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The Meaning of Apology

By: Celia Young

Ever since the announcement of the massive recall of their cars, Toyota has apologized publicly on TV and in newspaper again and again to its customers and in the marketplace.

For Japanese and other Asian countries, an apology is the highest form of humility and taking responsibility for their mistakes. In ancient times in Japan, the highest code of honor for the Samurai was to commit to a form of *Seppuku*, or *Kara kin* (suicide by cutting into ones stomach). I have not heard too many direct or indirect apologies from Enron, Goldman Sachs or AIG for what they have done, let alone committing suicide! So, when an American business leader or politician says they would take full responsibilities for some negative events, I am not sure what they mean. Will they resign? Will they volunteer to go to jail? Will they offer to pay back all the money? Or, will they commit suicide?

Suicide in the Japanese culture is viewed as the highest form of respect for the self and from others. Suicide in most Christian cultures is viewed as a sin. Of course *Kara Kin* is not commonly practiced anymore in Japan. However, perhaps there are still two ways of looking at the different meanings of apology between the U.S. and Asian cultures.

In the U.S. court systems, an apology can be viewed as admitting of guilt. Therefore, many defendants including major corporations would agree to pay a settlement but never admit guilt. And culturally when someone does issue an apology, it often comes with lots of logical explanations. So at the end, these explanations almost justify the wrong doing and draw out the impact of the apology. In Japan and other Asian countries, an apology is not necessarily viewed as basis for a guilty verdict.

During the recent Senate hearings, I also noticed that several Senators repeated similar questions at Mr. Akio Toyoda, CEO of Toyota. And Mr. Toyoda's answers were also similar. So I wonder what the real value of these hearings is. Toyota already apologized and promised that they would fix the problems and take good care of their customers. I wonder after days of questioning, what do these Senators want? What else is there to find out, except to grandstand the Senator's own points of view?

Finally, when a Senator asked Mr. Toyoda if his company was prepared to deal with tort cases as a result of this recall, I realized all the questions served as a prelude to the eminent massive lawsuits which are for sure to follow. And I wonder if the lawyers will use Toyota's apologies as basis for their legal actions.

About Celia Young & Associates, Inc – Since 1986, Ms. Young and her associates have helped their global business clients develop vision and strategies and implement change in

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their businesses worldwide. They coach and develop globally competent and multi-culturally versatile leaders on the individual and group basis in order to help mold a new organization that is open to and capable of fully utilizing the "diversity" of its people. Such an organization is well positioned to respond to the needs of its customers internally and externally, in the U.S. and in the world. Their clients span a wide variety of industries including Telecommunications, Banking/Finance, Healthcare, Utilities, Oil Products, Personal Care, Pharmaceuticals, Print Media, Real Estate and Government Agencies. For more information about Celia Young & Associates, Inc., its clients and work, visit www.celiayoungandassociates.com.

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