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Is Forgiveness One of the Secrets to Success? Considering the Costs of Workplace Disharmony and the Benefits of Teaching Employees to Forgive

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Workplace Interpersonal Stress and Injustices

Interpersonal stress and conflict are an all too common part of everyday life, but when they occur in the workplace, it can have especially negative effects on personal well-being and productivity.[1] This is likely due to the nature of the workplace. People who work together often do not choose to work together; there are power dynamics, which each have the potential for personality conflict. When interpersonal conflicts arise, it can be especially challenging as coworkers may not be able to easily resolve the conflictual situation, they may be required to work together indefinitely, and the workplace structures may make it difficult to honestly express their feelings.

Consequently, interpersonal issues at work can cause untoward, long-lasting, and especially counterproductive effects on individual members of an organization and negatively impact the organization's bottom line.[2] The impact on an organization's finances is not trivial. One study estimated that American workers spend a little less than 3 hours a week or 1 day a month dealing with workplace interpersonal stress and conflict. In Germany and Ireland, it is more than 3 hours a week, and 10% of workers report spending 6 or more hours a week involved in disagreements or managing conflicts between coworkers. In the end, interpersonal stress and conflict at work is estimated to cost American businesses alone about $349 billion and 385 million working days annually.[2]

Being hurt by coworkers often prompts unproductive and vengeful motives. For instance, consider the supervisor who inadvertently offends one of her subordinates. The offended subordinate may realize, or fear, that the power structure prevents an open discourse regarding the offense. Because of this, the subordinate employee may seek opportunities for surreptitious retribution such as intentionally working inefficiently, seeking to sabotage the supervisor's reputation, or considering ways to leave the company at an inopportune time. While all these approaches may help to alleviate the "injustice gap" that was created when the offense took place and, in the victim's eyes, offer a just solution, these are obviously not productive ways to cope. In fact, these types of responses may cause the victim to incur additional stress and impaired quality of life as the anger and frustration driving these thoughts and actions continues to fester. Although a focus on justice and revenge in resolving workplace conflicts often takes center stage, we want to suggest that a little forgiveness in these situations can go a very long way.

Forgiveness and Well-Being

Forgiveness is the releasing of negative and promotion of positive thoughts, feelings, and behaviors toward someone who hurt you.[3] Often conceptualized from a religious or spiritual framework, forgiveness is also grounded in several secular psychological constructs, for instance, emotional intelligence, empathy, pride, and narcissism.[3] Forgiveness can alleviate stress and negative emotions that are all too often associated with impaired mental and physical well-being.[4-9] Furthermore, forgiving people tend to have more support from friends and coworkers[10] and tend to see obstacles as less challenging.[11] Forgiveness has also been associated with fewer chronic health conditions, improved physiological functioning, and better cognitive function.[4,12-14] With these benefits in mind, it is easy to see why several approaches to teaching forgiveness have developed. Although the approaches differ to some degree in the areas of focus, they all have been shown to be useful in helping people become more forgiving.[15]

Teaching Forgiveness

One approach that has been especially useful in helping people to become more forgiving is the, "Forgive for Good" method developed and tested in the Stanford Forgiveness Project by Dr Frederic Luskin.[4] The "Forgive for Good" method has been used in literally thousands of cases where obstacles to forgiveness have prevented individuals from living a full and happy life. The method has received critical acclaim from hundreds of reviewers and has been featured in thousands of popular media outlets from National Public Radio to the *New York Times* to the *Wall Street Journal*. We have used this method to help survivors of the troubles in Ireland, citizens of post-civil war Columbia and Sierra Leone, and people who lost loved ones in the 9-11-2001 attack on the World Trade Center. We are working with the state government of Hawaii to develop trained "Forgive for Good" teachers who work in the community.

The "Forgive for Good" method consists of 9 steps leading to forgiveness (see Table 1).[4]

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Table 1. Nine Steps to Forgiveness.

Step	Objective
1	Know exactly how you feel about what happened and be able to articulate what about the situation is not ok. Then, tell a trusted couple of people about your experience.
2	Make a commitment to yourself to do what you have to do to feel better. Forgiveness is for you and not for anyone else.
3	Forgiveness does not necessarily mean reconciliation with the person that hurt you, or condoning of their action. What you are after is to find peace. Forgiveness can be defined as the "peace and understanding that come from blaming that which has hurt you less, taking the life experience less personally, and changing your grievance story."
4	Get the right perspective on what is happening. Recognize that your primary distress is coming from the hurt feelings, thoughts, and physical upset you are suffering now, not what offended you or hurt you 2 minutes—or 10 years—ago. Forgiveness helps to heal those hurt feelings.
5	At the moment you feel upset, practice a simple stress management technique to soothe your body's flight or fight response.
6	Give up expecting things from other people, or your life, that they do not choose to give you. Recognize the "unenforceable rules" you have for your health or how you or other people must behave. Remind yourself that you can hope for health, love, peace, and prosperity and work hard to get them.
7	Put your energy into looking for another way to get your positive goals met than through the experience that has hurt you. Instead of mentally replaying your hurt seek out new ways to get what you want.
8	Remember that a life well lived is your best revenge. Instead of focusing on your wounded feelings, and thereby giving the person who caused you pain power over you, learn to look for the love, beauty, and kindness around you. Forgiveness is about personal power.
9	Amend your grievance story to remind you of the heroic choice to forgive.

Given the benefits of forgiveness, it is surprising that the teaching and development of forgiveness as a part of the workplace culture has not been more thoroughly examined. Research suggests that forgiveness is associated with better health and productivity in workplace settings,[16] but little, if any, work has directly examined the effects of teaching workers to be more forgiving and measuring the effects of this skill on quality of life and objective measures of productivity. Lacking such information, it is difficult to understand how the evidence showing the benefits of forgiveness might translate to workplace contexts, and for that reason, we describe a case study of a financial services organization that allowed us to experiment with forgiveness education as a core component of emotional intelligence training.

Case Study: Ameriprise Financial Services

In what we believe to be the first ever attempt to teach forgiveness skills to employees, varying US market groups of Ameriprise collaborated on a 6 to 12-month program focused on forgiveness and emotional intelligence training. Forgiveness was conceptualized as a key aspect of emotional intelligence and taught as an exemplar of emotional intelligence enhancement. Eighty-nine financial service advisors, 9 vice presidents, and 6 administrative assistants volunteered to be in 1 of 7 cohorts in pilot projects designed to measure the effect of forgiveness training on sales and quality of life. The first 4 cohorts received a 9-hour workshop and 6 support phone calls approximately every 2 months over a 1 year period of time. The fifth and sixth cohorts received the workshop and 6 phone calls approximately every 3 to 4 weeks over a 6-month period of time. The first 3 calls were about 20 minutes in length and the last 3 calls were about 30 minutes in length.

The project was conducted by 2 psychologists and initiated by a group vice president of Ameriprise. The training for this project began with a 1-day workshop attended by between 8 and 25 participants per site. The morning workshop defined emotional competence,[17] suggested that forgiveness was a core component of emotional competence, taught the importance of aligning thoughts, emotions, and behaviors, and helped participants examine areas of weakness. The afternoon session focused on techniques for stress management and the importance and training of interpersonal forgiveness. Dr Luskin's book *Forgive for Good: A Proven Prescription for Health and Happiness* was given to all participants.[4] Subsequent to this workshop, an individual development plan (IDP) was created by a professional psychotherapist for each advisor. In consultation with each participant's group vice president, the IDP was developed after evaluating pretest quality of life measures and the Emotional Quotient Inventory,[18] a validated assessment that provides information on domains of stress management, emotional self-control, mood, and interpersonal relationships. Each IDP contained 2 or 3 action items that were presented as specific behavioral suggestions. The items were designed to help the participant develop areas of emotional competence in which they were in need of improvement. This IDP was shared with each participant during an initial 20-minute conference call with a professional psychotherapist. The test results were reviewed and the rationale for the IDP was presented along with practice guidelines. In addition, each participant was asked to select a "coach." The "coach" was someone who had ongoing contact with the participant and who agreed to help the participant adhere to the IDP through biweekly meetings. Often the "coach" was a coworker or spouse who had no formal training but had willingness to observe, support, and consult with the participant. Once the "coach" was selected, participants were provided training via conference call where the process was thoroughly reviewed. Five more times during the training period, each participant was given follow-up conference calls with professional psychotherapists to provide ongoing feedback and support. During each call, the purpose of the program was reviewed as well as the IDP. Participants were given support in adhering to the IDP and were asked to share their successes and failures and report on how they were using the "coach."

The effectiveness of the program was systematically measured using standardized and validated assessments distributed before and after the program's completion. Assessments included:

- Productivity: Financial adviser productivity was measured using a metric known as Time of Sale Gross Dealer Concession. This is an Ameriprise measure of adviser productivity. It measures the amount of money

an adviser generates when selling financial planning services or products.

- Stress: The Perceived Stress Scale[19] was used to measure stress. This 14-item measure assesses both perceived amount of stress and perception of control and stress tolerance.
- Anger: The Trait Anger Inventory[20] is a 15-item assessment that measures participants' levels of anger over time and across situations as opposed to a measure of their anger at any particular time or place. It measures anger as part of one's personality.
- Positive states: The Positive States of Mind Survey[21] is a 6-item instrument that was used to measure experiences of positive states, such as productive rest, concentrated attention, and nonsexual pleasure and intimacy.
- Health-related quality of life: The Short Form 36 Health Survey[22] is a 36-item measure of quality of life and includes items on mood, anxiety, optimism, pain, fatigue, and disability. It is one of the most widely used assessments of health-related quality of life.
- Physical vitality: The Vitality Plus Scale[23] is a 10-item measure used to assess the domains of appetite, energy level, sleep patterns, relaxation, and body stiffness.

In examining the outcomes of this study, it was changes in productivity and quality of life in the Ameriprise employees who completed the program that were of particular interest. In other words, where an employee started, in terms of productivity or quality of life, was of less interest than whether the employee showed gains or losses as a result of the program. That is, no matter how productive or healthy, we wanted to know whether the program could positively influence employees. Financial planning sales productivity was measured in the employees who completed the program, and in addition, sales productivity for employees who did not attend the program were used as a comparison. When looking at employees who completed the program, average sales productivity went up (24%) compared to employees not attending the program (10%). For employees completing the program, there were also meaningful decreases in stress (23%) and anger (13%) and increases in positive states (20%), health-related quality of life (10%), and physical vitality (9%). There was, however, no quality of life data from the group of employees not completing the program to offer any comparison.

Conclusions

Workplace interpersonal stress, conflict, and injustice are all too common and very real sources of reduced worker well-being and productivity.[2,10,16,24] Despite ample evidence to suggest that forgiveness is an important component of individual health and well-being,[4,12] little evidence exists to show that forgiveness training can be effectively implemented in the workplace setting as a means to promote wellness and increase productivity. The Ameriprise pilot case study provides what is, to our knowledge, the first and only attempt to teach forgiveness in the workplace and measure its impact on productivity and quality of life. The findings from this case study are as expected and encouraging. Worker well-being and productivity benefit when forgiveness skills are taught. These initial findings coincide with existing correlational research showing forgiveness is related to productivity and well-being in the workplace[16] and with both intervention research and clinical population samples that show forgiveness produces improvements in quality of life.[15]

Of course, as an initial study, the design has inherent limitations including the lack of randomization, a truly matched control group, and the use of volunteers in the treatment sample. There remain questions about generalizability to other financial companies or other types of organizations. Nevertheless, all too often individuals are hurt on the job, and we think of this hurt primarily as physical in nature. Workplace interpersonal stresses, conflicts, and injustices comprise a major source of "injury." This injury leads to lost productivity, diminished well-being for workers, and has a negative toll on the business. In our increasingly competitive and cutthroat business world, not to mention challenges faced by religious, nonprofit, and governmental organizations, the Ameriprise case study holds out the promise that teaching individuals how to forgive can benefit workers in terms of both productivity and quality of life. Furthermore, teaching forgiveness skills proactively, before workers find the urgent need for them, holds the potential to protect human resources and insulate organizations from the financial repercussions of internal interpersonal stress and conflict. Forgiveness might prove to be one of the most commonly overlooked but crucial elements to any organization's success. Investment in studying, developing, and monitoring forgiveness and its effects may well become a priority for those organizations wishing to succeed in the 21st century.

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