

# Apology

## A Tool for Conflict Resolution?

*Patrick Field*

*Lucy Moore*

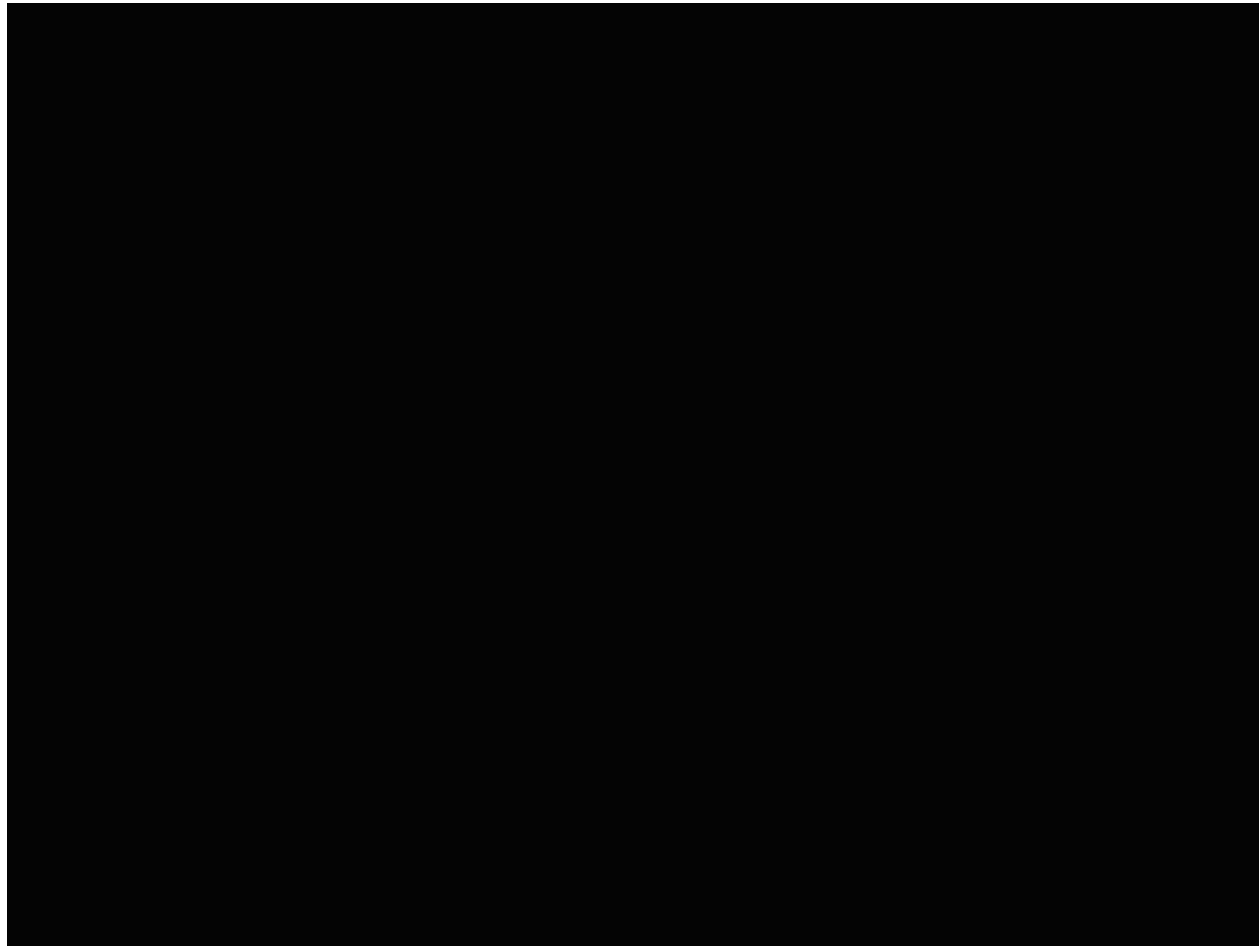
*Ray Daw*



Consensus Building Institute



# Public Apology?



# Key Points

- Define *what is* (and isn't) an apology?
- Consider *why* one should make a public apology.
- Illuminate the *elements* of a “good apology” by reviewing the good, bad, and ugly.
- Discuss the *difficulties* of apologizing well.
- Considering what you *need to know and do* as an individual and an organization

# Why Consider Apologies?

## GENERALLY

- Apology is an important part of dispute resolution and managing on-going relationships.
- Better understanding of the role of apology helps when encountering, desiring, or issuing one.
- Elements of an apology may be important tools even without a “full” apology.
- Public apologies might come from any organization or individual. This is not about what EPA needs to or not to do!

## SPECIFICALLY

- Toxics, their impacts, and their cleanup, all affect people, sometimes dramatically.
- Risk or harm, perceived or substantiated, is truly “felt.”
- Apology may serve as an important part of “clean-up.”



# What is an Apology?

- **An apology is:**
  - An interaction, not just words, between two or more parties
  - A trajectory of events, not a singular act
- **Key Elements include:**
  - Acknowledging a mistake or failure
  - Recognizing hurt, harm, or offense
  - Taking responsibility for act
  - Stating clearly remorse or regret
  - Acting through contrition, amends, mitigation, commitment, or restitution that follow
- **It is embedded in context, culture, and hierarchy**

# Something, but not an apology

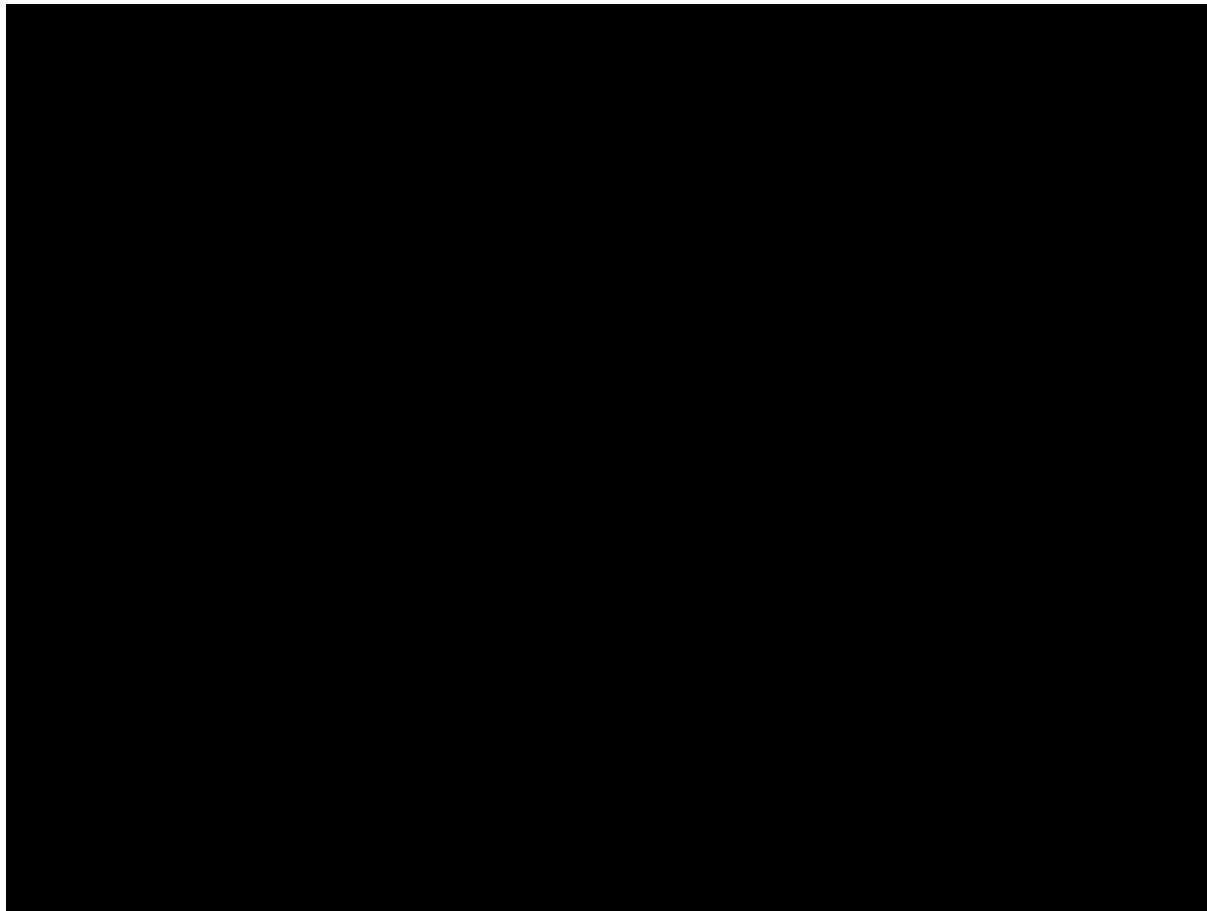
- Apologia
- Regret
- Excuse
- Acknowledgement
- Manners
- Condolence
- Empathy

# Purpose(s) of Public Apology

## **BOTH PERSONAL AND INSTITUTIONAL**

- Avoid future harm, hurt (or litigation)
- End or tamp down controversy
- Protect or defend job position
- Protect or defend organization/institution
- Appease guilt or social conscience
- Restore relationships
- Restore and/or affirm social order
- Maintain or restore power and influence
- Alter power and influence
- Commit to new order, action, or approach (fulcrum of change)

# FEMA Fake Press Conference Video



# FEMA “Press Conference”

- “FEMA’s goal is to get information out as soon as possible, and in trying to do so we made an error in judgment,” the agency says in a statement attributed to Johnson. “Our intent was to provide useful information and be responsive to the many questions we have received. We are reviewing our press procedures and will make the changes necessary to ensure that all of our communications are straight forward and transparent.”

*Vice Admiral Harvey Johnson*



# Check List for FEMA

- ☐ Mistake acknowledged ✓
- Hurt or harm affirmed
- Responsibility taken ✓
- Remorse or regret expressed
- Commitment to action ✓

# Face Masks, Air Quality, and China

- “Following our arrival on Tuesday, we offer our sincere apologies to [Games organizers] Bocog, the city of Beijing, and the people of China if our actions were in any way offensive. That was not our intent.”
- “The wearing of protective masks upon our arrival into Beijing was strictly a precautionary measure we as athletes chose to take, and was in no way meant to serve as an environmental or political statement. We deeply regret the nature of our choices. Our decision was not intended to insult Bocog or countless others who have put forth a tremendous amount of effort to improve the air quality in Beijing.”



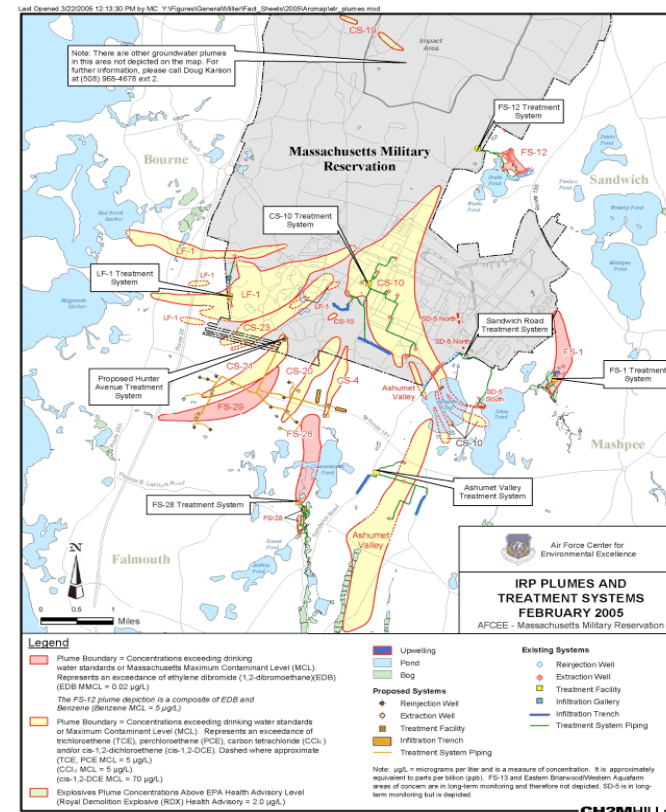
# Check List for the Bicyclists

Mistake acknowledged	?
Hurt or harm affirmed	✓
Responsibility Taken	✓
Remorse or regret expressed	✓
Commitment to action	?

# Air Force Undersecretary McCall

- “I am sorry we polluted your water. I am sorry we have not dealt with investigation and cleanup in the way we should have. I will take responsibility for ensuring that the Air Force makes your community whole again.”

*Air Force Undersecretary of Environment Tad McCall*



# Check-List

- ☐ Mistake acknowledged ✓
- Hurt or harm affirmed ✓
- Responsibility Taken ✓
- Remorse or regret expressed ✓
- Commitment to action ✓

# Question

**With so many smart people and many smart advisors, why is this SO hard?**

**OR**

**Why do examples of mediocre to terrible apologies abound?**

# Challenges to the Art of Apology

- Liability risk
- Organizational and personal
  - Who speaks?
  - To whom (internal and external audiences)?
- Psychological Defense and risk/reward
- Forgiveness and Cognitive barriers
- Cross-cultural communication and expectations
- Timing

# Check List for Legal Implications\*

<b>Mistake acknowledged</b>	<b>NO.</b> Highly likely to be admissible statement of guilt
<b>Hurt or harm affirmed</b>	<b>PERHAPS.</b> If done without acknowledgement of fault or cause.
<b>Responsibility taken</b>	<b>NO.</b> Highly likely to be admissible statement of guilt.
<b>Remorse or regret expressed</b>	<b>PERHAPS.</b> If done without acknowledgement of fault or cause.
<b>Commitment to action</b>	<b>YES.</b> Post-facto correction is not admission of negligence or guilt.

- **\*NOTE:** Settlement negotiations and mediation may protect more full admissions.



# Apologies and Organizations

- Apologies made on behalf of organizations require special care as to:
  - Who speaks
  - Timing
  - Coordination internally
  - Different, diverse, and diffuse audiences
  - Media (print, TV, web) reaction and attention
  - Internal and external audiences
  - Follow through (since they cannot be anything but staged, only way to test sincerity is through follow-through)

# Oblate Conference of Canada Apology for Aboriginal Residential School Abuse

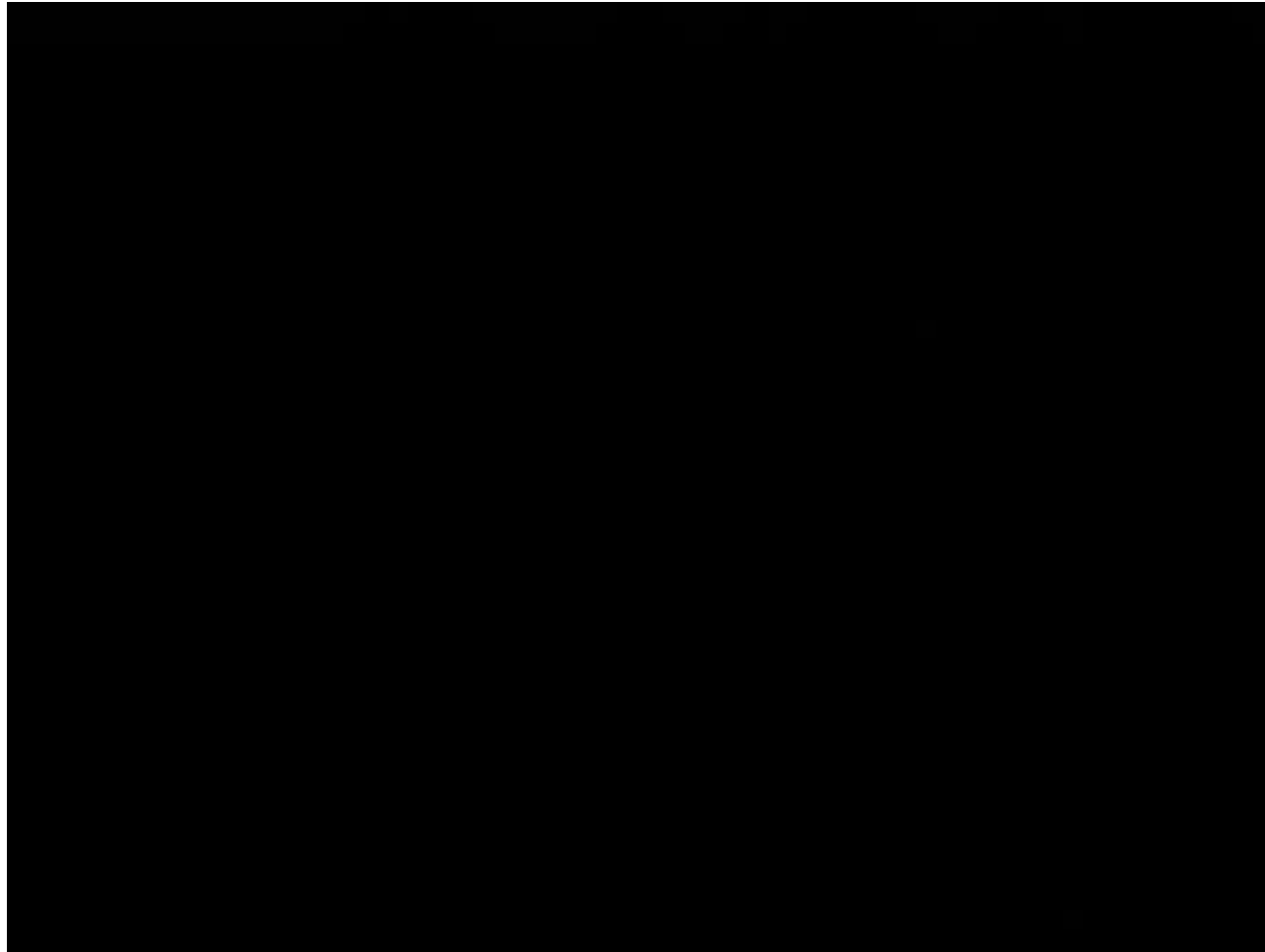
“ . . . These men and women sincerely believed that their vocations and actions were serving both God and the best interests of the native peoples to whom they were ministering. History has partially rendered a cruel judgment on their efforts, showing how, despite much sincerity and genuine dedication, their actions were sometimes naïve and disrespectful in that they violated the sacred and cherished traditions of others. Hence, even as we apologize for some of the effects of their actions, we want at the same time to affirm their sincerity, the goodness of their intent and the goodness in many cases of their actions.”

Before 20,000, 1991, Lad Ste. Anne, Alberta

# Psychological Defense

- **The Personal: Psychological defense**
  - Fear of being seen as weak
  - Fear of rejection
  - Avoidance of shame and guilt
- **Risk and Reward**
  - **What are the risks of making an apology?**
    - Being seen as weak organizationally, publicly, or via reputation
    - Being seen as having failed
    - Being seen as counter to one's image (i.e. Jack Welch apologizing?)
  - **What are the rewards?**
    - Not on the job performance list of criteria?
    - Chances of promotion or pay increase?
    - Chances of higher ups backing you up?
    - Chances of lower downs respecting you?
    - Chances it is part of the organizational culture already?

**I've got your forgiveness right here...**



# Why not Accept an Apology

- It wasn't one.
- Cognitive dissonance
  - Victimhood
- Reactive devaluation
- In and out group identify affiliation
- Unsatisfied revenge
- Protecting pain with anger
- The imbalanced scales of justice

# Receiving an Apology

**What the apologist may receive in return**

**Forgiving**

**Accepting**

**Understanding**

**Receiving**

**Listening**

**Ignoring**

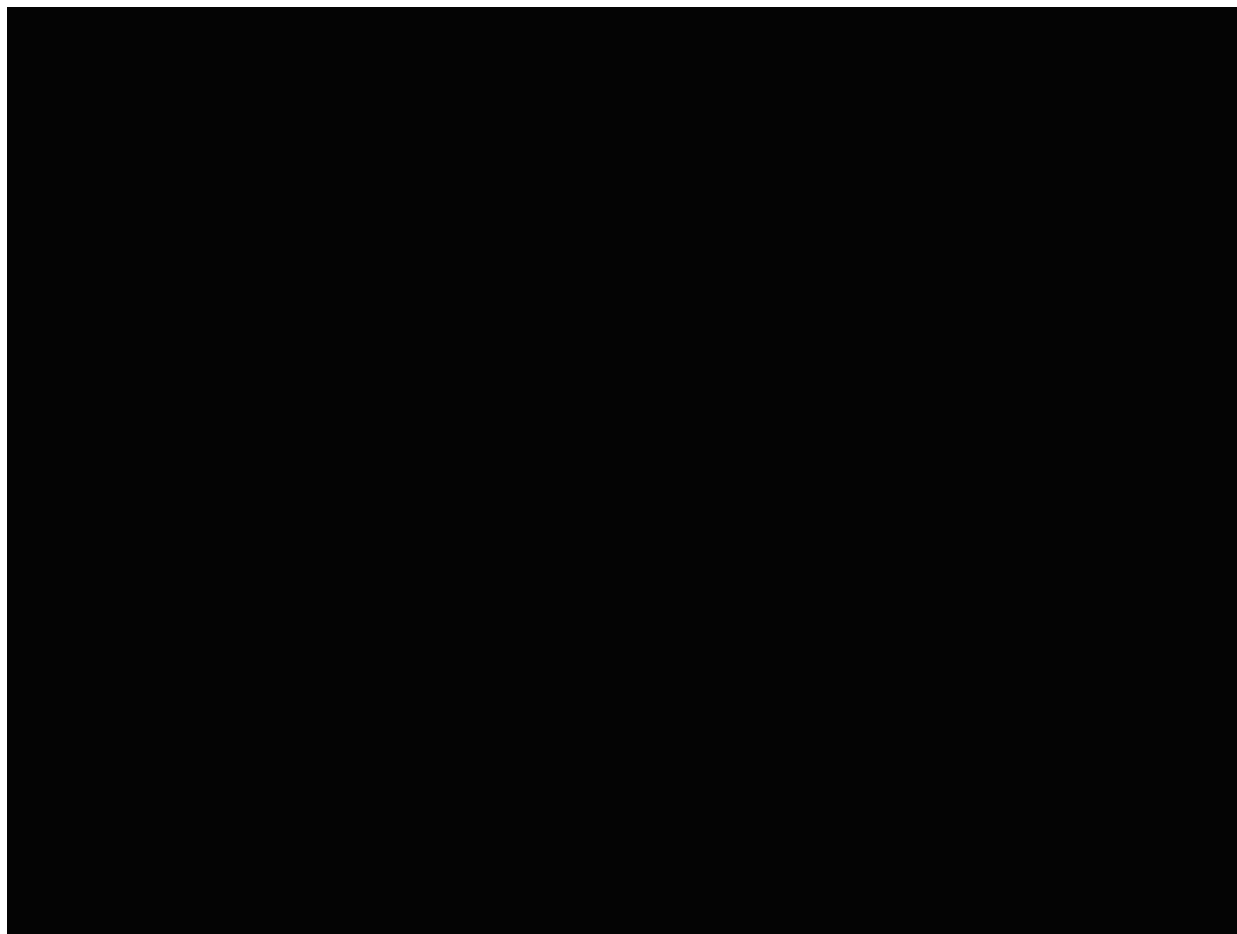
**Rejecting**



# Intent of an Apology

- Calculated (cost-benefit)
- Coerced (forced by others)
- Heartfelt (from within)
  
- Intent is partly “cultural”
  - Form versus content
  - Manners versus sincerity

# Mattel Apologizes...Twice



# Timing

- You can't apologize before the injury occurs!
- Concern, worry and action may need to proceed an apology
- An apology cannot be “taken back” or retracted w/o strong ramifications, so some understanding or acceptance of the mistake is needed first
- Too soon may preempt emotional expression of harm or hurt
- Listening and “receiving anger and hurt” may be essential before apologizing (giving the “the pound of flesh”)
- Too late seems “unseemly”
- Better late than never if . . . .

# Timing it All Wrong

- On his death bed, a man confesses to his wife about an affair he had with his wife's good friend. "I am so sorry," he says. "So sorry," he says again. Until then, the wife had no knowledge of the affair.
- He has unburdened his guilt. What has he done to his wife?



# And apology

I had the opportunity & the information & I failed to make use of it. I don't know what an inquest or a court of law would say, but I stand condemned in the court of my own conscience to be guilty of not preventing the Columbia disaster.

We could discuss the particulars: inattention, incompetence, distraction, lack of conviction, lack of understanding, a lack of backbone, laziness. The bottom line is that I failed to understand what I was being told; I failed to stand up and be counted. Therefore look no further; I am guilty of allowing Columbia to crash.

*N.Wayne Hale, Jr., NASA launch integration manager*

# Advanced Criteria for a “Good” Apology

- Acknowledge thing(s) done specifically
- Recognize hurt or harm directly
- Accept responsibility personally and actively
- State remorse or regret clearly
- Commit to and take specific action(s)
- Select the appropriate messenger
- Tailor to the cultural context(s)
- Use the appropriate form(s)
- Time appropriately
- Manage and address barriers

# Credit where Credit is Due

- Lazare, Aaron *On Apology*, Oxford University Press, 2004
- Kellerman, Barbara, “When should Leader Apologize and Not,” *Harvard Business Review*, April 2006
- Tavis, Carol & Aronson, Elliot, *Mistake were Made*, Harcourt Books, 2007.

# Anglican Apology

**My Brothers and Sisters:**

**"Together here with you I have listened as you have told your stories of the residential schools."**

**"I have heard the voices that have spoken of pain and hurt experienced in the schools, and of the scars which endure to this day."**

**"I have felt shame and humiliation as I have heard of suffering inflicted by my people, and as I think of the part our church played in that suffering."**

**"I am deeply conscious of the sacredness of the stories that you have told and I hold in the highest honour those who have told them."**

**"I have heard with admiration the stories of people and communities who have worked at healing, and I am aware of how much healing is needed."**

## **(continued)**

**"I also know that I am in need of healing, and my own people are in need of healing, and our church is in need of healing. Without that healing, we will continue the same attitudes that have done such damage in the past."**

**"I also know that healing takes a long time, both for people and for communities."**

**"I also know that it is God who heals, and that God can begin to heal when we open ourselves, our wounds, our failures and our shame to God. I want to take one step along that path here and now."**

**"I accept and I confess before God and you, our failures in the residential schools. We failed you. We failed ourselves. We failed God."**

**"I am sorry, more than I can say, that we were part of a system which took you and your children from home and family."**

**(continued)**

**"I am sorry, more than I can say, that we tried to remake you in our image, taking from you your language and the signs of your identity."**

**"I am sorry, more than I can say, that in our schools so many were abused physically, sexually, culturally and emotionally."**

**"On behalf of the Anglican Church of Canada, I present our apology." 7**

# Check List for Vignettes

☐ Mistake acknowledged

Hurt or harm affirmed

Responsibility taken

Remorse or regret expressed

Commitment to action