Sorry is not Enough: Apology as a crisis management tactic

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Abstract: Public admissions of personal or professional misdeeds, followed by apologies by high profile individuals and organizations are strategies and tactics of image restoration when a reputation is damaged. Although the ritual of an apology is an expected societal norm sometimes, they can make matters worse. Apology is effective depending on the offense, the place, time, language, tone of apology and if the recipient of the apology is willing to accept it. Another important element is the cultural factor. Apology that does not adhere to perceived cultural norms may not be received positively; thereby worsening the crisis situation. In 2018 and 2019, three incidents, the arrest of two young black men in a Philadelphia Starbucks, the off-duty police killing of Dallas resident Botham Jean and the police killing of Atatiana Jefferson of Fort Worth, captured national and international attention and had all the elements of the use of apology rhetoric. This essay examines, based on media reports, why the rhetoric of apology was acceptable in one case, somewhat acceptable in another and not at all acceptable in the other.

Keywords — apologies, apology as a ritual, apology as a societal norm

INTRODUCTION

Public apologies abound—from one of the most notorious, former president Bill Clinton’s confession and apology for an extramarital affair with White House intern, Monica Lewinsky, to a myriad of other politicians, religious leaders and celebrities caught up in sex, financial or other kinds of scandals. Thus, as Gibney et al [1] concluded, we live in an “age of apology.” Mill [2], affirmed that we operate in a “culture of apology.” It is no surprise then that organizations and public officials assume that an apology, sincere or not, would rectify whatever harm they may cause a public, regardless of what the harm may be. Anticipating this, most organizations have developed standard rhetorical responses for any given crisis that may occur as a result of their actions toward a particular group. These responses, part of an organization’s crisis communication plan, include strategies and tactics that are deployed across multiple media platforms, including social media. Often, crisis managers advise organizations or individuals at the onset of a crisis to quickly apologize in a way that sounds authentic and sincere and to tell what actions are being taken or would be taken to rectify the crisis. In essence, organizations are told to “foul up, fess up and fix it.” (Take responsibility, express remorse and make amends).

In this essay, I use media reports to present three case studies that examine the elements of official apologies and consider which were accepted by the recipients, compared with those that were partially or not accepted at all. The first two cases involved white police officers in Dallas and Fort Worth, Texas, and the victims were young African Americans who were killed in their own homes. Both cases drew international media attention and protests from mostly African American communities whose relationship with police is fraught with mistrust that is centuries old. Law enforcement and African-Americans have never had a good relationship in the South where police were part of the structure that helped to reinforce Jim Crow. The third exemplifies the sometimes-uneasy relationship between corporate America and the African American community.

APOLOGY

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines apology as an admission of error followed by an expression of regret and remorse and a plea for forgiveness. It is a communication behavior whose goal is to explain the offense and seek ways to

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rectify the situation. Often used in crisis communication, an effective apology has these characteristics: expression of regret, explanation of what went wrong, acknowledgment of responsibility, declaration of repentance, offer of repair, request for forgiveness [3]. While this study focused on written apology, a spoken apology may elicit a different (and potentially more positive) response because of observation of demeanor, the context in which the apology is given, its timing, and the tone of voice and accompanying gestures as well as the relationship between the person apologizing and the recipient of the apology [4].

However, while apologies are increasingly common and best practices about apologies abound [5], others question their effectiveness [6] for a number of reasons, including the trust factor and prior relationship between the offender and the recipient(s) of the apology.

Apologia, Latin for apology or "speaking in defense," is defined as a formal defense of an opinion, position or action [7], [8]. While apology admits error, expresses regrets and remorse for wrongdoing, without presenting a defense [9] apology may express concern, but present a forceful defense.

Ware and Linkugel's [10] seminal work on apologia theory identify four major strategies—denial, bolstering, differentiation, and transcendence. Denial strategy is simple denial of whatever misconduct one may have been accused; bolstering, attempting to enhance the image of the individual under attack by finding common grounds with the audience; differentiation, distinguishing the misconduct from other serious or harmful actions; transcendence, putting the misconduct in a different and broader context.

Benoit's [11] image repair theory extends the apologia theory. Based on the concept that when one’s reputation is besmirched, the desire to defend oneself and restore reputation is imperative. He proposed five image repair strategies with subcategories: denial: whereby the accused denies the act of which he or she has been accused or shift blame to someone else; when that is not effective, the accused may attempt to evade responsibility. This strategy is based on the use of provocation; a claim that the act was provoked; defeasibility; a lack of knowledge or control about the situation, accident; and good intentions.

Another strategy is reducing offensiveness: whereby the accused attempts to reduce the level of negative feeling experienced by the audience., through bolstering, minimizing the act, differentiating the act from more offensive ones; transcendence, putting the act in a broader and less offensive context. The accused may also attack the accuser to cast doubt on his or her credibility; and could also compensate; whereby the accused make amends to counterbalance the negative feelings. Benoit also lists corrective action as the strategy used by the accused to correct the offensive act to its original state or prevent a recurrence. Mortification is the last strategy when the accused accepts responsibility and asks for forgiveness. While corrective action and mortification often involves apology, Coombs [12] notes the limitation of their use in crisis communication, based on his Situational Crisis Communication Theory [13]. Coombs argues that crisis managers should match strategic crisis responses to the level of crisis responsibility and threats posed to the reputation of the organization. The assessment of the crisis type, history and relationship that the organization has with its target audience would enable crisis manager to ascertain how they would respond to the crisis. Thus, the use of mortification and corrective action, which includes an apology as a crisis communication tactic, is dependent on those factors. Studies have shown that apology does not assure forgiveness nor is it necessary for exoneration [14], [15]. However, the apology must be accepted by those to whom it is being issued.

TRUST AND APOLOGY

Repairing trust with groups is considered more difficult than with individuals [16]. Apologies alone are not enough to regain trust; however, they are a start. For an apology to be effective, it must be sincere, authentic, fair and open, and be able to heal and improve the fissures. Lazare [17], [18] notes that the proper steps—from acknowledgment, remorse and making clear the offense would not be committed again—must be met. Additionally, the victim has to believe that the offender’s apology is genuine. Prior trust relationship between the victim and the offender as well as perception of the leader, also influence whether the apology is accepted as genuine [19]. While public apologies, whether from governments or organization leaders are uncommon, and some don’t include compensation, studies show that they are helpful in repairing and restoring relationships. Examples include the US government apology to the Japanese internees and their families [20], [21].

Culturally, it’s important to recognize that there is a centuries old breach between Black Americans and law enforcement that has fostered mistrust and defensiveness on both sides. Furthermore, stereotyping and systemic racism has long colored the relationship between African Americans and the larger American society. As a result, confrontations involving Black Americans and the police, or discriminatory behavior toward Black Americans can spark volatile flash points that need to be defused.

THE CASES: DALLAS & FORT WORTH

On October 12, 2019, Fort Worth Police Officer Aaron Dean and his partner responded to a welfare call on the police nonemergency number by a Fort Worth resident who reported that his neighbor’s door was open about 2:30 a.m. On arrival, Officer Dean walked towards the rear of the home and saw 28-year old Atatiana Jefferson inside playing video
Almost a year prior, on September 6, 2018, a white Dallas police officer, Amber Guyger, entered an apartment she believed was hers, and encountered the resident, 26-year old black man, Botham Jean, an accountant at Price WaterHouse Cooper, who was watching television and eating ice cream. Without warning, she shot and killed him, in what she later claimed was mistaken identity. Guyger was not arrested for a full 72 hours. On September 9, she was arrested and charged with manslaughter. After a few hours in custody, she was released on a $300,000 bond, and put on administrative leave. Dallas Police were roundly criticized for waiting 48 hours before releasing Guyger's name. While Dallas Police Chief Renee Hall did not formally apologize, she took corrective action. She announced on September 24 that following an internal affairs investigation, she had fired Guyger. On November 30, 2018, a Dallas County grand jury indicted Guyger on one count of murder. On September 27, at her trial, Amber Guyger repeatedly apologized for killing Botham Jean. She said: "I’m so sorry… I hate that I have to live with this every single day of my life and I ask God for forgiveness, and I hate myself every single day… I never wanted to take an innocent person’s life. And I’m so sorry. This is not about hate. It’s about being scared that night." [22]. On October 1, 2019, a Dallas County jury found Guyger guilty of murder. She was sentenced to 10 years in prison, after an unusual sentencing procedure. At the sentencing hearing, she received a hug and offer of forgiveness from the brother of her victim, and a hug from the presiding judge who offered her a bible [23].

**THE APOLOGY: DALLAS**

In his condolence shortly after Botham Jean’s killing, Dallas Mayor Mike Rawlings described Botham Jean as a potential leader of the city. "Botham Jean was exactly the sort of citizen we want to have in the city of Dallas," Rawlings said during a press conference. "And for that reason this is a terrible thing that has happened. Not only has he lost his life, but we've lost a potential leader for this city for decades to come" [24].

Mayor Rawlings went on to say that he had met with Jean’s mother and sister and also spoken with the prime minister of Saint Lucia (the home country of Botham Jean) and apologized. “I offered my apologizes on the behalf of the City of Dallas.”[24]

Conversely, the action of Dallas Police, as revealed in an unsealed affidavit, reaffirm the fraught relationship between the Black community and police. The Dallas police affidavit stated that officers found 10.4 grams of marijuana in Jean’s apartment after the shooting. Jean’s family’s attorney, Lee Merritt, said the affidavit showed a pattern of police intent to discredit Jean by specifically looking for drug paraphernalia [25].

Botham Jean was mourned in his home country of St. Lucia as reported in the St. Lucia Star. News reports and an editorial in the paper indicated that no apology or gesture of goodwill by the Dallas mayor or police chief would change their minds about what they perceived as extra-judicial killing of blacks [26].

Although Mayor Rawlings apologized on behalf of the city of Dallas, met with Jean’s parents and spoke to St. Lucia’s prime minister, given news reports, it was clear that what Jean’s parents wanted was more than an apology. They wanted justice for their son. That was also what St. Lucians at home and in the diaspora as well as the crowds that gathered in Dallas and elsewhere as a result of this killing wanted. The St. Lucia Star reported rally organizer, Nicole David, as saying:

“[I am not just here as a proud Saint Lucian, I’m here as a mother. My son is actually the same age group as Botham. So, when this tragedy hit home, it hit really, really hard. Angry, outraged, heartbroken, baffled are just a few emotions we all feel… We must not let Botham’s death go in vain; we must fight for justice . . . we want transparency and we will not rest until there is Justice for Botham!" [26].

Alison Jean, Botham Jean’s mother, said at a rally in Dallas after the conviction of Amber Guyger:

“[There’s much more that needs to be done by the city of Dallas…The corruption that we saw during this process must stop.]" [26].

It was obvious that the Jean family and their supporters did not believe the Dallas Police Department acted in good faith after the officer killing of their son and the highlighting of the small amount of marijuana found in Jean’s apartment which they considered a deliberate smear. The apology could only bring satisfaction if followed by action. The action was the prosecution, conviction and sentencing of Amber Guyger to 10 years in jail.

While the Dallas mayor offered an apology, the Dallas Police Chief, Renee Hall, who is African American, did not. A Texas Tribune article aptly captured Chief Hall’s comments which reflected the sentiments of Dallas’ Black citizens who have a great distrust of the police. Chief Hall said: "I can only imagine the community's perception of who we are as a Dallas police department and, if we're truly honest with one another, what law enforcement is
across this country” [23]. The paper also quoted Changa Higgins, head of the Dallas Community Police Oversight Coalition, who said: “The energy in Dallas is more volatile now than when the case started, because you gave people a bit of hope, then you took it away” [23].

An apology from Chief Hall would not have made a difference as the paper noted that “many Dallas residents’ distrust of authority stems largely from their public leaders’ flagrant racism in the 20th century and the systemic biases remaining within the criminal justice system decades later” [27].

The apology from Amber Guyger may have played a role in her sentencing, according to the unnamed jurors. Some of the jurors said after the sentencing: "She showed remorse and that she's going to have to deal with that for the rest of her life." They also mentioned that they wanted their decision to reflect the kind of “caring and forgiving” person Botham Jean was: "I don't think Bo would want to take harsh vengeance," said the male juror. "I think he would want to forgive her" [28].

The apology and the Christian belief in forgiveness may also have played a part in the unexpected hug and offer of forgiveness by Botham Jean’s brother, an action that shocked and surprised everyone in the courtroom.

THE APOLOGY: FORT WORTH

Meanwhile, in Fort Worth, the initial press statement by Fort Worth Police Department (FWPD) about the killing of Atatiana Jefferson, was erroneous and reinforced the distrust of police in the black community. The statement read in part, “Officers entered the residence (of Atatiana Jefferson) locating the individual and a firearm and began providing emergency medical care” [29], [30]. This statement would appear to some that the police were looking to minimize the blame and find an excuse to justify the former officer’s action.

Three days after Jefferson’s, killing, FWPD Interim Police Chief Ed Kraus appeared in a news conference and took responsibility on behalf of the department and apologized:

“This incident has eroded the trust that we have built with our community and we must now work even harder to ensure that trust is restored.” He added that there is “absolutely no excuse” for the incident and that the police officer would be held accountable for his action. He urged the Fort Worth community not to judge the entire police department by this one incident. He said “The officers are hurting…and they try hard every day to try to make this city better” [31].

In essence, with the acknowledgment of the shooting and asking for understanding, he also tried to emphasize that his officers work hard trying to build relationships with the same community they are accused of attacking. With these statements, Chief Kraus used his apology to remind people of the good deeds his officers do in the community.

Fort Worth Mayor, Betsy Price’s apology to Jefferson’s family on behalf of the city was unequivocal. She said there was “no justification” for the “senseless” shooting and vowed to hire external experts to conduct a thorough review of the Fort Worth Police Department. She said in a statement that “The tragic death of Ms. Jefferson has left this city broken…Citizens don’t feel safe, they are scared, tired and hopeless…“We will continue to listen, and we are taking immediate action… My focus remains on healing this city and pushing forward to see that we make progress” [31].

However, her apology and promise of action did not assuage angry citizens who were still reeling from many years of conflict with the police department. As one resident, Rodney McIntosh said: “At some point, this city’s going to have to realize, it’s not us that are going to start a riot …Y’all are going to start a riot. We are tired of seeing our children, tired of seeing our women, and our sons gunned down in the city that y’all say belongs to us” [32].

The mayor’s quick apology and her defense of Atatiana’s right to have a gun (which is legal in Texas), her recognition of the pain of the community, and her promise to appoint external reviewers to review the Fort Worth PD are commendable. She also announced in her statement a special panel to review police use of force in the wake of the killing of Atatiana Jefferson, that the independent, third-party panel would assume duty on November 19 and will report weekly to the city. She reiterated that she will accept the recommendations of the city’s Race and Culture Taskforce (which was established in 2017 in response to a 2016 police shooting of a black mother who called police after a dispute with her neighbor) which include the appointment of an independent police monitor as well as a diversity and inclusion officer. While she has her critics, few city leaders have stepped up as quickly as Mayor Price did. While the proposals have not all been implemented, the Atatiana Jefferson killing hastened the decisions taken by the mayor and her team. In essence, her apology was followed by an action plan and reflects Benoit’s corrective actions and mortification. It is too early for a verdict as the police-minority community’s frayed relationship did not develop overnight.

STARBUCKS

On April 12, 2018, two African American men, Rashon Nelson and Donte Robinson, were in a Philadelphia Starbucks waiting for a friend they were meeting with on business. The manager called police because she claimed that Nelson and Robinson were trespassing. The arrest of the two men, caught on video, ignited outrage throughout the black community in Philadelphia and across the nation. On April 14, the Philadelphia Police Department and the mayor’s office began independent investigations of the case. Meanwhile, Starbucks CEO, Kevin Johnson issued an apology on Twitter, followed by a video press release. The company also promised more action. It fired the store manager, closed all its stores on May 29 and held a four-hour racial bias training. The action cost Starbucks $16.7 million in lost revenue.
Beyond that, Starbucks offered to pay for the college education of the two men at Arizona State University. The men settled with the city of Philadelphia for $1.00 in exchange for the city making an investment of $200,000 for an entrepreneurs' program focused on African American youth.

THE APOLOGY: MORE THAN AN APOLOGY

Although he would go on to apologize, Philadelphia Police Chief Richard Ross’s initial response in a Facebook post declared that his “officers did not do anything wrong.” However, Philadelphia Mayor Jim Kenney contradicted the chief. Kenney said the Starbucks incident “appears to exemplify what racial discrimination looks like in 2018.” His full statement:

“I am heartbroken to see Philadelphia in the headlines for an incident that — at least based on what we know at this point — appears to exemplify what racial discrimination looks like in 2018. For many, Starbucks is not just a place to buy a cup of coffee, but a place to meet up with friends or family members, or to get some work done. Like all retail establishments in our city, Starbucks should be a place where everyone is treated the same, no matter the color of their skin.

“Starbucks has issued an apology, but that is not enough. I have asked the Philadelphia Commission on Human Relations to examine the firm’s policies and procedures, including the extent of, or need for, implicit bias training for its employees. We are reaching out to Starbucks to begin a discussion about this.

“Commissioner Ross and his team have promised a review of their policies moving forward with regards to response to complaints like this. I believe a thorough review is fully warranted given the unfortunate outcome of this event, particularly at a time when our criminal justice reform efforts are focused on avoiding needless incarcerations” [33].

Starbucks’ initial apology two days after the incident was lackluster. The hashtag #BoycottStarbucks was trending on social media and the outrage grew. As the Starbucks store became the site of a massive protest drawing extensive media coverage, CEO Johnson flew to Philadelphia on April 17 and met with Nelson and Robinson and city leaders and the media. He condemned the men’s treatment by the Starbucks manager as reprehensible. He also announced the closing of all 8,000 U.S. stores on May 29 to conduct racial-bias training for its 175,000 employees, an unprecedented move by any business organization [34]. Johnson hired an external team headed by the former U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder to review Starbucks’s practices and provide recommendations. Starbucks reached a confidential financial settlement with both men and provided for them to complete their undergraduate degrees at Arizona State University [34].

The City of Philadelphia went on to settle with Nelson and Robinson for $1 but agreed to fund a program for young black entrepreneurs for $200,000.

While the Starbucks incident began as crisis for the company, the response was unprecedented—an apology followed by actions (corrective action and mortification) that satisfied not just the parties involved, but also addressed the concerns of the aggrieved community and observers. Starbucks’ communication with all its constituents, internal and external, was praised across the board. In fact, the company presented an example of how to effectively manage a crisis —how to do more than an apology.

CONCLUSION

It has been only two years since the Dallas and Starbucks incidents took place. The Fort Worth incident is less than a year old. So, what changes have occurred and what lessons about apology can we learn from these cases? While one cannot generalize from this essay, one can conclude that based on media reports of these incidents and their aftermaths, a well-timed apology, followed by actions that are considered acceptable by the aggrieved, go a long way to minimize negative perception and potentially long term damage to reputation. The wording and tone of the apology, who communicates the apology, prior relationship between the aggrieved and the culprit (or a representative of the organization perceived as the one at fault), and the perception of the apology by the aggrieved are important factors in the healing process.

So, what did Starbucks CEO, Philadelphia mayor and Fort Worth mayor do that is worth considering? They acknowledged responsibility, even though they did not personally cause the incident; they acted quickly by disciplining the culprit, they promised to review their policies and invited outside experts to help them with that task. In the case of Starbucks, the company shut down 8,000 US stores for several hours in one day to execute a mandatory diversity training.

These changes have been in place only for a short while. It would be worth a review a few years down the road to see if the policies have been effective and if the relationship between the organizations and the aggrieved community has improved.

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