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TALKING POINTS

The good, bad and the ugly of apologies

By Andrea Obston

What do Rush Limbaugh, Fed Ex and Penn State have to teach us? That a good apology is worth its weight in gold and a bad apology can fall on you like a bag of manure.

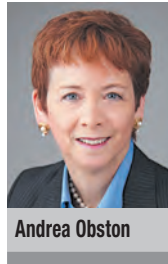
The incidents that caused these three institutions to apologize are as different as possible, yet they lead us to the same conclusions. After a crisis, an authentic apology can be the beginning of the end of a bad incident. An authentic apology includes: honestly acknowledging the mistake; demonstrate real regret, show you are taking honest responsibility for the offense and explain what you've learned that will keep it from happening again.

Let's take a look at these three incidents and see how they stack up. Think of them as illustrating "The Bad, the Good and the Ugly" in the world of apologies (with my honest apology to Clint Eastwood).

The most contemporary and dramatic of these incidents is, of course, the recent fury stirred up by Rush Limbaugh's remarks characterizing Georgetown Law Student, Sandra Fluke as a "slut" and a prostitute.

The catalyst for this personal assault was her testimony at an unofficial Congressional hearing in support of free mandated contraceptives. The comments have been well documented, as has Rush's so-called "apology" in which he said "... I chose the wrong words in my analogy of the situation. I did not mean a personal attack on Ms. Fluke ... My choice of words was not the best, and in the attempt to be humorous, I created a national stir. I sincerely apologize to Ms. Fluke for the insulting word choices."

In my book, this is a case study in delivering a "bad" apology. He does not acknowledge or accept fault. Nor do his words demonstrate neither true contrition nor an



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ability to learn from the mistake. As the Daily Beast's Howard Shultz put it, "... while Rush dutifully recited the words, there was no music ... He flunked the contrition test, retracting only his word choice ... He never called Sandra Fluke ... He kept slamming her for three days before issuing his statement of regret — which came as advertisers were starting to bail on his radio program, giving the exercise an air of damage control."

In short, his so-called apology was not.

If you want an example of an apology that sets the stage for forgiveness and opens the door for a recovery from a crisis, consider FedEx. Around the holiday season, one of the hottest You Tubes was the security-camera shots of a Fed Ex delivery man blatantly tossing a box containing a computer monitor over a high security wall.

The video went viral with 2.6 million views. Less than 48 hours after the video was posted, FedEx went into recovery mode with their own YouTube. In it, Matthew Thornton, Fed Ex's senior vice president for FedEx Express U.S. operations acknowledged the shocking nature of the video and flatly explained that this behavior was, "Absolutely. Positively Unacceptable."

He explains how FedEx had already taken the person approach by delivering a replacement monitor to the customer at no cost accompanied by an apology. And here's the most striking part: he went so far as to say that the video would now be used as part of the FedEx training programs for employees. In short, he had it all — acknowledgment, correction and even a large shot of learning. These factors gave the apology authenticity, contrition and helped FedEx make lemonade out of lemons. And yes, that's the "Good" in our Bad-Good-Ugly trilogy.

So now, here's the ugly: Penn State's travails courtesy of Jerry Sandusky dominated traditional and social media in early November.

This was a toxic situation that created turmoil and heartache in Happy Valley and resulted in the loss of a beloved coach as

well as Penn State's president.

So, you'd think a few lessons about personal responsibility and changes to the system might be in order. You'd be wrong.

In fact, Penn State's administration remained tone deaf to the situation right through January when their new president held a series of town hall meetings with alumni. These meetings were ostensibly to repair the damage with this valued group of contributors.

"It makes me mad when people call this a Penn State scandal. This is a Jerry Sandusky scandal," Newly christened Penn State President Rodney Erickson told a group of alumni. How amazing is it that the very "see no evil; hear no evil" approach to the Jerry Sandusky's situation is now being used to sweep it under the rug?

Most of these meetings focused on how the late Joe Paterno was fired. How, not WHY. If I understand this correctly, many of the folks in those meetings seemed to be overlooking the two parts of the scandal. Part I was, of course, Sandusky's ongoing acts of child sexual abuse. Part II (and the one makes Part I into a Penn State issue) was the institution's ongoing ability of everyone around Sandusky, including Paterno, to turn a blind-eye to these acts. If that doesn't make the case for a true apology, I'm not sure what would.

What these cases teach all of us in business is that a true, personal and authentic apology should be the first step in recovering from a crisis. True apologies acknowledge the mistake and assure the target audiences that an organization has learned enough to make sure it doesn't happen again.

Everyone messes up; every business missteps. Most people are willing to "forgive and forget" provided you "man-up" or "woman-up" to what you've done. Now THAT'S the stuff of a good apology. ■

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