

Chaitanya Kalbag: How to apologise without saying sorry

The compulsions and rewards of the non-apology apology

Advertisement



Business Standard
Insight Out



Apologising is never easy. Barack Obama knows this now. He made a non-apology apology last week to a Massachusetts police sergeant two days after saying the officer “acted stupidly” in arresting Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates Jr because he was trying to break into his own house.

Obama's decision to wade into a local issue involving an African-American friend triggered a debate on race and the US criminal justice system. The Cambridge Police Department dropped a charge of disorderly conduct against Gates and said the incident was "regrettable and unfortunate", but demanded that Obama himself apologise; in an unusually direct rebuke, it said the president had used the right words but at the wrong party.

Advertisement



EXTREME ENGINEERING AND CONSTRUCTION
DELIVERING COMPLEX, FIRST OF ITS KIND INFRASTRUCTURE PROJECTS IN INDIA AND THE WORLD.

[illegible]

For risks to investors, disclaimer and other details in relation to the Offer

[CLICK HERE](#)

It was ironic that Gates should be involved in a racial row. When football star OJ Simpson was acquitted of the charge of killing his estranged wife Nicole and her friend in 1995, Gates published a brilliant and critical analysis, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Man" in *The New Yorker*. "Many blacks as well as whites saw the trial's outcome as a grim enactment of Richard

Apparently Obama decided to “apologise” to Sergeant Jim Crowley after talking the matter over with wife Michelle. The president has quite a few other things to mull over. His honeymoon is

definitely over. A Zogby poll last week put Obama's approval rating at 48 per cent; 51 per cent of those polled felt the US was "on the wrong track". This, pollster John Zogby noted, was about where George W Bush was with voters just before the 9/11 attacks. A CBS News Poll put Obama's approval rating at 57 per cent — down from 68 per cent in April. On a range of issues — healthcare reform, the way the huge stimulus package is being spent, the backtracking on Guantanamo, the growing "surge" in Afghanistan — Obama is not coming through as a blazing reformer with a flaming sword.

Advertisement

AFCONS

Afcons Infrastructure Limited

EXTREME ENGINEERING AND CONSTRUCTION

DELIVERING COMPLEX, FIRST OF ITS KIND INFRASTRUCTURE PROJECTS IN INDIA AND THE WORLD

The Offer is being made through the Book Building Process in accordance with Regulation 62] of the SEBI ICDR Regulations. - QIB Portion: Not more than 50% of the Net Offer

- Non-Institutional Portion: Not less than 15% of the Net Offer-Retail Portion: Not less than 35% of the Net Offer - Employee Reservation Portion: Up to [2] Equity Shares aggregating up to ₹ 250 Million

- PRICE BAND: ₹440 TO ₹463 PER EQUITY SHARE OF FACE VALUE OF ₹10 EACH
- THE FLOOR PRICE AND THE CAP PRICE ARE 44.00 TIMES AND 46.30 TIMES THE FACE VALUE OF THE EQUITY SHARES RESPECTIVELY
- BIDS CAN BE MADE FOR A MINIMUM OF 32 EQUITY SHARES AND IN MULTIPLES OF 32 EQUITY SHARES THEREAFTER
- A DISCOUNT OF ₹44 PER EQUITY SHARE IS BEING OFFERED TO ELIGIBLE EMPLOYEES BIDDING IN THE EMPLOYEE RESERVATION PORTION

For risks to investors, disclaimer and other details in relation to the Offer

CLICK HERE

Actually he is having a fairly easy time of apologising. His predecessor spent his first few months in the White House feeling regretful. Very early in his first term, Bush had to apologise personally to the Japanese prime minister after a US nuclear submarine smashed into a Japanese fishing vessel carrying schoolchildren off Hawaii, killing nine of them. A few weeks later, a US spy plane with 24 crew members force-landed on China's Hainan island after colliding with a Chinese fighter jet. The Americans sent a repatriation team to bring back the crew after an 11-day standoff, and said they were "very sorry" that the Chinese pilot had died in the collision.

You would think that after Vietnam, Cambodia and Watergate, Americans had had a lot of practice in deniability. Ten years ago Nato planes bombed the Chinese embassy in Belgrade. China's *People's Daily* commented scornfully this May that the incident had been shrugged off by the US as a "mistaken bombing". "Taking into account that this event is a page already turned in history, the alertness and latent hostility that the US holds towards China seems not to have vanished."

More From This Section < >



Ajai Shukla: Rafale's July take-off



Alokananda Chakraborty: It is okay to procrastinate



Sukumar Mukhopadhyay: GST - 'Paradise lost' from fractured design



Daniel Gros Saving Europe's model

Six years into its occupation of Iraq, we are only just beginning to hear a little less about the collateral damage of teenaged US soldiers shooting dead civilians who did not slow down near checkpoints. We don't hear apologies either about the civilian deaths caused along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border by unmanned drone bombings. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees said in April that 546,000 people have registered as refugees, forced to flee their homes by the relentless bombing.

Back to the art of apology. The Japanese used to have it down pat. Their language is peppered with apologetic phrases. Every time somebody brushed against me in an impossibly crowded Tokyo subway train both of us would mutter *gomen nasai* — forgive me. And Indians did not invent anticipatory bail — the Japanese routinely say *shitsurei shimasu*: “Excuse me for what I am about to do”. But the coinage has got a little debased recently.

Much was made last year when Howard Stringer, the CEO of Sony, did not apologise personally for a series of mishaps in which Sony’s lithium-ion batteries caused laptops to burst into flames. Observers noted that a lower-ranking Sony official bowed from a sitting position while apologising for the overheating batteries, of which Sony eventually had to recall 9.6 million. In contrast, Citigroup’s former CEO Chuck Prince, apologising for problems that led to the closure of the banking giant’s Japanese private banking licence, stood up and bowed for a full seven seconds. Leslie Gaines-Ross, chief reputation strategist for Weber Shandwick, writes in *Corporate Reputation: 12 Steps to Safeguarding and Recovering Reputation* that CEOs need to follow three important steps when apologising: take responsibility, act quickly, and communicate sincerity. Japan’s Prime Minister Taro Aso was tearful last week when he announced early elections and the dissolution of the Lower House. “My wavering remarks caused anxiety and distrust in the public and led to a fall in the party support rate,” Aso was quoted by Kyodo as saying at the start of his speech. “I’m deeply repentant.” Apparently Aso had planned to apologise in the middle of his speech but his Chief Cabinet Secretary advised him to start off with an apology.

Advertisement

[illegible]

For risks to investors, disclaimer and other details in relation to the Offer

[CLICK HERE](#)

Maybe Obama's wordsmiths need to get together with Manmohan Singh's to craft a non-apology apology for the Sharm-el-Sheikh joint statement. Or maybe our diplomats and ministers just need to tear up a bit.