

Forgiveness in the Workplace: Fuel for Individual and Organizational Success

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INTRODUCTION

“Forgiveness” is often perceived as a baggage-laden word that has religious and/or spiritual connotations. It is also perceived as an abstract philosophical or theological construct that may be defined differently by each individual and, therefore, deemed too “murky and messy” to be considered for its value to leaders and managers as well as employees and other stakeholders. The integration of religion into the public spaces of work is typically frowned upon in modern Western society where the separation of church and state has extended by implication to a separation of church and public spaces (Milliman et al., 2003). Forgiveness is also commonly viewed as “personal” and, therefore, not appropriate to be discussed in the workplace. Workers, in particular, are often expected to separate the work-self from the personal-self between the punches of the timecard. And, though seldom spoken aloud, many feel they are expected to be “non-human” at work. This can lead to a reduction in the feeling of one’s personal values, including forgiveness, being aligned with organizational values (Milliman et al., 2003). Such rigid compartmentalization of identity can lead to employees at all levels feeling their work is devoid of personal or higher meaning and resulting in reduced levels of engagement and satisfaction as well as higher incidents of mistakes and errors (Chalofsky, 2010).

Gallup, a global research and performance management enterprise based in the USA reports that over 50 percent of employees are dissatisfied with their bosses or supervisors, the amount of work they are required to do, the recognition they receive for their accomplishments, and the culture of their organizations (Saad, 2012). High levels of stress on the job—especially from workplace issues of rudeness, bullying, and harassment—and being seen as a commodity versus a unique human and spiritual being contribute to dissatisfaction and lack of engagement. Fear of being ridiculed, punished, or shunned for mistakes, including those that are inadvertent, unintended, and without malice is often rampant and can impede people from doing their best work (Glaser, 2007). Leaders and managers are challenged amidst times of rapid change and increasing demands to find innovative ways to fuel success. We believe that “forgiveness”—a topic seldom discussed in leadership and management circles and rarely taught in supervisory training or in higher education—can be a major contributor to employee engagement, satisfaction, and high performance in organizations around the world.

Organizational research in recent years has acknowledged the importance of a leadership and management philosophy that treats people as valued assets rather than simply as labor costs to be moved around like pawns on a chess board, tossed aside as used commodities, or eliminated from a balance sheet

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(Caldwell & Dixon, 2009). Leaders and managers have a profound influence on their followers as well as the overall organization. Leadership behaviors that “encourage the heart” have increased employee initiative and responsibility (Kouzes & Posner, 2003, p. 4) and produced positive results in other ways, including to the bottom line.

Michael Stone, director of Mastery of Management International, posited that forgiveness can be a powerful tool, framework, or context for effective management and leadership. Stone writes:

In this new economy, which is characterized by escalating speed of change, increasing alienation and a growing search for meaning, it makes good business sense to practice the art of forgiveness. True forgiveness supports the retention of valued employees, allows for greater creativity and innovation, leads to increased profitability, and generates greater flexibility in responding to market conditions. (2002, p. 3)

The goal of this chapter is to show how real-world application of forgiveness can be a valuable tool of leadership, a powerful work reinforcer, and fuel for organizational success.

BACKGROUND

Businesses are established with an aim of longevity through profit maximization. Not-for-profit organizations also have an aim for longevity in fulfilling their mission. As a result, both non-profit and profit-oriented organizations require highly engaged employees to be successful. Leaders and managers at all levels are called upon to create efficiencies to achieve goals and objectives within stated deadlines, requiring enhanced teamwork, collaboration, and collective responsibility within the organization. Research indicates that workplaces where leaders and managers focus on tolerance, understanding, and positivity promotes employees performing well and contributing to the achievement of the organizational objectives (Wheatley, 2011).

In their ground-breaking work, Lofquist and Dawis created the Theory of Work Adjustment, which explores the relationship or fit between an individual and his/her work, work environment and organization (Lofquist & Dawis, 1975). Upon review of the research literature, these researchers developed a list of specific conditions in the work environment, referred to as “work reinforcers,” thought to be major universal sources of job satisfaction. The following work reinforcers were identified and are listed below with illustrative defining statements of Lofquist and Dawis:

These factors, in large part, remain the building blocks of employee satisfaction decades after their inception. When taken collectively, they make the case that performance likely increases when employees are not treated merely as “resources,” but are respected as individuals (Saad, 2012). In light of these work reinforcers and a desire to respect people as individuals while still maintaining requisite authority, questions such as these deserve consideration: How do we create “forgiving” workplaces? What role does forgiveness play in our own success as leaders and managers? How does a leader or manager deal effectively with an employee who makes a mistake? What are the pitfalls to forgiveness at work?

Some employees live in the fear of making mistakes and being disciplined, suspended or fired as a result. Yet, often at the same time, employees are encouraged to try out new ideas and innovative approaches to work. Not all will be successful. Effective company policies and supervisor behaviors foster a work environment absent from high levels of fear. Research indicates that forgiveness, along with caring and compassion, are remedies to fear (Ndira, Alana, & Bucknam, 2011).

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