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Using the “S” Word
March 2, 2017

In the 1980’s and early 1990’s, it was not difficult to pick out the worst U.S. air carrier. It was Continental Airlines. For 15 years, it had not made a profit, and had twice gone into bankruptcy. It was a tenth-place airline. Tenth out of ten in on-time performance, tenth out of ten in baggage handling, tenth out of ten in customer complaints.¹ If you had to book a flight, you avoided Continental.

That was true for Greg Brenneman. Brenneman was a partner specializing in corporate turnaround for Bain & Company’s Dallas office. Continental’s reputation had kept him off the airline, but since he was trying to woo them as a client he booked a flight from Dallas to Houston on Continental. The flight was fifty minutes late taking off even though the plane had come in plenty early to board passengers. The air conditioning was not turned on so passengers sweltered. The interior had seven different color schemes because when parts had to be replaced, they were taken from old planes from a previous era. And when the air conditioning was turned on, the condensation was so great that water built up right over where Brenneman sat and soaked his best suit. To put it mildly, it didn’t take Brenneman much detective work to understand why Continental was the worst airline in America.

Little did Brenneman know that just 15 months later, at the age of 33, he would be asked to be the President and COO of Continental Airlines. Not exactly an enviable position, given that Continental Airlines had had 10 presidents in the previous 10 years. Brenneman had his work cut out for him. His year or so of consulting had helped him identify many of the problems at Continental from non-profitable routes to incentives that actually encouraged pilots to turn off the air conditioning just as he had experienced. But although changes to shortcomings like this were certainly near the top of Brenneman’s day one to-do list, it was not his first move. No, his first move in completing one of the most impressive corporate turnarounds to date was to use the ‘S’ word—to say sorry. This is what he writes of that time.

You might think the first step in breaking the doom loop is to fix the product, but that’s actually the second step. The first step is

to beg forgiveness from all the customers you have wronged. Sure, you can skip this step, but you'll miss out on all the goodwill it fosters and the relationships it spawns...Begging for forgiveness can be unpleasant, that's for sure. But it's indispensable if you want to break the doom loop. Only after that can you move on to making money.²

What did Brenneman's apology strategy look like? It involved dividing up the angry letters that had been received from customers like you and me, from corporate customers, and from travel agents, and giving them to Continental's officers. Each had to personally call the letter writers, apologize, and explain the steps they were taking to fix the company. Often times, these phone calls would take 30 minutes or more as people poured out their frustrations. Brenneman himself took the largest accounts. Being the brunt of people's frustrations and enduring a good share of shouting for things done well before Brenneman's tenure was certainly not easy, but it was the place to start.

One of the parts of biblical history I really like to teach comes from the book of Ezra. I suppose I like to teach it because most people are not familiar with the story. It involves the Jews, what was left of them. For centuries, the Jewish people had fallen way short in following the ways of God, and finally God had had enough. He had the entire nation completely dismantled. Most of the people were killed, the rest were carried off into exile, and the cities and towns, even the sacred buildings of Jerusalem, were destroyed. God had warned the people that this would happen, if they did not turn back to him. But they did not listen and experienced the consequences.

They would experience those consequences for about 70 years, as servants to the Babylon and Medio-Persian empires. Then, by the hand of God, they were given permission to return to their land. And so they went, at least a good number did, and returned to the land of Israel. You might wonder what they did upon their return. How did they start over? I think the answer to that question is telling. They started by building the alter—the alter on which they would prepare sacrifices to the Lord. In other words, they started over again by using the 'S' word.

Over and over again through the years, I have found that using the 'S' word is essential to the rebuilding process. It does not matter if that

rebuilding process is with your family, or with a client, or with a friend. If it involves people and a trust has been broken, saying sorry is the place to start.

I think you can recognize that what I am saying is more than just a platitude. It is what you yourselves have experienced. Think of friends who in some way have wronged you. They said something stupid or did something hurtful. Then the next time they see you they act as though nothing happened. Perhaps out of guilt they even treat you nicer than they did before. Of course, it is good that they are treating you better than before, but something remains amiss. Without an apology, it's just hard to get the relationship back on track. If you are the one who fails to make the apology, you may think two words—I'm sorry—shouldn't make that big a difference. But they do. You know that and I know that.

Now, of course, not all apologies are created equal. That is something that I am sure you can attest to as well. But perhaps you've never thought through what makes a good apology. So let me suggest a few ideas.

First, and this is perhaps the most obvious an apology must be sincere. If people sense you are just saying sorry because you were told to, or because you want to manipulate them, it will only create a bigger trust divide. I can remember when I was a kid. My friends and I were playing baseball in our front yard. We hit a ball into the street just as a woman was walking her dog in front of our home. It scared the heck out of her and her dog, and she was mad. So what did I do? I said, "I'm sorry" with about as little sincerity as possible. As you might imagine, it didn't do an ounce of good. I got the words out, but there was a massive gap between them and any real contrition. This gap is why researchers on topics like this tell us that it is possible to say sorry too early, before we can say it sincerely.

Secondly, a good apology takes personal responsibility and avoids rationalization. People don't want to hear that a company let them down or a school let them down; they want to hear that *you* let them down. They know that institutions are made up of people and they want a person to say sorry. They also don't want to hear excuses or blame shifting. Saying, "I'm sorry, but I was just trying to..." or "I'm sorry, but the situation was out of my control," just doesn't work. That why the

famous “I am sorry *your* feelings were hurt,” doesn’t work. It just shifts the blame, as if the other person shouldn’t have been hurt. So if you are going to say sorry, own up to it what you are saying sorry for.

Third, and this goes with the previous point, if you are going to say sorry, be all in. Don’t do it partially. Identify where you went wrong and apologize specifically and completely for your actions and its consequences. Jennifer K. Robbennolt, a professor at the University of Illinois, surveyed 145 professionals to see how they would respond to a hypothetical accident in which a pedestrian was hit by a bicyclist. When those surveyed were presented with a full apology (“The accident was all my fault. I was going too fast and not watching where I was going.”) the “offended” were willing to accept a settlement offer 73% of the time. This is in stark contrast to those who received only a partial apology (“I am so sorry that you were hurt. I hope you feel better soon.”). In those cases, only 35% of people were willing to settle. What is particularly interesting about this research is that when people received no apology at all they were willing to accept a settlement 52% of the time. In other words, no apology was actually better than a partial apology. Listen to that again, no apology is better than a partial apology. So if you are going to do it, be all in.³

Fourth, a good apology often calls for assurances that changes are going to be made in the future that decrease the likelihood of the same mistake. When Greg Brenneman and the other officers at Continental started making their phone calls, they said sorry, but right on its heels they told their customers the changes that they were already making. This was similar to Marissa Mayer’s approach when a disruption in email service occurred for roughly 1 million Yahoo users in 2013. She immediately issued an apology, but a few days later after the problem for the breakdown was identified, she wrote a longer more formal letter that once again said sorry, but also explained to users what the problem was and what Yahoo was doing to fix the problem.⁴ Mayer’s approach was a good one, because an apology is much easier to accept when the one who receives it is convinced you see the problem and are doing something about it.

Now, let’s take a look at these four suggestions regarding the ‘S’ word. They are: be sincere, take personal responsibility, be all in, and give clear intention of your efforts to do better in the future. I think you

would agree with me that none of these suggestions are particularly novel. Now, of course, when you blow it you could pull out a list like this, and make sure that you have all your bases covered. And that's all well and good. I have probably done the same myself from time to time. But it seems to me that the best uses of the 'S' word, don't actually happen when we attend to a checklist. They happen when we are humble enough to admit a mistake and are empathetic enough to know that others have been hurt by what we've done.

One last note. And this might be the most important in the long run. Just about everything I've mentioned here applies to your relationship with God as well. God's not disappointed if you try to live a 'good' life, but honestly he knows that your best efforts are going to fall short. So what he's looking for more than anything is for us to come to him and say sorry. And when we do so, He wants us to be sincere, taking full responsibility, be all in, and have a true desire to chart a new course. And what's best is that when we come to him in this way, he is more than willing to embrace us. I like this verse from Acts, and I'll end today with it: "Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord."⁵

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¹Greg Brenneman, *Right Away & All at Once*, 5. The rest of the details from the opening story also come from this source.

²*Ibid*, 342, 344.

³Alison Stein Wellner, "[Making Amends](#)," *Inc. Magazine*, June 1, 2006.

⁴Marissa Mayer, "[An Update on Yahoo](#)," Yahoo, Dec 13, 2013.

⁵Act 3:19