

Mastering the Zoom Apology

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A CEO, executive director, bar president, section chair or another leader has to apologize or speak about something very important. The stakes are high – and in this COVID-19 era, the apology is going to have to be done using Zoom or another virtual platform.

Under any circumstance, delivering an effective apology can be a daunting experience. It involves conveying the right words, in the right tone of voice, with the right facial expression. It requires authenticity combined with the ability to convince the individual (or group) you're apologizing to that you really mean what you say -- and that you are really sorry.

If you're sincerely sorry, and you really feel sorrow, you may succumb to emotions that affect the message you're trying to convey – a quavering voice, maybe some welling up, perhaps some tripping over your words. If those feelings are true and 100% authentic, it's OK to express emotion.

But if you really don't believe you were at fault, it may be challenging to keep a tone of resentment out of your voice and a steely look out of your eyes. In these situations, your apology will likely fail to convince anyone of your remorse and the whole exercise will have been for naught.

With the onsite of COVID-19, the ability to deliver an effective apology has become even more challenging. Why? Because most of them are now being delivered via Zoom or a comparable video platform. Depending on the situation, the apologizer will be facing a small group, or potentially a throng of hundreds. The apology will be delivered to a camera lens instead of a live audience. Every flaw will be captured close-up. And your words will be captured for all eternity if the Zoom call is taped and uploaded to a website, to YouTube or any of the other platforms designed to share content throughout cyberspace. It makes the prospect of going on live television seem a far better alternative – and very few individuals are well-equipped to undertake that experience.

We recently saw a business executive deliver an apology via Zoom. It was clear the individual was apologizing under duress. The delivery was void of emotion. There was scant eye contact. Worse yet, the apologizer read from a prepared script. The term "hostage video" came to mind as we watched this individual struggle toward his concluding remarks. Technically, an apology was delivered. In actuality, it's doubtful anyone's opinion was altered by the words that were spoken. As part of a larger strategy to rehabilitate this individual's reputation or standing, the undertaking was a

failure.

Zoom apologies can be improved and can achieve the larger goal behind them – even those that are coerced. Here are some recommendations to improve performance and enhance results.

Start with the right words. This applies to all apologies, but especially those that will be memorialized online. If someone is writing your apology for you, make sure it reflects the way you speak and the phrases you use. Don't let someone else put words in your mouth that will be difficult for you to deliver. Especially to be avoided are words you don't believe.

Ask someone familiar with the situation to review what's been written. Do the words ring true? Can you deliver them with a straight face? Think back to the example a couple years ago when the CEO of United Airlines, Oscar Munoz, was forced to apologize for the police officers that dragged a paying passenger off one of its flights. "I apologize for having to re-accommodate that customer," said Munoz – two days later. What does that even mean? How satisfied do you think the affected passenger felt after receiving it? And what about the public, which now had just another reason to hold United Airlines in contempt?

Contrast the United Airlines situation with one that happened shortly after to an American Airlines passenger who was attempting to board a plane while holding two infants in her arms along with a stroller. An airline employee got into a shouting match with her and another passenger. Of course, the entire incident was caught on-camera with a mobile phone and uploaded to Facebook where it then went viral. Don't remember that story? That's because the president of United Airlines immediately issued an apology, an apology without equivocation. United Airlines' story lasted weeks; American Airlines' story lasted a day or two.

As you consider the content of your apology, beware of the false apology. "I'm sorry you feel that way," is not an apology. Apologizing - without qualification - for what your or your organization did or the problems you caused is an authentic apology. The former will only make your victims more resentful and more inclined toward revenge or retribution. The latter may actually help you make progress toward resolution of the problem your actions have caused. For a great short summary of the 12 kinds of fake apologies, read [this](#) article.

Get familiar with the medium. No doubt you are using Zoom, Microsoft Teams or some other platform almost every day to conduct business. Staging an apology on Zoom requires a higher level of preparation. Make sure you are seated at the right height so you are looking straight into the camera and making eye contact with your audience. You want to be close enough to the camera to appear engaged, but not so close that you look as though you're peering through a keyhole trying to intimidate your audience. Nor do you want to sit too far away, which gives the appearance that you are trying to distance yourself from your viewers – and perhaps subconsciously, from the issue at hand. Don't let your eyes roam off-camera as though you're looking for someone to rescue you. And, as anyone who has been media trained for a sit-down interview will also tell you, sit straight up and don't swivel in your chair.

Set the stage. Lighting is critical to a good Zoom appearance. Avoid overhead lights that can create shadows on your face. Never sit in front of a bright window or other light source that will cast your face in darkness and likewise cast doubt on your character. Strive instead for a soft source of light to illuminate you from the front. An inexpensive LED light can do the trick (for a few selections, click [here](#)).

Be very mindful of the background. What do the framed photos and art in the background say about you? If you're apologizing for mispending someone else's money, avoid pictures that show you in expensive vacation spots, enjoying the company of celebrities or otherwise telegraphing your bad financial management skills. Apologies should be delivered in neutral locations that will not generate envy, questions about your judgement or other distracting speculations about your personal life. Stick to pictures of the family, your pets, framed awards and other items that speak to your professionalism and values.

Lastly, make sure the door to the room you are Zooming in is closed and that those on the other side understand it is not to be opened until you do so. Spouses wandering in the background, small children climbing into your lap and a photobomb from the family pet will undercut the professionalism and solemnity you want for this critical communication.

Dress the part. What you wear for your Zoom apology should reflect the seriousness of the situation. Dress at least one step up from the look you typically put on for day-to-day business meetings. At the same time, avoid an outfit that will make you visibly uncomfortable and distract from the important message you are delivering. Try to be rested before you confront the camera and do take a good look in the mirror before the session starts to make sure you are presenting yourself in the best light possible. And if you choose to wear shorts or sweat pants, you must make 100% certain they won't be seen on the video, even inadvertently.

Say it, don't read it. Apologies that are read from a piece of paper in your hand compel you to lose eye contact with the camera and your audience. If you can't memorize your apology and deliver it without stumbling, consider attaching notes to your desktop screen (without blocking your camera) containing key phrases to prompt you through your delivery. Just be sure the type is large enough that you don't need to tilt your head or squint to read it.

Practice and practice some more. Ask someone you trust – ideally, someone who also understands Zoom – to hold a few sessions for the two of you so you can practice delivering your apology to a live audience. Ask your friend or colleague to give you a frank assessment. How do you look on camera? How is your delivery? Do you sound sincere, do you sound credible and, most important, do you sound sorry?

As we often tell clients, more often than not it's not what you say, but the way you say it. Matching the right words with the performance techniques detailed above is the one-two punch that will make your apology believable.

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