

PUBLIC APOLOGY:

A powerful tool in organizational change?

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Confessing when we have gone wrong is core to our Christian faith as individuals. But does this also hold true for organizational change? What is the role of public apology in OD? I believe we can apply apology in an innovative and creative way in our OD work with churches and Christian organizations. Public apology can enable greater openness and honesty in both individuals and organizations. It can release forgiveness and reconcile relationships in the organizations we are trying to help.

Experiencing Apology in Organizations

I remember a profound experience of this with Mzima, a Pan African, Christian development: organization. I was struck by the leaders' public apology - leading by example.

My experience of Mzima resonates with a number of examples from the OD and Churches newsletters last year. I read about how public apology transformed seemingly impossible situations. In 'Sorry' (December 2009 letter) the Director of a major Christian NGO stood up in a highly volatile, angry meeting with staff and simply said he was sorry. Sorry for the mistakes he and the leadership had made and the pain they had caused. This brought tears to people's eyes and proved the turning point in that organization's change. In the story of 'When the Bishops repented' (February 2009) we read about how, convicted by God, Bishops confessed to corruption and 'prostituting' themselves before the State President. This confession enabled healing within the organization. But it did not stop there. The Evangelical Fellowship then went out and publically apologized to the national Council of Churches for its behavior over the past few years in undermining their stance on human rights.

The Concept of Public Apology

According to *Thesaurus* dictionary, apology is defined as "admission of guilt, request for forgiveness, regret, confession or act of contrition". But it is also noted that apology can be construed to imply "defense, excuse, explanation and an assurance".

We need public apology when there are 'sins of omission or commission' by those in the public eye whether intended or unintended. They can take a variety of forms such as insensitive and derogatory statements, unacceptable behavior (including sexual promiscuity) and simply poor decision-making. The concept of public apology seems more prevalent in democratic and open societies as compared to dictatorial and closed

ones.

Following a Biblical Pattern

We see from numerous examples from the Bible that apology or confession follows a consistent pattern.

Step 1: Feeling in the right: Very often, before an apology is made; there is a feeling of being right and great. This is often coupled with an attitude that is demanding, feeling that no support is needed. During that time a number of people in leadership positions want their own undisturbed space with very little room to listen to others. There is the feeling that one has the knowledge and does not have to consult. Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son clearly illustrates this. Here the younger son exemplifies the attitude of being right.

Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them. Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living". (Luke 15: 11-13 NIV)

Step 2: Coming to one's senses and making the apology: This is a time to reflect deeply on the potential impact of the planned apology. There will sometimes be a feeling of guilt just before an apology is made. It is about a realization that at some stage in life, people who are in leadership positions have to come back to their senses. It is a feeling that an apology is not only necessary but urgent and has to be made whatever the cost. This is illustrated by the Prodigal Son in the passage below:

"When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.' So he got up and went to his father (Luke 15: 17-19 NIV)

Step 3: Deep reflection on the potential consequences: It is not always easy to predict the outcome of a public apology. Thinking about an apology prompts people to think about the behavior or actions that led up to it. Essentially, our emotions and pride become part of the mix resulting into a feeling of embarrassment, a sense of shame and discomfort. The net effect is that people then find it difficult to apologize.

Step 4: Reaping the reward: At this stage the person making the apology becomes the "winner" or the loser depending on the outcome. When the battle is won, it then becomes a time of "bringing the best robes, ring and sandals". Basically, people who are opposed to the apology could easily lose out if they are not tactful. In the passage below, the older brother loses out in the whole process in spite of his "correctness". This is as highlighted below

"But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate. "Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has

killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.' (Luke 15: 22-27)

Implications for OD Practice

Recognize the centrality of leadership:

In all the organizational examples cited, it was the leaders who led the way in apology. Leaders have to go first in the game of admitting error. They have to be role models. There is a power dimension to public apology. Otherwise it is unlikely to happen from below. Public apology must not be forced on others, particularly on those with less power. In the case of the Prodigal Son, who provided the leadership? And in what ways?

Practice humility:

The OD stories quoted and the Prodigal Son example show how important humility is. Only by humbling yourself can you really apologize, gain acceptance, and return 'home'. Again it is about practicing humility, not inflicting humiliation on others.

Make apologies more candid:

Public apologies have different levels of success depending on how they are executed. The more candid apologies are, the more they are likely to earn public forgiveness. It is not enough simply to express 'regret for any unforeseen hurt caused'. By examining examples where public figures succeed or fail to apologize and be forgiven, we may better understand the dynamics of apology.

The Place of Apology in OD

We know from the Bible and from our experience of OD that confessing and publically apologizing can redeem seemingly impossible situations. It can release forgiveness and reconcile relationships in the organizations we are trying to help. We may be able to deepen and develop our OD practice with churches if we paid greater attention to the power of apology. So do we need to create space for apology in our next OD intervention? How might we even actively encourage it?

Corporate Confession in OD

Mzima was suffering from considerable resentment and unrest. Internal conflict was rife. Tribalism was rearing its ugly head. The leadership team decided to spend considerable time together and in prayer. They asked each other, 'what have we done to offend you?' People began to open up about events that had happened in the past and on-going grievances and lack of respect between departments. It was very raw. People found it hard not to become defensive. But as the team members reflected on what was said, something startling happened. In a profound and emotional way, they began to confess to one another and ask forgiveness on behalf of themselves and their teams. Team leaders were reconciled with each other.

But they were left with the question - how were they to pass this repentance and reconciliation to the rest of the organisation? How do you structure a corporate

confession? At the subsequent annual staff meeting, all the leadership team took the stage together in front of the staff. They announced that what they were to do was a very serious process. They described the division in the office. They began to confess again to each other in public. Initially people laughed nervously. As the worship team played, what started looking like a joke became deeply serious. They asked "*On behalf of the team will you please forgive us?*" Tears flowed amongst leaders and staff. Taboos were addressed. The session concluded by staff and leadership forgiving each other.