

# TIME Business & Money

## Apology Not Accepted: The Right — and Wrong — Way to Say You're Sorry

By Dov Seidman

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A great deal has been written about Harvard University professor Niall Ferguson's controversial comments about the late economist [John Maynard Keynes](#). (The short version: Keynesian economic theory, Ferguson suggested, is flawed because Keynes himself was gay and childless — and consequently blind to the dangerous long-term consequences of his own ideas.)

The statement itself has been pretty exhaustively litigated, so I'll refrain. As it happens, though, I was particularly interested in Ferguson's [apology](#), the first line of which struck me as admirably unequivocal: "During a recent question-and-answer session at a conference in [California](#), I made comments about John Maynard Keynes that were as stupid as they were insensitive."

I don't know Ferguson personally, but I respected what he did there, and extended my trust to him because I experienced his apology as authentic. However, I later saw that my response was far from universal. *Guardian* writer Oliver Burkeman, for example, [wrote](#) that Ferguson's apology makes it "almost impossible to believe that he's being sincere." And The Huffington Post's Mark Gongloff [argued](#) that Ferguson's apology "makes several more dumb statements."

(VIDEO: [Dov Seidman, Principle Prophet](#))

All of this scrutiny of a single apology raised the question for me: Why are we now dissecting apologies so rigorously?

I believe it's because we are in what I would call the Era of Behavior. What I mean is that, although our behavior has of course always mattered, our world's growing interconnectedness and interdependence makes it matter more today, and in more ways, than ever before. As a result, apologies — themselves a behavior in response to misbehavior — are more consequential, so we're spending more time trying to distinguish authentic expressions of contrition from rote crisis-management exercises.

As a matter of fact, apologies are so commonplace today that their effectiveness is being called into question. Just in recent weeks and months, IRS acting commissioner Steven Miller [apologized](#) for "poor service" ; Bloomberg [apologized](#) for data snooping; South Korea expressed [contrition](#) over an aide's misconduct in Washington; beverage-makers voiced regret for [diluting](#) their whiskey and for [portraying](#) racial stereotypes; car makers [apologized](#) for the actions of their advertising partners; and banks [owned up](#) to unethical behavior.

Recently departed J.C. Penney CEO Ron Johnson might still be at the helm of the department store chain if the apology developed under his watch – a production that elevates “sorry” into a [compelling advertisement](#) – had appeared just a few weeks earlier. The YouTube-posted mea culpa, which notched nearly a million views within five days, shows a company eager to promote its ability to apologize and emphasize that it has learned a lesson about the importance of listening to its customers.

We’re seeing more apologies like J.C. Penney’s because corporate leaders are fast learning that apologizing is the ultimate act of transparency and reconnection, a prime example of how we can turn our hyper-transparent and hyper-connected world to our favor. By admitting fault, an individual or company can show itself to be vulnerable, and allow the public to see deeply into its character or culture. As such, apologies – when they are seen as sincere and genuine – can make people and organizations both more human and relatable, and thus forgivable.

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The flip side of that – the risk implicit in that opportunity – is that today’s unprecedented levels of transparency make ulterior motives all but impossible to hide. So it’s no longer enough to simply say “I’m sorry.” We must also do it for the right reasons.

There are, in other words, good and bad, effective and not, ways to apologize. Here are five guidelines for getting it right in this Era of Behavior:

1. **Feel the pain.** An authentic apology feels extremely uncomfortable and even painful to the apologizer. It should. An apology represents a fundamental re-set, one that begins with a difficult and highly personal observation: Wow, I really should not have done that. What is going on with me that I did that? And I really can’t do that anymore, and that may mean deep changes that I may not yet know how to make. In order to achieve that re-set, the apologizer must take responsibility, share an expression of sorrow, and acknowledge that a sincere apology is a promise of genuine, perhaps painful, change.
2. **Mean it.** To be taken seriously, an apology can’t have ulterior motives or be a means to an end. It must express an authentic sense of regret. This is crucial because authentic expressions of regret can lead to beneficial outcomes. When the University of Michigan Health System let doctors apologize to patients after making a mistake – a departure from the traditional “deny and defend” response – malpractice lawsuits and payouts decreased by 50%. However, if “deny and defend” doctors at another institution began apologizing to patients for the specific purpose of reducing malpractice lawsuits, you can bet that lawsuits there would actually increase. Authenticity matters, so make sure you know who is really making the apology – your true self or your inner crisis manager.
3. **Go beyond the mistake itself.** A genuine apology specifies the mistake, but also goes deeper. Identify what about your individual or organizational character enabled the mistake to occur, and then explain how you plan to change it. Think of JetBlue’s response a couple of years ago to increased flight delays and poor customer service: A JetBlue Bill of Rights. The Bill quantified JetBlue’s commitment and backed it with customer compensation. JetBlue did a ‘fiscal audit’ and balanced the financial equation with their customers by promising to pay them off if they behaved badly again. But JetBlue sidestepped a ‘moral audit’ of looking longer in the mirror and asking ‘Who are we or who have we become that we would leave our customers on the runway with no airconditioning for six hours?’ and then recommitting to balancing the moral equation by treating customers with respect and dignity.

4. **Invite feedback.** Superficial PR gestures and 10-step crisis management plans simply don't work in the highly transparent and connected world we now inhabit. As we increasingly see, every claim you make can be researched, countered, and communicated about on a global basis. As a result, one-way statements are useless, to be replaced by two-way conversations with stakeholders. This includes truly opening up to input and conversation during an apology. Two-way dialogue can be a source of new ideas. Companies now crowdsource their next innovation. Why not crowdsource for how to better connect with and relate to those hurt by the behavior for which they are apologizing?
5. **Go to work.** A company that is genuinely remorseful parlays that regret into a change in the way they do business, into an investment in avoiding the same mistakes in the future. Look at Barclay's CEO Anthony Jenkins, who after apologizing for the company's involvement in the LIBOR scandal ("We have made serious mistakes. We need to change our culture, which means setting out the values you expect from people") is beginning the hard and perhaps costly work of changing his company's culture.

Public figures and businesses have come a long way since the days of dealing with their transgressions by "neither denying nor admitting guilt." But our apology surge is part of a larger and longer journey toward making our leaders and corporations more "human." Since all journeys are rich with learning, triumphs and missteps, we'd better get our apologies right the first time. *How you apologize matters a lot more than it once did.*