The 5 Secrets of a Validating Apology

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When people of different backgrounds work together, it is inevitable for people to feel triggered or targeted, even when that was not the intent. When someone is negatively impacted, an apology may seem like the best action.

Apologies are not easy because of the stigma that admitting fault is a sign of weakness. As the song goes, “Sorry seems to be the hardest word.” But it takes much more than saying, “I’m sorry,” especially when people perceive the situation differently.

There’s an art to apologizing in a way that feels sincere, meaningful and healing. I call it the validating apology. Effective leaders encourage vulnerability and promote validating apologies to resolve issues with and among their team members and preserve their brand and reputation.

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A validating apology

In June 2020, shortly after the murder of George Floyd, I received a surprising email from Tailwind that demonstrated what a validating apology looks like. In part, it read:

> *We messed up.*
>
> *Recent events have led our predominantly white team to look inward and examine the privilege many of us take for granted*

> *every day. We're determined to become more intentionally anti-racist.*
>
> *But…what about Tailwind Tribes?*
>
> *Can we ever truly become anti-racist if we have a product whose name is offensive and racially charged for many Native and Indigenous peoples?*
>
> *Our answer is "no," so we're committing to changing the name by the end of the year.*

As a blogger for over 18 years, I had been a fan of Tailwind's services, but as a descendant of Indigenous ancestors, I was resistant to using this tool, and my excitement about the whole brand subsided.

This validating apology by their CEO, which was also posted on their website and across their social media channels, allowed me and many others to restore – and increase – our brand loyalty.

Let's break down the key elements of a validating apology using Tailwind's example above:

1. They showed concern for the impact their actions had on others.

Tailwind guided the conversation toward validation and accountability for how they impacted others, without any caveats. This helped us feel feels seen, safe and supported.

Apologies imply care when they acknowledge how the other person feels about the harm that was done. A validating apology explicitly expresses how a lack of information or a lack of bad intentions does not take back the damage caused.

Even when we might have the purest intentions, we must remind

ourselves that someone who is hurt can’t be wrong about their feelings. Our focus must be directed at alleviating their pain or distress.

2. They vulnerably admitted they were wrong and didn’t listen soon enough.

Accepting and taking responsibility demonstrates that we recognize our part in the situation.

We must avoid invalidating phrases like “I’m sorry you took it that way,” “I’m sorry you were offended,” and “I’m sorry if I caused you stress.” These shift the blame onto the impacted person for misunderstanding the intent and communicate doubt that the hurt was actually caused.

Tailwind admitted that the name Tribes was racist and “a misalignment with our values of inclusivity, community, and transparency” because they couldn’t feel anti-racist unless they changed it.

It is essential to openly express how we feel about the consequences of our words or behavior. This level of ownership creates trust, safety, and respect.

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3. They acknowledged their team was not inclusive enough and recognized the impact of their privilege and

unconscious biases.

This step is about digging deeper and going to the root of the problem.

As a diversity, inclusion and representation advocate, I urge leaders to hire diverse people, test new recruits for implicit bias, and make sure that diverse perspectives are welcomed and respected. It is normal to feel discomfort when realizing that we cannot relate to another's perspective or lived experience. And yet, it is by recognizing this position of privilege that positive change can occur.

4. They communicated their decision to repair the situation.

Shortly after their apology, the name Tailwind Tribes was officially updated to "Tailwind Communities."

They've also led initiatives that show their ongoing commitment to promoting respect for the diverse people they serve.

To create a safe culture, policies and systems must be established that discourage language experienced as insensitive, biased, offensive, oppressive or insulting. Repair is the only path to resolution. It is important to take preventive measures, put corrective processes in place, and provide updates to all involved.

5. They took responsibility for educating themselves to understand the hurtful impact of using the

word “Tribe.”

A caring leader is open to learning and will explore what the impacted person wants to express, but they need to do their own homework.

For example, if a leader wants to learn about marginalizing language, they can hire a consultant or invest in accurate training for themselves and the whole team.

One way in which many leaders may invalidate BIPOC groups is by making our interrogation their education.

I remember one particular occasion when I experienced constant microaggressions and exclusion that affected my physical, mental and emotional health.

When the leader finally made time to get involved, it was not only too late, but I was subjected to explaining “how” the other person had discriminated against me. He kept asking me questions to help him “understand it.” My perspective was not being heard; it was being questioned.

They took some radical steps to try and repair the situation, but it was clear that their seemingly sincere yet poor attempts were not about me.

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The power of a validating apology

A validating apology is a great start to forging reconciliation. It helps all the parties involved to move forward, find solutions and turn conflict into progress.

I invite you to use the power of the validating apology to foster a culture of understanding, trust and intimacy to ensure a safe environment for all.

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