

Apology Part I: Is it Ever Possible to Apologize?

The misadventures of British Petroleum have raised a number of ethical issues, and demonstrate BP's appalling lack of interest in ethics despite the company's extensive documentation of its ethical aspirations.

The initial failure of BP to accept responsibility for its actions (it initially sought to blame others for what had happened) was followed by its chief executive's appearance before a Congressional Committee, where he was unprepared and evasive. Finally, he got around to publicly apologizing, and BP has stepped up and started paying claims that have been filed.

Some see no evidence of ethics in BP's slick public apology, arguing that it was nothing more than a ploy. Still, the idea of a company making a public apology in such a large matter raises the question of how and under what circumstances apologies are necessary in an ethical company.

No doubt, BP's apology was crafted by its lawyers and public relations experts. Indeed, it is generally believed by lawyers understandably fearful that an apology will be viewed as expensive admissions of guilt or responsibility.

Others believe that the only way to save a situation and permit it to proceed is a well conceived and sincere apology.

Not surprisingly, because of the spate of misdeeds of late, many suggestions have been made about how to apologize. Here are three:

1. An apology should be unambiguous, direct and to the point.
2. When an apology fails, two things are lost - the "victims" are not asked for forgiveness, nor are they given a chance to grant it. Being asked to forgive restores dignity to the person who has been injured in some way. Granting forgiveness is a step toward moving on. A botched apology not only taints the act of apology but the ability to accept an apology as well.
3. An apology that is well done and well thought out can lift anger and guilt and allow splintered bonds to mend. Conversely, when done badly, an apology risks worsening the situation between those who are involved.

While there are potential legal risks, it may be more risky and more expensive to refuse to apologize, when one is clearly in order. It may be unethical, as well.