

Forgiveness at Work: Managing the Dynamics and Reaping the Benefits

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Abstract

Forgiveness has been discussed for hundreds of years from religious, philosophical and personal perspectives. Scientific study of this topic, however, is a relatively new undertaking and as such applications of forgiveness strategies in the work place are sparse (Cameron, 2007). This article suggests that forgiveness would be appropriate and beneficial in the handling of certain workplace transgressions. The value of forgiving and the interplay of various factors in the process of forgiveness are discussed. Understanding this process can help business leaders and others effectively practice forgiveness. Two examples and some barriers to practicing forgiveness in organizations are presented. A way to assess and gain insights into one's forgiveness disposition is also provided.

Applied behavioral science research reveals that forgiveness can improve performance, health and happiness. People who are forgiving tend to be less resentful, hostile and angry. These outcomes achieved in non-business settings may also be effective when forgiveness strategies are appropriately adapted within organizations (Harris & Thoresen, 2006; Lyubomirsky, 2007). Consider how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements (Thompson & Snyder, 2003):

- I don't stop criticizing myself for negative things I've felt, thought, said or done.
- I continue to be hard on others who have hurt me.

- It's really hard for me to accept negative situations that aren't anybody's fault.
- If others mistreat me, I continue to think badly of them.

The more strongly an individual agrees with statements like these in the work environment, the more benefit he or she may experience by putting forgiveness into practice at work.

We are all subjected to being hurt, offended and mistreated in our relationships, and relationships at work are no exception. Typical responses to such offensive actions are negative. One might be inclined to reciprocate the harm, avoid the offender and/or seek revenge. These reactions can make one unhappy and damage relationships. How one responds to these transgressions in the workplace will impact his or her effectiveness – harboring negative feelings, avoiding the transgressor or seeking revenge are all counter productive.

As an alternative to the negative reactions many of us might experience in response to such offensive acts, it may be appropriate, and more powerful, to forgive an offender. Forgiveness means to suppress or decrease a desire to harm or avoid a transgressor; it may disrupt the preoccupation, hostility and resentment that we may harbor as a result of a transgression. Forgiveness is not reconciliation with the transgressor, or excusing or condoning the transgression. The main beneficiary of forgiveness is the person forgiving; however, the response can impact effectiveness and productivity at the workplace.

The Value of Forgiveness

The process of forgiving offers significant benefits. Research is showing that forgiveness is positively connected to physical health, life happiness, hope, and job satisfaction. Forgiveness seems to help shield against illness by reducing the body's stress response and by facilitating physiological and psychological healing. Cardiovascular fitness, emotional stability, problem solving and creativity have been enhanced through the process of forgiving (McCullough, 2000; McCullough, Pargament & Thoresen, 2000; Thompson & Shahen, 2003; Witvliet, Ludwig & Vander Laan, 2001; Worthington & Scherer, 2004). A forgiving response can also serve as a buffer for leaders against offenses and wrong doings by others (Bright, Cameron & Caza, 2006).

Research further shows that an inclination not to forgive can dramatically reduce work performance, quality and organizational commitment, while increasing time spent worrying about offensive acts and avoiding the offender (Porath & Erez, 2009). Failure to forgive correlates with hostility, anger, vengeance, physiological symptoms and rumination about life events and is linked to significantly more depression, anger, anxiety, cardiovascular problems, immune system issues, and even premature death (McCullough, 2000, 2008; Thompson & Shahen, 2003; Witvliet, Ludwig & Vander Laan, 2001; Worthington & Scherer, 2004).

Forgiveness and the skills involved in facilitating forgiving hold promise for organizational effectiveness. Forgiveness strategies at work can encourage employee

retention, enhance innovative problem solving, promote profitability and facilitate flexibility in adjusting to changing market conditions (Stone, 2002). Forgiveness strategies may also help organizations realize more of the positive outcomes noted above while avoiding many of the negative, unproductive impacts caused by unforgiving behavior. Forgiveness at work contributes to creating a happy high-performing workplace culture (Kerns, 2008).

A Model

A typical response to a transgression includes negative thoughts, emotions or behaviors. This “negative attachment” extends to thoughts, memories, emotions and behaviors that surface when one recalls the transgression. This “negative attachment” is reduced when one forgives. Forgiveness has been conceptualized and measured in a number of ways (McCullough, Pargament & Thoresen, 2000; Thompson & Snyder, 2003). Forgiveness occurs when the individual has a shift in his or her perception of the transgressor and transgression from negative to neutral or positive. In cases where the forgiver acts on his/her positive feelings toward the transgressor, reconciliation with the forgiven may occur; however, reconciliation is not a necessary condition for forgiveness. Ultimately, forgiveness rests with the forgiver.

In thinking about how to facilitate the process of forgiveness in the workplace, consider the “Forgiveness – Unforgiveness Dynamic” depicted below.

Forgiveness – Unforgiveness Dynamic

Individual’s Profile	➔	Perception of Transgression	➔	Level of Dissonance/ Distress	➔	Reactions to Dissonance/ Distress	➔	Organizational Impacts
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Forgiveness Disposition ▪ Expectations ▪ Core Values 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Source <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Self - Other(s) - Circumstances ▪ Seriousness ▪ Intentionality 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Amount transgression deviates from individual’s expectations 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Forgiving ▪ Unforgiving 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Individual, Group, Organization Level.

Key to this dynamic is a person's profile: his/her disposition for forgiveness, expectations and core values. Individuals bring their tendencies for forgiveness to each offensive workplace encounter they face. An individual’s profile will likely influence how challenging it will be for him or her to display a forgiveness response. When an individual’s experiences match his or her expectations about such things as company policies, ethics and the treatment of others, they generally do not perceive offensive acts. In contrast, when circumstances depart from company norms, negative reactions follow and represent the dissonance between expectations and experiences. Expectations, for example, have been shown to influence forgiveness in a unionized trucking company (Cameron, 2007).

The perception of the source (oneself, another individual or group, or external circumstance), seriousness and intentionality of the transgression will affect how much

the offense departs from expectations, or how much dissonance or distress the individual will perceive as a result of the transgression. A person will then either react with forgiveness or be unforgiving. Whether a person is forgiving or unforgiving will have an impact at the individual and group levels within an organization, and perhaps at the overall organization level. For example, at the individual level, a lack of forgiveness may create unhappiness, rumination, preoccupation, anger and withdrawal; forgiveness may foster focus, openness and self-assurance. Any of these individual impacts can affect relationships within the workplace and the way a person functions within the organization, which can ultimately have an impact on group and/or organizational performance.

Forgiveness has mental, emotional and social components. In order to forgive, individuals will change their thought patterns and/or emotional outlook regarding an offensive situation. In turn, these modifications by individuals will likely impact other individuals, groups and perhaps the entire organization. From a positive perspective, forgiving can change negative emotional states to positive emotions and in fact can contribute to creating a positive operating environment that produces desirable outcomes. Forgiveness, for example, has been shown to increase organizational productivity and reduce personnel turnover in companies who were downsizing (Bright, Cameron & Caza, 2006).

A Closer Look at the Dynamic: Two Examples

George was passed over for an opportunity to participate in a leadership development program. Behavioral assessments showed him to have a predisposition for forgiveness. George had expected it to be difficult to be selected for this leadership development program and blamed himself for not being more vocal with this boss about how much he would have liked to be in this program (he viewed himself as the source of this transgression). While George was distressed upon learning that he was not selected, he repeatedly told himself that there would be other opportunities to participate in a similar program. His mild distress about his poor self-promotion efforts changed to peace of mind and acceptance. He quickly forgave himself for not being more vocal about his desire to be selected.

In contrast, John was passed over for promotion to regional sales manager. Behavioral assessments revealed that he tended not to be forgiving. He fully expected to be promoted. He perceived the source of this transgression to be himself and his boss. John's level of distress was relatively strong given that he tended not to practice forgiveness and that his expectations about receiving this promotion were high. John's first reactions were negative toward himself and his boss. He ruminated about having been ill-prepared for the selection interview and not seeking support of others in the organization. For several weeks he avoided his boss and was preoccupied with the belief that his boss was unfair. His relationships with others and his performance within the organization suffered.

Focusing on the Forgiving Response

Harboring anger and resentment in the workplace does not lead to successful performance and happiness. Managerial leaders may choose to intervene when faced with the consequences of unforgiving behavior, in an attempt to help the individual move toward forgiveness.

In John's situation described above, because of his negativity and resentment, the Human Resources department in his organization referred John to an executive coach. Working with the coach to move toward forgiveness, John practiced several “thought restructuring” techniques, changing what he told himself about not receiving the promotion. For example, rather than telling himself “I really blew it by not being more prepared,” he began to say “I was not really ready for this promotion and the work that kept me from preparing for this promotion will improve my chances in the future.” To change his “negative” perception of his boss, John wrote an uncensored letter to his boss. In the letter John used unfiltered words and expressed anger, focusing on the aspects of the selection process that John perceived to be unfair. He ended his letter by stating what he would do to more effectively handle this situation in the future. He did not share the letter with his boss, but writing it allowed him to resolve his anger and resentment, and to handle forgiveness within himself. As a result of these interventions John forgave himself and his boss and was able to move forward more productively.

The approach used by John's executive coach to help him move toward forgiveness is a proven approach to help individuals restructure their thoughts called the ABCDE Model. It is a well documented method borrowed from the fields of Positive Psychology and Cognitive – Behavioral Psychology (Seligman, 1998). The components of the ABCDE method are:

- A = Activating Event
- B = Beliefs
- C = Consequences of Beliefs
- D = Disputing Beliefs
- E = Effort (Practice New Thought and Action)

This method can be used to shift “negative attachments” toward the transgression/transgressor to a more neutral or perhaps positive response. Using the ABCDE Model, John's situation is as follows:

<u>Component</u>	<u>Example</u>
A = <u>A</u> ctivating Event	→ John was rejected for promotion.
B = <u>B</u> eliefs of John	→ Boss was unfair; John screwed up.
C = <u>C</u> onsequences of B's	→ John was angry with boss and himself; ruminated about unfairness and what he did wrong.
D = <u>D</u> isputing the B's	→ With coaching, John countered his

E = Effort (Practice New Thoughts and Actions) →

negative self-talk with more positive forgiving self talk.

John replaced his unforgiving ruminations with more constructive, positive self-talk. He increased his forgiveness of his boss by writing, yet not mailing, an uncensored letter.

By disputing negative unforgiving beliefs and self-talk, a person can increase the likelihood of forgiveness. Using this approach, managerial leaders can help their people move toward forgiveness to eliminate negative and unproductive thoughts and behaviors. It is focused, systematic and oriented toward personal responsibility.

Barriers to Forgiveness

Various barriers may interfere with the effort to create and sustain a work place culture that reflects forgiveness (McCullough & Witvliet, 2002). Barriers include:

Bent on revenge

Just as certain individuals may be more disposed to forgiveness, others have a greater tendency toward anger and hostility, and are less forgiving. In his book Beyond Revenge, Michael McCullough describes how revenge and anger may be present among those who do not practice forgiveness (McCullough, 2008). Such individuals present a greater challenge to organizational practitioners wanting to facilitate forgiveness.

In working with these individuals who seem “bent on revenge”, it is important to remind them that they are “doubling their pain”. In effect, they are allowing themselves to be hurt twice; first by the original offender and second by their unwillingness to forgive and move beyond the negative response to the transgression.

Forgiveness is too "soft"

There is some indication that individuals believe that forgiveness is a reflection of weakness. However, mounting research evidence substantiating the value of practicing forgiveness is compelling. People in organizations who forgive should not be seen as soft, weak or ineffective. Rather they should be viewed as resilient, strong and wise.

Learning to practice forgiveness in the workplace takes considerable character strength and is challenging. It is more an act of strength than of weakness. It may require individuals to make significant changes in how they view situations and in how they act. Self-control and courage will also likely need to be displayed when interacting with others around offensive situations. Leaders who can effectively practice forgiveness will likely be more resilient, happier and productive. They will also serve as a positive performance role model for their people.

Egotism

When people do not see beyond their own needs and desires, it becomes difficult for them to practice forgiveness. They are not disposed to forgiveness, and expect things to go their way in most organizational encounters. Egotistical people are more likely to perceive transgressions and transgressors in unforgiving ways.

Egotists tend to discount the usefulness of other's perceptions and may often ignore or discount empathetic or forgiving oriented responses as something they do not need from others, especially when they are performing well. Unfortunately, over time this response pattern may likely cause the leader to derail when he or she faces a significant performance problem. In these situations others will find it more challenging to offer the leader forgiveness for his or her history of acting with arrogance and egotism toward them and others.

While there are challenges in applying forgiveness to organizational conflicts, especially dealing with individuals who are bent on revenge, think forgiveness is too soft to use in business, and/or are egotistical, the benefits of forgiveness in these situations are substantial. In addition to organizational benefits such as improved relationships and individual and group effectiveness, forgiveness offers individuals the opportunity for improved physical, mental, and emotional health and social adjustment as they face the inevitable offenses encountered in organizational life.

Your Forgiveness Disposition

A key component in the "Forgiveness – Unforgiveness Dynamic" is the individual's profile, and specifically his/her disposition toward forgiveness. There are two useful instruments that can help you reflect on your inclination toward forgiveness. The first instrument, The Heartland Forgiveness Scale, is an 18-item measure that will help you assess your disposition to forgiveness (Thompson & Snyder, 2003). The second instrument, The Values in Action (VIA) Scale, is a 240 item measure that will help you determine where "Forgiveness" fits into your own profile in relationship to a total of twenty-four identified Character Strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) (Go to www.viastrengths.org to take the VIA Survey of Character on-line. This website also offers The Brief Strengths Test which is a 24 question survey of Character Strengths.)

Understanding your disposition for forgiveness will help you strengthen your forgiving response to organizational transgressions. For those who are inclined to be more forgiving by nature, the road to practicing forgiveness may have fewer bumps. For those who are not oriented toward forgiving, the challenge to achieving forgiveness may be more demanding. However, regardless of one's predisposition toward forgiveness, the value to the individual and the organization is worth the investment in understanding and managing forgiveness.

A Closing Note

In practicing forgiveness, it will be important to remember that the forgiver is the main beneficiary of forgiveness. Being forgiving will free one to be happier and more productive at work. The forgiveness response will positively impact other individuals, groups and the entire organization. It starts with individuals choosing to be forgiving or unforgiving. Individuals in organizations are encouraged to manage the dynamics of work place transgressions in ways that strengthen their forgiveness, and then reap the benefits to self and the organization.

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