

Let's face it, we all have made mistakes many times over the course of our lives. Many times those mistakes required an apology to someone. Privately, *apologizing* is an underrated relationship skill that can bring real healing ... in a resolution, reaffirm shared *values*, restore good will, and the beginnings of rebuilding trust.

When public figures and corporations make mistakes, those mistakes are public, they have caused harm, and they come to the attention of everyone.

Public mistakes make news and the sincerity and accountability of the public apologies that follow are subject to our thumbs up or thumbs down---do these apologies contain a resolution, reaffirm shared values, and make some effort to restore our trust?

What goes into a sincere public apology? What should our own apologies contain?

American swimmer Ryan Lochte has apologized for his behavior during a drunken altercation in Rio de Janeiro where property was damaged and a guard drew his gun to try to contain the situation. Lochte did not report the full story, he misled authorities, and embarrassed the host country and city, and his Olympic team. So he apologized on Instagram.

But his apology fails because it is vague about what he did wrong. He starts like this:

I want to apologize for my behavior last weekend — for not being more careful and candid in how I described the events of that early morning and for my role in taking the focus away from the many athletes fulfilling their dreams of participating in the Olympics.

The words he uses here—or the words his attorney or PR person wrote for him--- are a clue that he fails to take responsibility for anything specific, just for “not being more careful and candid.” They acknowledge neither damaging property nor misleading authorities and media.

He also fails to fairly describe who he and his teammates harmed. He acknowledges the athletes, but not the host city, whose reputation he has impugned. (While there's plenty of crime in Rio, that doesn't mean it's ok for Lochte to invent criminal acts.)

A good apology also includes an explanation that's not an excuse. But Lochte's excuse is that he's in a foreign country and was threatened (in response to damaging property):

He says, It's traumatic to be out late with your friends in a foreign country — with a language barrier — and have a stranger point a gun at you and demand money to let you leave . . .

What he should have done and what is he responsible for is vague. (But he finally gets around to acknowledging the host city):

. . . but regardless of the behavior of anyone else that night, I should have been much more responsible in how I handled myself and for that I am sorry to my teammates, my fans, my fellow competitors, my sponsors, and the hosts of this great event. . . . I accept responsibility for my role in this happening and have learned some valuable lessons.

“Should have been more responsible” and “my role in this happening” are meaningless phrases. And the passive voice in this apology shows what he’s not yet ready to take responsibility for:

. . . this was a situation that could and have been avoided . . .

There has already been too much said and too many valuable resources dedicated to what happened last weekend . . .

In other words he’s saying it’s, “somebody’s fault, not necessarily mine.”

While Lochte’s apology is more sincere than corporate apologies, like Volkswagen apologizing for its falsifying the emissions tests of thousands of diesel vehicles, and Lochte does use the first person “I” in many places, still where his apology is sincere, it’s vague, and where it’s specific, it makes excuses. This is the writing of someone who feels as much victimized as responsible for the consequences of his actions.

Here’s what the apology would look like it were straightforward and direct. This could have avoided the thumbs down the public gave him and saved him from having to issue a second apology in response to the backlash that ensued when he issued the first one. He could have said:

My teammates and I were irresponsible this weekend. We vandalized a gas station and then failed to tell the whole story when we went to the authorities.

As a result, we embarrassed the Rio 2016 Olympics, the city of Rio de Janeiro, and our team. It’s a scary experience to have a security guard threaten you with a gun, but it was our fault we were in that situation, and we’re responsible for causing the problem in the first place.

---two short paragraphs, four clear, direct sentences.

Whether you’re a public figure, a corporation, or an ordinary private citizen, when apologizing, be specific, take personal responsibility, say who has been harmed, and say what you’ll do to make up for it. Until you do, nobody will move on from what you did.

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