

# Regaining trust after a transgression

October 13 2011

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the disgraced politician, chastened business leader or shamed celebrity standing before a podium offering up their apologies as the news cameras flash. "Sorry" may be the hardest word to say, but does simply owning up to misdeeds do anything toward regaining trust after a transgression or are words, as some say, cheap?

According to a recent paper by researchers at USC, Washington University in St. Louis, Singapore Management University and the University of Miami, it depends on the how the audience perceives the apology. The researchers investigated what is called substantive efforts to repair trust--those responses to [trust](#) violations that are more significant than a verbal apology or promise such as punishment, regulation or policies designed to prevent future transgressions. The researchers concluded that the ability of each method to repair trust hinged on the extent to which the response by the alleged trust violator showed that the violator was truly repentant.

The four-part study, detailed in an article in the journal *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, was conducted by Peter Kim, associate professor of management and organization at USC Marshall School of Business; Kurt Dirks, [Bank of America](#) professor of managerial leadership at Washington University's John M. Olin School of Business; Donald Ferrin, associate professor of organizational behavior and human resources at Singapore's Lee Kong Chian School of Business; and Cecily Cooper, associate professor of management at Miami's Department of Management.

Participants in the U.S. and Singapore took part in four experiments, two of which had participants make a series of trust-related decisions in a game with a [virtual partner](#) who would, at a designated point in the match, violate their trust by keeping all the money earned cooperatively in previous rounds. The two other studies meanwhile, assessed participants' opinion of a fictional CEO who asked his employees to take a pay cut and failed to follow suit, breaking a promise to refuse dividends from his preferred stock holdings.

The research, detailed in the article "Understanding the Effects of Substantive Responses on Trust Following a Transgression," showed that nothing beat showing true contrition in terms of winning back trust.

Why is this presumed to work? According to the study, it is about perception and activating an impression of repentance in the wronged individual's mind, thus reinforcing that the perpetrator is unlikely to violate trust again. To communicate repentance, the violator must show that he/she regrets his/her actions, that he/she is committed to reform, and has the resolve to act differently in the future.

Preventative measures, calls for regulation and even promises of financial remediation did less in some cases than simply and convincingly apologizing to the wronged parties. When coupled with a believable apology, however, substantive methods like regulation were effective, more so depending on whether the violation was due to incompetence, which participants found easier to forgive, than lack of integrity. 1 "We want to know that the person has changed somehow, that their character has changed. The trust repair responses we explore, even though they differ in costliness, the approach and so on, the extent at which they work hinges on their ability to signal perceived repentance," said Kim.

Kim pointed to the recent sexting scandal involving former New York

Congressman Anthony Weiner as a relevant example of the study's core findings.

"The fact that he resigned from Congress, it's clear that he did so involuntarily so that resignation isn't going to restore trust in him at all," said Kim. "If it had been seen as him doing so voluntarily and that he was punishing himself and doing so because he really was repentant that would have been far more effective than the same objective outcome. Leaving Congress because it was imposed on him, that punishment is not able to signal that sense of repentance."

The fallout from the phone-hacking scandal involving Rupert Murdoch's News Corp remains to be seen, but Kim, citing his trust research, said their success will depend on several factors.

"If News Corp offered a trust repair response voluntarily that's going to be more effective. Should they apologize and then offer some sort of compensation to the victims? Should they ask for some government oversight of their policies and practices? If it's seen just as a payoff rather than them being truly sorry about what happened then that's going to be less effective as well. All of this hinges on that signal of repentance ."

Provided by University of Southern California

Citation: Regaining trust after a transgression (2011, October 13) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2011-10-regaining-transgression.html>

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