Repair After Hurt · About 4 minutes

Apologising for the Part That Hurt

A sincere apology can still miss the actual injury.

Soren is sorry the sewing machine came back late. Mae is looking at it and wondering whether it still works.

In this fictional example, Soren borrowed Mae's machine and dropped its foot control while moving it. When he returns it, he explains that a work call ran over. Mae has an alterations job due tomorrow and now has no usable machine. His explanation addresses the delay. Her immediate problem is the damage.

This is how a sincere apology can miss. You may regret something real while giving little attention to the part the other person is still dealing with. A carefully worded apology for “how I said it” can overlook the fact that private information was shared at all. Regret about arriving late can overlook a decision someone else had to make in your absence.

Soren could respond, “I focused on being late. I damaged the foot control, and you need the machine for tomorrow's job.” He does not have to deny the long call. He needs to stop using the explanation as though it addresses the whole event.

Research on ratings of written apologies has found acknowledgment of responsibility and offers of repair important among the components studied.[1] That gives us useful questions to consider, not a formula that earns forgiveness. What conduct are you acknowledging? What consequence still needs attention? Is the offer relevant to the person who was affected?

For Soren, a practical response might involve contacting an appropriate repair service and offering to cover the agreed cost. Temporary equipment might help, if something suitable is available. Mae may have a preferred service or an access requirement he does not know about. He needs enough consultation to avoid imposing another problem, without making her organize every detail of his response.

Taking initiative takes thought. Replacing her machine without asking, or arranging equipment she is expected to pay for, could repeat the experience of having decisions made for her. “I'll fix it” is only useful if the proposed repair fits what was harmed.

Mae might appreciate being understood and remain angry about the workday. She might accept help but decide against lending the machine again. Neither response means Soren must produce a larger confession or obtain a more reassuring verdict about himself.

There can also be genuine disagreement. If Mae attributes an intention Soren does not recognize, he can say so while remaining accountable for the damaged equipment. Accuracy matters in both directions. An apology should not require accepting a false account in order to end the conversation.

Soren can learn where that work is by hearing what Mae was actually worried about.

Once he hears what worried Mae, Soren can turn his attention to the machine and what it will take to put things right.

Companion reading · An Apology Is a Beginning, Not a Repair

Full pathway companion · included with paid learning
Pathway introduction: Repair After Hurt (public introduction; full modules require access).

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Sources and further reading

[1] Lewicki, R. J., Polin, B., & Lount, R. B., Jr. (2016). An exploration of the structure of effective apologies. Negotiation and Conflict Management Research, 9(2), 177–196. Source.

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