

# How to deliver an effective apology

This factsheet offers guidance to education providers on how to deliver an effective apology.

## Why apologise?

We all make mistakes, and sometimes things happen that we did not foresee. This is true for us personally, and for the organisations we work for. Giving an effective apology can go a long way to putting things right, resolving disputes and complaints, and rebuilding trust and confidence. It shows your organisation is transparent, accountable and treats people with respect.<sup>1</sup>

Apologising is a sign of strength, rather than weakness, as it involves taking responsibility for the effects of our actions. Policies, guidelines and effective training can ensure that apologising is seen as a positive step.

## What is an effective apology?

A good apology needs to be genuine, sincere, tailored to the individual and the situation. Consider giving an apology even if the person hasn't requested it.<sup>2</sup>

It is helpful to look at what outcome the person wants. Some people look for acknowledgement that wrong has been done to them, while others want to know that it will not happen again.<sup>3</sup>

It is better to give your apology as early as possible and deliver it well.

A good apology usually consists of:

- Recognition:** identifying the mistake and the harm caused.
- Responsibility:** an admission of responsibility or fault if identified. This may not be appropriate if there is no clear error on the organisation's part or the actions were in accordance with company policy.
- Regret:** an expression of regret or sympathy.
- Reasons:** an explanation of what occurred or what will be done to investigate.
- Redress:** an explanation of what is being done to fix the issue or prevent a reoccurrence.
- Release:** if it is appropriate, a request for forgiveness.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> [Apologies | Victorian Ombudsman](#) p.5

<sup>2</sup> [Apologies | Victorian Ombudsman](#) p.6

<sup>3</sup> [Apologies | Victorian Ombudsman](#) (factsheet p.1)

<sup>4</sup> [Apologies | Victorian Ombudsman](#) p.7

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Apologies can go a long way to resolving disputes

Insincere apologies can make matters worse

Many Australian states and territories have legislation that protects apologies from being used as an admission of legal liability

An apology is likely to have more impact if it is given promptly. However, it is reasonable to delay the apology if person is too upset to listen at the time, or if the issue is still being investigated.<sup>5</sup>

Consider:

- the best way to communicate the apology
- whether to apologise in person or by letter
- what information to relay and what language to use
- who is the best person to receive the apology.

The apology is more likely to be seen as genuine if it is backed up with practical action or is part of a package of remedies that address the impact of the mistake.

### Things to avoid in apologies

An apology can be significantly less effective if you include or leave things out that make the recipient feel like you don't really mean it:<sup>6</sup>

*Inaccurate apologies*—apologies that don't identify the issues that the recipient is most upset about: this makes the recipient feel like you didn't even listen to their concerns.

*Misguided apologies*—apologies where you are not responsible for the error.

*Generalised apologies*—apologies that fail to identify the relevant problem, fault or mistake e.g. *'I am sorry for what occurred'*.

*Avoidance apologies*—apologies that try to excuse or avoid responsibility, e.g. *'I'm sorry I said that, but...'*

*Conditional apologies*—apologies which question whether the recipient was harmed e.g. *'I'm sorry if anyone took offense at what I said'*.

*Partial apologies*—apologies that don't admit responsibility for harm caused but only express regret, sympathy etc. This could also include passive comments without taking ownership e.g. *'hurtful things were said'*.

### Need more information?

Additional reference material is available online at the following links:

- [Apologies | Victorian Ombudsman](#)
- [Apologies - A practical guide \(2nd edition\) | NSW Ombudsman](#)

Please note: This document is intended as a guide only. For this reason, the information should not be relied on as legal advice or regarded as a substitute for legal advice in individual cases. To the maximum extent permitted by the law, the Commonwealth Ombudsman is not liable to you for any loss or damage suffered as a result of reliance on this document. For the most up-to-date versions of cited Acts, please refer to the [Federal Register of Legislation](#).

<sup>5</sup> [Apologies | Victorian Ombudsman](#) p.3

<sup>6</sup> [Apologies. A practical guide \(nsw.gov.au\)](#), p.12–13. \*Several of these problems are also referred to by Dr Aaron Lazare in *On Apology*, Oxford University Press, 2004. (Referenced in *NSW Ombudsman, Apologies: A Practical Guide (2009)*)