

Discipline #8 – Apology and Forgiveness

What to Do [Injunction]:

Event: Identify an event or a series of events which have done harm to you or to another in a relationship you want to repair. (If you have been harmed by the choice of another then the relationship you are repairing is primarily the one you have with yourself.)

Choices: Clarify as precisely as you can the choice or choices you or another made which was the cause of the harm. There may be several choices and those may have been made by you or the other or both.

Consequences: Taking each choice in turn discover all you can about how that choice affected you and the other and your relationship to the other. Take this as deep as you can.

Clean up: Identify what you can do to repair the damage that has been done by the choices even if you were not the one who made the choice.

Patterns: Identify what patterns of choosing supported making the damaging choice in the first place and what patterns have been created by the effects of the choices and identify what you can do to dismantle those patterns.

Why do it [Rationale]:

Sometimes we find ourselves being harmed in our relationships with others or we discover that we have done things which are harmful to them. While we sometimes will just choose to have nothing to do with those who harm us, or they may decide not to have anything to do with us, there are many relationships which are too valuable to lose. So we want to repair relationships in which the damage has occurred. What we normally do is to act as though the damage hasn't happened. If we acknowledge the damage at all, it is to say, in effect, let's act as though this didn't happen. This is what often passes for an apology or forgiveness. But in order to actually repair the relationship, we will have to address the harm which was done. We will have to clean up the mess and that includes doing everything we can to be sure we don't make a similar mess in the future.

The reason to apologize and forgive is thus twofold. First, it is to seek to repair a damaged relationship or to repair our relationship to ourselves when we have been damaged by someone close to us; and second, to discover what was going on that allowed for the harm in the first place and to make the changes that will protect against such harm in the future.

What it will get you [Promises]:

The first thing you will get is a repaired relationship. Sometimes people respond to this promise by asking, "But what if the other doesn't accept my apology?" I have never known anyone to

reject a genuine apology. We all long to have our experience validated and no one can do that more effectively than someone who has harmed us. What people reject are efforts at reconciliation which don't acknowledge the damage and are not genuinely motivated by a wish for full accountability. If your apology is experienced by the other as an attempt by you to get them to absolve you of accountability for your actions, then, yes, it will be rejected.

Remember that the reason to apologize is not to get the other to forgive you. That is trying to change them and they will resist your manipulation. The reason to apologize is to change yourself in the wake of choices you regret. The reason to apologize is to minimize the chances that you will again make this regrettable choice.

The promise then is that you will not only heal the relationship, you will also heal yourself and you support your own transformation into someone who doesn't do the things that harm others or your relationships to them.

Suggestions:

Carefully plan your apology. If you make lots of apologies for the same transgression people come to think that you are not sincere. Also, apologizing is often hard and painful. It is not the sort of thing we want to have to do over and over. So plan it out and do it with care.

Make sure you are offering your apology at a time and in a place that the other is fully available to hear it. In the song by Paul Simon, *Slip Slidin' Away*, the father goes to his son to apologize but instead kisses him while he is sleeping and then leaves. This is important. Do it well.

You will have lots of chances to practice apologizing if you are careful to notice whenever you do things that harm others. Being able to apologize well is a very valuable skill, so don't pass up any chances to practice. Whenever you want to talk seriously to someone about a circumstance or quality in a relationship, an excellent way to set the tone is to apologize for something. This has to be genuine. You can't apologize for something you haven't done or don't regret. But if you can find something about which you can apologize with integrity then you will have much better luck connecting with the other.

Finally, remember that the reason to apologize, as in all things, is to change yourself. The success of the apology is gauged by how well you offered it and how fully it transforms you, not whether the other does what you want with it.

Similarly, the reason to forgive is not to let the offender off the hook or to in any way get the person who harmed you to change. The reason to forgive is to transform ourselves in the wake of choices which have harmed us.

© Center for Creative Conflict Resolution – 2009

www.CreativeConflictResolution.org