuals – politicians, business leaders, the Catholic church all provide countless examples when wrongdoings have been done yet no contrition or apology is forthcoming. And it kills business, trust and faith.

John Kador author of *Mending Fences, Building Bridges and Restoring Trust* says that whilst a leader’s first impulse may be to avoid apology, so as not to appear weak or prone to mistakes, this can have serious consequences. He purports that mistakes are inevitable and that an honest and effective apology will defuse anger, reduce litigation, begin the healing process, and rebuild the relationship. He goes on to point out that while an apology is not free of personal and economic cost, the price of denial, blame, and a refusal to take responsibility for mistakes and apologise is much higher. While an admission of fault was once viewed as weakness, society now takes the opposite view, considering an open and honest apology to be a sign of personal strength and integrity, though right now you might have a hard job convincing the CEO of Toyota on that one!

For some, sorry really seems to be the hardest word but in business it’s so much the softer option than having to listen to ‘goodbye, good riddance and never darken our doors again’. So, who do you think should have given an apology and didn’t, let me know on twitter! [Tweet this article...](#)

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