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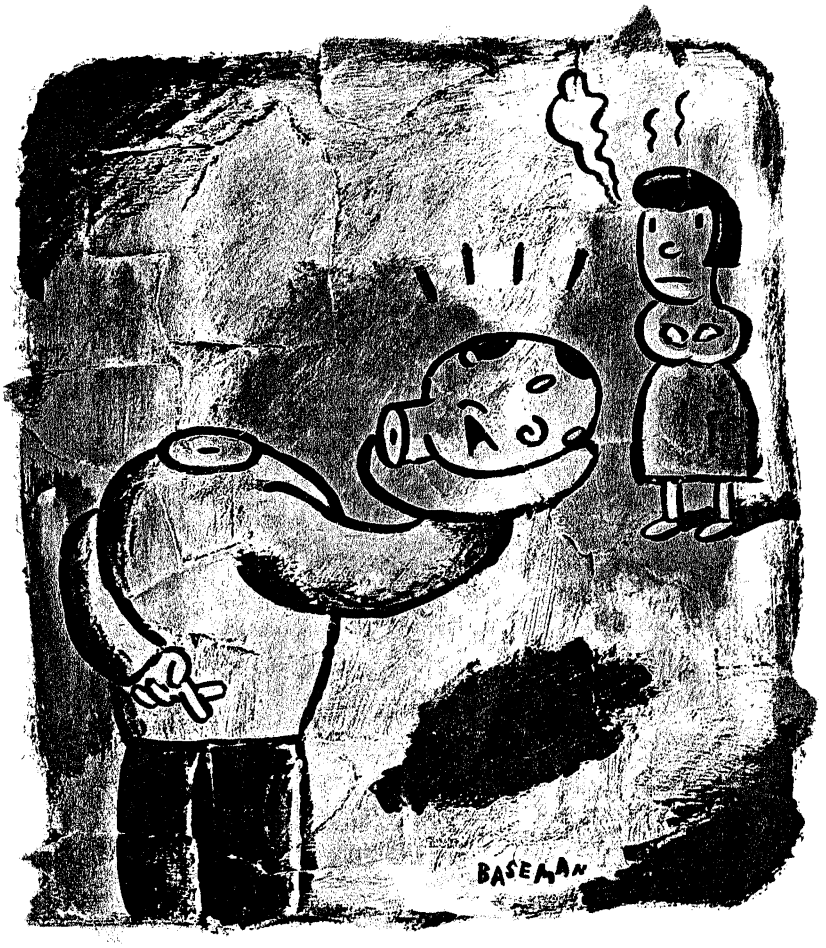
I'm Sorry, I Won't Apologize



A simple statement of contrition can fix an honest mistake. So why can't men seem to do it?

BY DEBORAH TANNEN

ALMOST DAILY, NEWS reports include accounts of public figures or heads of companies being forced to say they're sorry. In a recent case, Marge Schott, managing partner of the Cincinnati Reds, at first did not want to apologize for her remark that Hitler "was good at the beginning but he just went too far." Under pressure, she finally said that she regretted her remarks "offended many people." Predictably — and especially given her history with such comments — many were not satisfied with this response and successfully lobbied for her resignation.

This particular use of "I'm sorry" has a familiar ring. The other day my husband said to me, "I'm sorry I hurt your feelings." I knew he was really trying. He has learned, through our years together, that apologies are important to me. But he was grinning, because he also knew that "I'm sorry I hurt your feelings" left open the possibility — indeed, strongly suggested — that he regretted not what he did but my emotional reaction. It sometimes seems that he thinks the earth will open up and swallow him if he admits fault.

It may appear that insisting someone admit fault is like wanting him to humiliate himself. But I don't see it that way, since it's no big deal for me to say I made a mistake and apologize. The problem is that it becomes a big deal when he won't.

This turns out to be similar to the Japanese view. Following a fender bender, according to a Times article, the Japanese typically get out of their cars and bow, each claiming responsibility. In contrast, Americans are instructed by their insurance companies to avoid admitting fault. When an American living in Japan did just that — even though he knew he was to blame — the Japanese driver "was so incensed by the American's failure to show contrition that he took the highly unusual step of suing him."

The Japanese driver and I are not the only ones who are offended when someone obviously at fault doesn't just fess up and apologize. A woman who lives in the country told me of a similar reaction. One day she gave her husband something to mail when he went into town. She stressed that it was essential the letter be mailed that day, and he assured her it would. But the next day, when they left the house together, she found her unmailed letter in the car. He said, "Oh, I forgot to mail your letter." She was furious — not because he had forgotten, but because he didn't apologize. "If I had done that," she said, "I would have fallen all over myself saying how sorry I was. And if he had said he was sorry, I would have been upset about the letter, but I would have forgiven him. After all, anyone can forget something. But I couldn't stop being angry, because he didn't seem to care that much that he'd let me down. I know he felt bad about it, but he wouldn't say so. Is that just him," she asked, "or is it something about men?"

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I think it's something about men — not all men, of course. There are plenty of men who apologize easily and often, and plenty of women who — like Marge Schott — avoid it at all costs. But there are many women, seemingly more than men, who easily say they're sorry and can't understand why it's such a big deal for others. Indeed, many women say "I'm sorry" as a conversational ritual — an automatic tip of the verbal hat to acknowledge that something regrettable happened. And others sometimes take this too literally.

One woman, for example, was talking on the phone when she got an interrupting call that she had to take immediately. When she rang the first caller back, she began by acknowledging that she had inconvenienced him and possibly been rude. "This is Sharon," she said. "I'm sorry." He responded, "You're sorry you're Sharon?" He may well have intended this retort as a good-natured tease, but it irritated her because it implied there was something odd about what she had said, while she felt it was run-of-the-mill, even required. I suspect it struck him as odd because he would avoid saying "sorry" if he could. One C.E.O. found that he could avoid it entirely: his deputy told me that part of his job was to make the rounds after the boss had lost his temper and apologize for him.

It's as if there's a tenet that real men don't say they're sorry. Take the closing scene in "Crimson Tide." Gene Hackman plays an unyieldingly authoritarian Navy captain in charge of a submarine carrying nuclear warheads. When he gets an unconfirmed order to launch, he is determined to comply, but is thwarted by his lieutenant commander, played by Denzel Washington, who defies his commanding officer, sparks a mutiny and averts nuclear war. The order to launch turns out to have been an error. The final scene is one of those exhilarating, dramatic moments when justice is served. Standing at attention before a panel that has investigated the mutiny without hearing his side, the lieutenant commander expects to be court-martialed. Instead he is promoted — on the recommendation of his captain. As the film ends, the captain turns to his deputy and says, "You were right and I was wrong. . . ." The audience gasps: this icon of authoritarian rigidity is admitting error. Then he grins mischievously and finishes the sentence, ". . . about the horses — the Lipizzaners. They *are* from Spain, not Portugal." Never mind that they're really from Austria; the two men exchange a look of intense rapport, and the audience heaves a sigh of satisfying relief.

Not me. I felt frustrated. Why couldn't he just say it? "I made a mistake. You were right. I was wrong about starting that nuclear war."

And saying you're sorry isn't enough in itself. You have to seem sorry: your face should look dejected, your voice should sound apologetic. Describing how bad you feel is also a plus. Furthermore, the depth of remorse should be commensurate with the significance of the offense. An offhand "Sorry about that" might be fine for an insignificant error like dropping a piece of paper, but if you drop a glass of red wine on your host's brand new white couch, a fleeting "Sorry about that" will not suffice.

The same people who resist displaying contrition may be eager to see it in others. Nowhere is this more evident than in court. Judges and juries are widely believed to give milder sentences to defendants who seem contrite. Prisons used to be called "penitentiaries" because inmates were expected not only to serve their time but also to repent. Nowadays many offenders seem to regard prison sentences as contractual: I served my time, I paid my debt. No apologies.

Apologies seem to come most easily from those who know their error was not intentional. The Japanese Government, for example, quickly apologized for the obviously accidental downing of an American plane during joint military exercises. But they have been much more reluctant to apologize for offenses committed during World War II, like forcing Korean, Chinese and Filipina girls to serve as "comfort women" to Japanese soldiers.

Sometimes, though, people react negatively to an apology from a public figure. The First Lady discovered this last year when she met with a group of female columnists — off the record, she thought — and talked about how she had been portrayed in the press. "I regret very much that the efforts on health care were badly misunderstood, taken out of context and used politically against the Administration. I take responsibility for that, and I'm very sorry for that," she said.

The first part of this quote clearly indicates that the fault was not with her actions — "the efforts on health care" — but rather with the way they were received and distorted by others. But because she went on to say the big, bad "S" word, all hell broke loose. One newspaper article quoted a political scientist as saying, "To apologize for substantive things you've done raises the white flag. There's a school of thought in politics that you never say you're sorry. The best defense is a good offense." A Republican woman in the Florida state cabinet was quoted as saying: "I've seen women who overapologize, but I don't do that. I believe you negotiate through strength."

One manager discovered the power of apologies: subordinates not only forgave his errors but also became even more loyal.

And there's the rub — apologizing is seen as a sign of weakness. This explains why more men than women might resist apologizing, since most boys learn early on that their peers will take advantage of them if they appear weak. Girls, in contrast, tend to reward other girls who talk in ways that show they don't think they're better than their peers.

Hillary Clinton's experience also explains why those who resist saying "I apologize" may find it more palatable to say "I'm sorry," because I'm sorry is not necessarily an apology. It can be — and in the First Lady's statement it clearly was — an expression of regret. It means "I'm sorry that happened." Her experience shows how easily this expression of regret can be mistaken for an apology.

Given this ambiguity, shouldn't we all strike the phrase "I'm sorry" from our vocabularies? Not necessarily. I think we'd do better as a society if more people said "I'm sorry" rather than fewer. Instead of all the railing against Hillary Clinton for apologizing when she expressed regret, how come no one thought that either Newt Gingrich or his mother should apologize when the latter quoted her son as uttering an irrefutable insult against the First Lady? The problem seems to be not a surfeit of apologies but a dearth of them. One business manager told me he has discovered that apologies can be a powerful tool: subordinates so appreciate his admitting fault that they not only forgive his errors but also become ever more loyal employees.

History includes many examples of apologies that were not weak but highly potent. Following the calamitous Bay of Pigs invasion, John F. Kennedy demonstrated the power not only of "taking responsibility" but also of actually taking blame. For someone that high up to admit fault was shocking — and effective. People forgave the President, and his Administration, for the colossal error.

I think those brave enough to admit fault would find a similar power at home: it's amazing how an apology, if it seems sincere, can dissipate another's anger, calm the roiling waters. Erich Segal got it exactly wrong. Love doesn't mean never having to say you're sorry. Love means being able to say you're sorry — and, like J.F.K., being strong enough to admit you were at fault. ■