

Making Amends

Moving On After a Mistake

*"There are few, very few, that will own themselves in a mistake."
– Jonathan Swift, political essayist.*

Everyone makes mistakes. Saying something thoughtless, breaking a promise, or making a poor judgment – these are just some of the errors that we can make in the workplace.

Few people know how to make amends for a mistake, however, even though the consequences of this can be serious. If you don't make amends for wrong actions, your relationships, along with your reputation, may be seriously damaged.

In this article, we'll look at how you can own up to a mistake, and how you can do your best to right the wrong.



Amends: More Than Apologies

There is a difference between making amends and offering an apology. An apology is when you just say, "I'm sorry" to someone you've hurt. When you make amends, you take action to right the wrong that you've done and restore the balance with the other person.

Making amends means putting things right, as well as apologizing.
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For example, imagine that you said something thoughtless that caused a colleague's self-confidence to plummet. After sincerely apologizing, you could make amends by giving that person a project that will build his confidence back up again.

It can be extremely uncomfortable to admit that you've done something wrong. It goes against the grain of the ego, which is why many people find it difficult to admit that they've made a mistake. However, there are many advantages to making amends.

First, think of the person whom you've wronged. When you apologize and make amends to them, you give them the opportunity to forgive you.

A study published in the journal *Psychological Science* revealed that when people harbor grudges and perceive wrongs, these thoughts prompt negative emotions, higher blood pressure, and physiological stress. However, the researchers also discovered that when participants are able to forgive wrongs, they feel more control of the situation and they experience less stress.

There are also good personal reasons to make amends.

First, taking responsibility for your words or actions restores your self-respect. When you own up to a mistake, you can leave behind pervasive feelings of shame, as well as the sense that you're doing something wrong by "ducking the issue."

Also, when you make amends openly and sincerely, you can actually strengthen a relationship. By being humble enough to make things right, you show that you care about the other person and that you're genuinely sorry for what happened. If the other person can forgive you, you can both feel more positive as a result.

You can even build integrity – a rare and valuable trait – and your own reputation by making amends. This is especially important in a business context. Doing your best to right a wrong shows humility and empathy, and can go a long way towards developing your credibility within your organization.

Finally, making amends can provide learning opportunities. By reflecting on what went wrong and what needs to happen differently in future, you're focusing on finding a better way to do things next time.

How to Make Amends

Let's look at how to start putting things right.

Step 1: Acknowledge your Role in the Situation

In the immediate aftermath of a mistake, give yourself time to cool down and think about what happened, but don't wait too long to start making amends. This stops anger and resentment building up.

Begin by understanding your role in the situation. Sometimes, people hide behind feelings of blame, aggressiveness, or defensiveness when they've done something wrong – or they may convince themselves that they had no other choice but to do what they did. However, it's likely that your "gut instinct" will tell you that you've done something wrong, especially when that wrong has hurt someone else.

Then, consider things from the other person's perspective. How did your mistake affect his or her life? Did you let the person down? Did you cause them inconvenience or offence? Write down, or discuss with a friend, how your actions caused pain to the other person – this helps you develop **empathy** for them.

It's also an essential first step, because without understanding the part you played in the situation, you won't be able to correct the wrong and truly reconcile with the other person.

Step 2: Plan Your Approach

Next, identify what you can do to rectify the damage. This includes building trust again, as well as making good your mistake.

It's important that you come up with some ideas on your own. Remember, let the other person know that you understand and care about the mistake that you made, and it's impact. Token gestures won't fully rectify the situation; they'll only begin to repair the damaged relationship.

Your response should restore balance and help the other person grow or heal in some way. If you're unsure whether your response is appropriate, talk to a trusted colleague, family member, friend, or mentor about the situation.

Tip:

Guilt can cause you to overcompensate. The danger with this is that you can then appear insincere, and this can make a bad situation worse. You can also find yourself taking on too much in an effort to repair the relationship, meaning that you may let others down instead.

If you're struggling to understand whether your proposed action is excessive, talk your ideas through with a colleague or friend.

Once you've planned your approach, consider using **role-playing techniques** to practice the conversation. By preparing your apology, you'll be better able to anticipate and respond to what the other person is feeling.

Step 3: Communicate Your Intentions

Your statement of desire to make amends should include several important messages.

- First, address the mistake that you made and acknowledge your role in what happened.

Example: "I'm really sorry that I didn't follow through on my promise to help you complete your project on Friday."

- Next, address how your actions affected the other person and acknowledge his or her feelings. Hold yourself accountable and **don't play the "blame game."**

Show that you understand what you did was wrong.

Example: "It was selfish of me not to help after I gave you my word that I would. In this situation I would have felt upset and resentful, and I can imagine that you might feel the same right now. Because of my absence, you had to work much longer than you would have if I'd been there. And not showing up has reduced the trust that you had in me."

- Communicate how important the relationship is to you.

Example: "Your trust is really important to me, and I want set things right."

- Make amends.

Example: "I know that you asked for my help because of the expertise I could have provided. I want to make it up to you. Please allow me to help you every evening this week, until the project is complete and you can submit the findings."

Step 4: Learn From Your Mistake

Once you've apologized and made amends, make sure that you see the value in what happened. Mistakes are valuable teaching tools; they can help you grow, but only if you take time to learn from what happened.

Look honestly at what led up to this situation and ask yourself why you acted the way you did. Do you have trouble **managing your emotions**? Did you **miscalculate the time** that you needed to complete a task? Or is an element of your work causing you stress?

And what do you need to do to ensure that this never happens again?

Note:

Sometimes, making amends won't be enough to restore trust. The other person might never want to trust you again, or they might not be ready to forgive.

If this is the case, don't pressure the other person for forgiveness; give him or her the time and space necessary to heal and get over what happened. However, recognize that he or she might never be ready.

Key Points

When you make amends, you go a step further than offering just an apology. Making amends means taking action to right the wrong you've done, and trying to restore balance with the other person.

This can help the other person recover emotionally, help you repair the relationship, and restore your reputation.

Before making amends, think carefully about your part in what happened; empathize with how the other person might be feeling because of your actions; and plan your approach, so that your apology and actions are appropriate and considerate.

You might even want to role-play the conversation with someone else, so that you feel more comfortable apologizing.

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