Forgiveness as an Individual, Group, and Organizational Competency: A Literature Review and Comments

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Abstract

Studying forgiveness presents a formidable challenge to the organizational scholar. Forgiveness is a concept that has cultural, moral, and behavioral implications. Generally seen as rooted in religion by many (Smith, 1988), it is also a concept that may have a significant impact within the organization. In this paper we will offer a three-part model of the notion of forgiveness. Our model is based on the observation that the existing literature on forgiveness is clustered around three levels of behavioral patterns: 1) individual forgiveness, 2) group forgiveness, and 3) organizational forgiveness. We will also present a newly developed framework with an integrated perspective of forgiveness. Finally, we will argue the importance of forgiveness in the organizational and management literature as we explore the possible benefits of individuals and organizations learning to forgive.
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Forgiveness as a Behavioral and Organizational Skill:
A Literature Review and Comments

[INITIAL DRAFT]

Studying forgiveness presents a formidable challenge to the organizational scholar. Forgiveness is a concept that has cultural, moral, and behavioral implications. Generally seen as rooted in religion by many (Smith, 1988), it is also a concept that may have a significant impact within the organization. Although the effects of forgiveness are not always measurable, they are often visible to the researcher through patterns of behavior. In addition, the definitions of forgiveness remain ambiguous, particularly at the psychological and organizational levels. For example, Scobie and Scobie (1999) define forgiveness as

a conscious decision to set aside one’s legitimate claim for retaliation or restitution for a damaging act committed by a significant other, in order for any, or all, of the following to occur: 1) the relationship, or a modified version of the relationship, to be restored; 2) the negative effects associated with the damaging act for the forgiver and/or the forgiven to be reduced; 3) the forgiver to cease playing the role of the victim, and the forgiven to be given the opportunity to make amends; and 4) the forgiver and the forgiven to gain release from the dominating effect of the damaging act. (p. 382)

While Cameron and Caza (2002) defined organizational forgiveness as “the capacity to foster collective abandonment of justified resentment, bitterness, and blame, and instead, it is the adoption of positive, forward-looking approaches in response to harm or damage. Forgiveness in organization requires a transformation and an organization become virtuous to the extent to which it encourage, supports and facilitate such transformation” (p. 39).
This ambiguity, however, does not mean that forgiveness is not an important topic for organizational scholars to understand. Most managers will agree that interpersonal conflict and performance-based inadequacies are times of high learning. Particularly when they are successfully resolved, interpersonal conflicts are times when managers are able to take their human relations skills to a new level. Central to the idea of developing emotional intelligence, effective managers often have the ability to move past or let go of conflict. This skill may be the beginning of an operational definition of forgiveness.

While the above definitions may make some sense to the organizational researcher, as previously mentioned, most managers and organizational participants will have their concept of forgiveness shaped by a religious tradition. The idea of forgiveness is deeply rooted in Christian scripture, but it also appears in the Koran and various Buddhist scriptures. Even those who are not actively religious or aware of a particular theology may have some concept of forgiveness based on their observation of others or their knowledge of religious practices. While we acknowledge that the concept of forgiveness is rooted in religion, it is also clear that there is a strong secular value to being able to practically move in and out of conflict without retaining the negative effects of that conflict. The act of forgiveness moves individuals into a future orientation that is essential for retaining competitive advantage in a business situation. This practical value of a religious principle is what we want to explore.

This paper contains three sections. The first is a literature review based in the psychological and organizational literature that is structured around three levels of forgiveness described in the following section. The second section presents a newly developed framework with an integrated perspective of forgiveness. The final section contains an argument related to
the importance of forgiveness in the organizational and management literature as we explore the possible benefits of individuals and organizations learning to forgive.

Levels of Forgiveness

In this paper we will offer a three-part model of the notion of forgiveness. Our model is based on the observation that the existing literature on forgiveness is clustered around three levels of behavioral patterns: 1) individual forgiveness, 2) group forgiveness, and 3) organizational forgiveness. The first level, which has the most active literature base, is individual forgiveness which is focused in psychology. There are many rich examples of victims severely wrong who have psychologically healed by forgiving the victimizer. In organizations there are many examples of important learning that occurs when an individual is able to forgive an employee or a manager for perceived wrongdoing. There are various behavioral benefits of forgiveness at the individual level. For example, there is clearly a psychological benefit to being able to work through conflict without retaining excessive baggage. The literature suggests that people who are able to forgive are also able to do a number of other things well within the organization, including dealing with difficult co-workers and customers, as well as retaining stability and clarity in their actions.

The second level articulated in the research is related to group forgiveness. This is most easily illustrated in the family dynamic, where several individuals may embark in behavior that is destructive to the whole. In workgroups often people bring these dysfunctional behavioral patterns into their team. Beyond the complexity of individual forgiveness, is the ability for group members to forgive each other for dysfunctional behaviors with negative consequences. At the group level there is clearly a benefit to teams who are willing to looking past individual idiosyncrasies that may violate group norms in order to achieve a larger goal. These kinds of
groups may be able to attract a more creative, innovative, and sustainable group membership. The literature suggests that the ability to form a team that has wide behavioral capacities enhances the team’s ability to ultimately perform effectively.

Finally, the third level of forgiveness we will explore is focused on the organizational forgiveness realm. We know to that most organizations have few (if any) mechanisms to forgive workers for their behavioral inadequacies or performance shortfall aims. For example, the whole notion of performance appraisal avoids the idea that an individual may go through various life cycles, some of which are dysfunctional. There are many stories within organizations about people who are terminated prematurely as a result of what is deemed to be low performance only to find out later that their knowledge and understanding of the work processes are is central to the survival of the organization. It is of strategic importance than four organizations to be able to forgive employees and help them learn from their mistakes. There are of course benefits of forgiveness at the organizational level. Forgiveness plays a role and organizational learning. Research has found that organizations that retain employees who have learned through failure and who have developed the capacity to change have an overall strategic advantage. Of course each of the above claims wants for empirical research. It is important to note that it has been somewhat challenging for researchers to measure these claims using the traditional psychological or quantitatively based research.

Proposed Framework

Based upon the available literature, we propose the following integrated perspective of forgiveness: Forgiveness is a psychological act, a communicative act, and a social act. The individual (psychological) level involves letting go of offense even if being offended is justified and the hurt is sustained. The dyadic (communication) level involves letting the offending party
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know that the offense has been removed or erased. The organizational/cultural level (social) involves relationships and associations that are in balance and functioning effectively. A set of elements and questions for each of these levels of forgiveness provides the framework for scholars and practitioners to analyze and understand this phenomenon at a more comprehensive level.

I. Individual Level (Psychology)

a. *Perception:* Has an offense been seen, heard or felt? People perceive the intent to offend differently. For example, the literature suggests that on performance feedback is often perceived as offensive. Yet others value feedback from trusted individuals as a gift. People with a long history of violence or abuse may also perceive offense differently.

b. *Justification:* Are the feelings of hurt justified? Some “own” the hurt, saying the offender was justified, while others personalize and amplify their feelings.

c. *Sustained:* Is the feeling of hurt sustained? For some an offense is felt over time, while others can “let go” quickly. Some research suggests males accumulate fewer but more significant conflicts. Sustained conflict comes when the probability or anticipation of reoccurrence is felt.

II. Dyadic Level (Communication)

a. *Identity or action:* Is the offence against your identity (who you are) or your action (what you did)? What is the difference in perception between offending party and the offender?

b. *Retaliation, defense, or acceptance:* People have different learned strategies for dealing with offense or hurt. Is the offended party justifying retaliation (verbal or
behavioral), being defensive (keeping additional hurt from happening), or accepting
(playing the victim or “absorbing” the hurt)?
c. History: Is there a history? Do the offender and the offended have a sustained
relationship and a history of resolution?

III. Organizational/Culture Level (Social)

a. Moral Values: Is forgiveness valued beyond just the functional aspect of a
relationship?
b. Trust: Can trust be restored between the offender and the offended, and hurt be
forgotten?
c. Harmony: Can balance and harmony be restored so that the parties can work
productively together?

Discussion

It should be clear to the reader by now that the authors of this paper are advocates of the
moral value of forgiveness as well and is the personal, interpersonal, and organizational benefits.
Although tempting, we have not made a moral argument for forgiveness. We can however look
carefully at cases and individual experience.

As advocates of forgiveness, we knowledge the problematic process embedded in the concept.

Implications and Conclusions

In this final section we will also explore the opportunities for additional research as well
as implications and conclusions. We are obviously not done with this paper, so we request that it be considered only for a pipeline session. We have read a lot of literature (see bibliography), but
ran out of time to draft those sections into the paper. We wanted to give you an idea (in this draft) of some of the frameworks we want to use.
Bibliography


