3 Life Hacks That Will Revolutionize Your Relationships

Ever hear of “life hacks”? Little tips and tricks to make your life easier, like running a sticky note between your keyboard keys to collect crumbs and computer lint. Here are three life hacks that will act like relational lubricant.

“When you said/did X, I felt Y. Did you mean to communicate that?”

Instead of assuming we know someone’s motives and thinking, we need to clarify that we understand what they intend. Sometimes things just come out wrong, not at all what is meant, and it’s easily misinterpreted.

“When you gave me permission to take comp time after I worked all weekend, I sensed you were giving it begrudgingly and you weren’t happy about it at all, like I had broken an unwritten rule or expectation. Did I read you right?”

“When I asked you about _____, it seemed that you got really quiet and shut down. It felt like you were shutting me out. Is that accurate, or am I missing something?”

“When I asked you to unload the dishwasher, you rolled your eyes and sighed. It’s the only thing I’ve asked in two days, but it sounded to me like you were upset. As if it were an unfair burden to place on you. Is that what you meant to communicate?”

The other person might respond with, “Yeah, I was upset and felt put-upon, but really I have no right to be. I’m sorry for reacting so badly.” Or they might say, “I did? I don’t remember tha—oh wait, you know what? I had just heard such-and-so on TV and it disgusted me. My body language was in response to what was going on in the other room. Sorry, I didn’t hear you at all.”

It’s always a good idea to clarify what’s going on. And not assume you can read the other person’s mind. Only God can do that.

Own the Plank in Your Eye

Whenever there is a conflict, it’s the result of clashing perspectives or motives or interpretations. According to Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 7:3, the first step to resolving conflict is to take responsibility for our part in it. It’s amazing how hostilities can de-escalate when someone steps up to the plate and takes responsibility for their contribution to a problem.

Even if our part is only 5%, we’re 100% responsible for that 5%. And even if we’re sure we haven’t done anything wrong, we can acknowledge the possibility that we may have said or did something that was misinterpreted, and we can own that.

It’s natural to expect the other person to then take responsibility for their part in the conflict, but alas, very often that doesn’t happen. They will just let you take the blame/credit all by yourself even though you know perfectly well the other person was at fault at well. That’s okay. When you live for an Audience of One, it’s always right to do the right thing, trusting God to work out the justice part. Guilty parties never get away with it forever.

It’s not just a life hack, it’s supernatural, divine direction from the One who designed people and intended us to be in relationship. Own your part in a conflict—and watch the tension deflate like letting air out of a balloon.

How to Apologize

The specifics on this life hack came from one of the best blog posts in the history of the internet. There are four parts:

1) I’m sorry for _____. . .: Be specific. Show the person you’re apologizing to that you really understand what they are upset about.

Wrong: *I’m sorry for being mean.*

Right: *I’m sorry for being unkind when I said you were fat and ugly.*

2) This is wrong because _____: This might take some more thinking, but this is one of the most important parts. Until you understand why it was wrong or how it hurt someone’s feelings, it’s unlikely you will change. This is also important to show the person you hurt that you really understand how they feel. I can’t tell you how much of a difference this makes! Sometimes, people want to feel understood more than they want an apology. Sometimes just showing understanding- even without an apology- is enough to make them feel better!

Wrong: *This is wrong because you are hyper-sensitive.*

Right: *This is wrong because I hurt your feelings and made you feel bad about yourself.*

3) In the future, I will _____: Use positive language, and tell me what you WILL do, not what you won't do.

Wrong: *In the future, I will not say that.*

Right: *In the future, I will keep unkind words in my head.*

4) Will you forgive me? This is important to try to restore your friendship. Now, there is no rule that the other person has to forgive you. Sometimes, they won't. That's their decision. Hopefully, you will all try to be the kind of friends who will forgive easily, but that's not something you automatically get just because you apologized. But you should at least ask for it.

I love these four steps, and I would add eye contact to the mix.

These four steps to apologizing are powerful because they are biblical.

1. "I'm sorry for" means you are confessing, or agreeing with the other person, that you did something wrong. Biblical prayers of confession are very specific in naming the sins committed, such as idolatry, adultery, and murder. Apologizing to another person needs to be just as specific.

2. "This is wrong because" reveals that you understand of why it's a problem. David prayed for that kind of self-awareness in Ps. 139:23-24, "Search me, O God, and know my heart; Try me and know my anxious thoughts; And see if there be any hurtful way in me, And lead me in the everlasting way."

3. "In the future, I will" is a commitment to repent and choose a better, more righteous behavior than the one being renounced and forsaken. Zaccheus gave an example of this in

Luke 19:8-“Zaccheus stopped and said to the Lord, ‘Behold, Lord, half of my possessions I will give to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will give back four times as much.'”

4. “Will you forgive me?” is a humbling, difficult question to ask. Putting ourselves in the “one-down position” of asking for forgiveness risks exposure and shame-after all, the other person may say no-but forgiveness was extraordinarily important to Jesus. “For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions.” (Matt. 6:14-15)

Apologizing the right way is probably the most powerful way to restore a strained or broken relationship.

God created us for relationships and for community. These three life hacks can go a long way toward make them run more smoothly.

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South African Apartheid Leaders Apology for Racial Sins

Could the world use a bit more contrition, forgiveness and reconciliation?

Recent international news reports brought a startling example of contrition by Adriaan Vlok, former Law and Order Minister under South Africa's apartheid regime.

Robert Enright is an educational psychology professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and president of the International Forgiveness Institute. He laments the fact that despite society's conflicts, "almost never do we hear public leaders declaring their belief that forgiveness can being people together, heal their wounds, and alleviate the bitterness and resentment caused by wrongdoing." {1}

Here's an exception.

During the 1980s, conflict raged between South Africa's white minority Afrikaner government and the black majority opposition. One former African National Congress operative—now a government official—told me over breakfast in Cape Town that his responsibilities back then had been "to create chaos." Mutual hostility and animosity often reigned.

Bombing Campaign

In 1998, Adriaan Vlok confessed to South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission that in 1988 he had engineered the bombing of the headquarters of the South African Council of Churches, a prominent opposition group. The bombing campaign also included movie theaters showing "Cry Freedom," an anti-apartheid film. {2}

I had tickets to see "Cry Freedom" in Pretoria for opening night, but the screening was cancelled. The next morning, a bomb was discovered in the theater I would have attended.

You might imagine my interest when BBC television told of Vlok's recent attempt to reconcile personally with Rev. Frank Chikane, former head of the South African Council of Churches, the group whose headquarters Vlok had bombed. Chikane, now director general of the South African president's office,

reports that Vlok visited his office and gave him a Bible with these words inscribed: “I have sinned against the Lord and against you, please forgive me (John 13:15).”

An Example to Follow?

That biblical reference is Jesus’ Last Supper admonition that his disciples follow his example and wash one another’s feet. The inscription’s words echo those of the Prodigal Son who in the famous biblical story returns home after squandering his inheritance, hopes his father will accept him as a hired hand, and says, “I have sinned against heaven and against you.” {3} The father rejoices over his return, warmly receives him as son, and throws a welcome celebration.

Chikane tells what Vlok did next: “He picked up a glass of water, opened his bag, pulled out a bowl, put the water in the bowl, took out the towel, said ‘you must allow me to do this’ and washed my feet in my office.” Chikane gratefully accepted the gesture. {4}

Vlok, a born-again Christian, later told BBC television it was time “to go to my neighbor, to the person that I’ve wronged.” He says he and his compatriots should “climb down from the throne on which we have been sitting and say to people, ‘Look, I’m sorry. I regarded myself as better than you are. I think it is time to get rid of my egoism my sense of importance, my sense of superiority.'” {5}

Startling contrition, indeed.

Forgiveness Components

The late and renowned ethicist Lewis Smedes stressed three components of forgiving others: “First, we surrender our right to get even…. Second, we rediscover the humanity of our wrongdoer…that the person who wronged us is a complex, weak, confused, fragile person, not all that different from us…. And

third, we wish our wrongdoer well." {6}

Former U.S. Senator Alan Simpson has quipped that those in Washington, DC traveling "the high road of humility" won't encounter "heavy traffic." {7} Too often the same holds in workplaces, neighborhoods and families. Could Vlok's example inspire some changes?

Notes

1. Gary Thomas, "The Forgiveness Factor," Christianity Today, January 10, 2000, 38.
2. "Botha implicated in Church bombing," BBC News online, July 21, 1998; news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/136504.stm; accessed September 3, 2006.
3. Luke 15:21 NIV.
4. "Feet washed in apartheid apology," BBC News online, 28 August 2006; news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/5292302.stm; accessed September 3, 2006.
5. "Minister atones for race sins," BBC News video, 3 September 2006; http://tinyurl.com/g899l; accessed October 4, 2006.
6. Lewis B. Smedes, "Keys to Forgiving," Christianity Today, December 3, 2001, 73; www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2001/015/42.73.html.
7. Harry Kreisler, "Let 'er Rip! Reflections of a Rocky Mountain Senator: Conversation with Alan K. Simpson, Former U.S. Senator, Wyoming," Conversations with History, Institute of International Studies, University of California-Berkeley, September 17, 1997; globetrotter.berkeley.edu/conversations/Simpson/simpson1.html; accessed October 2, 2006.

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