

THE FORGIVING ORGANIZATION: BUILDING AND BENEFITING FROM A CULTURE OF FORGIVENESS¹

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INTRODUCTION

Decades of research demonstrate that forgiveness can play a central role in conflict management effectiveness and the restoration of interpersonal relationships (Fehr, Gelfand, & Nag, 2010). In addition to its salutary effects on relationships, forgiveness has been shown to facilitate positive affect, reduce stress, and even promote volunteerism (Karremans & Van Lange, 2008). Hundreds of studies have subsequently examined a wide array of constructs within the forgiveness nomological net, from intentionality and harm severity to perspective taking and trait anger (Fehr et al., 2010). Despite its volume there is a notable lack of forgiveness scholarship in the organizational sciences (Aquino, Grover, Goldman, & Folger, 2003). Instead, research has overwhelmingly emphasized the ‘dark side’ of workplace conflict including revenge and avoidance (Tripp & Bies, 2009). Research that does examine forgiveness almost exclusively focuses on individual, micro-level processes (Aquino, Tripp, & Bies, 2001; 2006) and generally ignores the role of the organizational context as an affordance and constraint of forgiveness-related behaviors. Looking at existing research on workplace forgiveness, one might ask the question: what is truly *organizational* about forgiveness at work? To provide unique insights into how forgiveness is manifest in organizations, scholars must develop an understanding of how the organizational context constrains and enables forgiveness to emerge and consequently affect downstream behaviors (for similar arguments, see De Dreu & Gelfand, 2008). Whereas previous research has only examined forgiveness at the individual level, we argue that forgiveness also “lives” as an organizational culture with important cross-level consequences that can impact the long-term success of the organization yet are currently underspecified.

At the individual level forgiveness is most commonly defined as a prosocial motivational change toward a perceived transgressor (McCullough, Pargament, & Thoresen, 2000). It is thus characterized by increasingly prosocial motivations (e.g. benevolence) and decreasingly antisocial motivations (avoidance; revenge). At the root of forgiveness is a change in how a victim perceives his or her transgressor. The victim does not condone the transgression itself, but instead comes to view the offender in a more benevolent light (Worthington, 2006).

Several studies support the prevalence of individual-level forgiveness in organizational contexts. Aquino and colleagues (Aquino et al., 2001; 2006) demonstrated the ubiquity of forgiveness in samples of government agency employees and public utility workers. Writings by Bright and Exline (2011) and Stone (2002) furthermore provide ample case studies of forgiveness as a frequent and powerful response to interpersonal conflict in organizational settings. Taken together, these writings demonstrate that forgiveness is fundamentally embedded within organizational systems. Nonetheless, they mirror the limitations of the social psychological, clinical, and counseling literatures in their primary focus on generalized, individual-level processes. Following from previous culture research we conceptualize forgiveness culture as a constellation of values, norms and assumptions about the organization,

defined as: “the shared belief that empathic, benevolent responses to conflict from victims and offenders is both normative and valued in the organization, with the ultimate goal of reconciliation.” Forgiveness culture is thus contrasted against vengeful and avoidant cultures where forgiveness is uncommon, undervalued, and supplanted by the tendency to display antisocial, egocentric responses to aggression, victimization, and conflict.

THE CULTURE OF FORGIVENESS: THREE CORE VALUES

How and when do forgiveness cultures emerge in organizations? Drawing from previous research on ethics, morality, positive organizational scholarship, and forgiveness, we identify three core organizational values through which cultures of forgiveness can be expected to thrive. First, we focus on *relationality* – features of the organizational landscape that build and encourage high-quality, lasting relationships. Second, we focus on *temperance* – features of the organizational landscape that build and encourage mindfulness, self-control, and open-mindedness. Third, we focus on *dignity* – features of the organizational landscape that build and encourage respect, justice, and fairness between leaders, followers, and coworkers.

Across the domains of relationality, temperance, and dignity we posit two overarching top-down mechanisms that unify the effects of each core value on forgiveness culture emergence. First, each core value can be expected to facilitate cultures of forgiveness via social learning from organizations’ leaders. Schein (1983) advanced the notion that the personality of an organization's founder guides the development of culture, given that founders "introduce humanistic, social service, and other non-economic assumptions into their paradigm of how an organization should look" (p. 28). Thereafter, the culture of an organization is reinforced by the vision and actions of the organization's senior leaders (Ostroff, Kinicki, & Tamkins, 2003). As scholars have long noted, leadership is above all else an influence process (Yukl, 2002). Leaders provide employees with salient role models and a source of reward and punishment when normative expectations are met or foregone (Bandura, 1977). Beyond leadership, the effects of each core value on forgiveness culture emergence can also be driven by organizational structures – aspects of the work environment that constrain or enable individual behavior.

Building Forgiveness Through Organizational Values: Relationality

Organizations are fundamentally relational entities, and the quality of these relationships determines in part how well organizations perform (Dienesch & Liden, 1986; Dutton & Heaphy, 2003). Previous research at the individual level of analysis suggests that forgiveness is more likely to emerge in close, committed, satisfying relationships than in relationships characterized by distance, indifference, and dissatisfaction (Fehr et al., 2010; Fincham, 2000). Nonetheless, research on relationships and forgiveness at the organizational level of analysis is almost nonexistent. We maintain that when organizations foster relationality as a core organizational value (as compared to treating organizations as only driven by economic, task-oriented concerns; Weber, 1947), a culture of forgiveness can likewise be expected to emerge. To illustrate these effects, we review here the impact of relational leadership, embeddedness, and job design.

Relational leadership. Among the constellation of traits and contexts theorized to typify the relational leader, relational self-construal stands as perhaps the most salient (Uhl-Bien, 2006). When leaders emphasize a relational self-construal, they view themselves as fundamentally connected to others (Cross & Madson, 1997). Consistent with recent social cognitive models of leadership (Lord & Brown, 2001), we posit that relational leaders highlight

the importance of a relationship orientation to their followers, influencing leader-follower relations and relations between subordinates as well. More specifically, we suggest that relational leaders directly model the importance of high-quality relationships through empathy, prosocial behavior, and acts of apology when offenses occur, facilitating a culture of forgiveness.

Embeddedness. Beyond leader relationality, employees' embeddedness in organizational networks can also act as an affordance of forgiveness culture emergence. Embeddedness is defined by three interrelated factors: employees' connections to other members of the organization, their sense of fit with the organization, and the level of personal sacrifice that turnover would entail (Mitchell, Holtom, Lee, Sablinski, & Erez, 2001). Here we argue that organizations that have high levels of embeddedness facilitate relational virtues, in turn allowing cultures of forgiveness to thrive. Consistent with this perspective, Finkel, Rusbult, Kumashiro, and Hannon (2002) found that victims who strongly desire to persist within the victim-offender relationship are more likely to forgive interpersonal offenses than their less embedded peers.

Relational job design. Regardless of a leader's relational orientation or one's embeddedness in the organization, some jobs are simply designed to facilitate positive interpersonal contact and prosocial behavior. When jobs are designed for prosocial impact, employees become motivated to help others in the organizational environment (Grant, 2007). This is in contrast to jobs designed solely out of self-interest, which constrain individual behavior even among employees otherwise inclined to be other-oriented (Tett & Burnett, 2003). Extended to the conflict context, we thus suggest that when jobs are designed for prosocial impact, employees can be expected to respond to aggression, victimization, and conflict with benevolence and the motivation to act prosocially through forgiveness.

Building Forgiveness Through Organizational Values: Temperance

The Oxford English Dictionary defines temperance as "the practice or habit of restraining oneself in provocation, passion, desire, etc." Social science research in turn most often portrays temperance as a virtue and character strength, situated within the literatures on positive psychology and positive organizational scholarship (Peterson & Seligman, 2003). Within the context of forgiveness cultures we conceptualize temperance as a suite of organizational values and norms that encourage thoughtful, benevolent responses to conflict. At the individual level, research supports the notion that forgiveness entails thoughtful reflection, empathy, and perspective taking (McCullough et al., 1997; Worthington, 2006). Thus we hypothesize that when organizations provide a context that encourages temperance after conflict, forgiveness cultures will emerge. Here we discuss mindfulness, self-control, and open-mindedness as three mechanisms through which temperance facilitates forgiveness culture emergence.

Mindfulness. Rooted in the doctrine of Buddhism and related philosophical traditions, the concept of mindfulness is only beginning to emerge in the social sciences. Brown and Ryan (2003) define mindfulness as a state of awareness and attention to the present moment. When in a mindful state, individuals possess a unique capacity to regulate their responses to environmental cues and respond to negative environmental events with calmness, patience, and neutrality (Brown, Ryan, & Creswell, 2007). When leaders engage in mindful behavior – awareness, attention, receptiveness to the moments they encounter, and non-judgmental reactions to the self and others – employees can be expected to adopt a parallel set of behavioral competencies, leading to forgiveness culture emergence.

Self-control. When individuals forego short-term gains in the pursuit of long-term goals, they are engaging in self-control (Myrseth & Fishbach, 2009). Most relevant to the current research, studies suggest that self-control can mitigate the effects of transgressions on revenge. In a series of experiments Bordia, Restubog, and Tang (2008) found that self-control moderates the effects of vengeful motivations on actual revenge behavior. Put differently, self-control provides victims with the resources to inhibit their antisocial inclinations and shift toward more benevolent response patterns. Given that self-control is a flexible resource that can be cultivated over time (Baumeister, Gailliot, DeWall, & Oaten, 2006), we hypothesize that organizations can likewise foster self-control in their employees when it is rewarded and made salient by the organization's leadership, with contaminant effects on forgiveness culture emergence.

Open-mindedness. Whereas conflict frequently entails egocentric biases and attribution errors, research suggests that forgiveness is facilitated perspective taking (Exline, Baumeister, Zell, Kraft, & Wilvliet, 2008). Central to this ability open-mindedness. When individuals approach conflict open-mindedly they are able to integrate others' perspectives with their own, positively influencing the quality of group outcomes. Conversely, when conflict is approached in a closed-minded manner, the quality of victim and offender outcomes is likely to decrease (de Zavala, Cislak, & Wesolowska, 2010). Given these links we posit that open-mindedness will facilitate inclinations to act prosocially and benevolently following conflict. When leaders encourage employees to be open-minded and demonstrate its importance through their own behavior, a culture of forgiveness can be expected to thrive.

Building Forgiveness Through Organizational Values: Dignity

Beyond relationality and temperance, cultures of forgiveness can be expected to thrive in organizations that inculcate fundamental values of dignity, humanity, and respect. Research generally supports the value and importance of treating employees humanely. For example, Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter, and Ng (2001) demonstrated that employees who are treated with sensitivity experience greater workplace satisfaction, commitment, trust, and productivity. Within the realm of forgiveness, research likewise specifically highlights the importance of humanity, dignity, and respect. Most notably, Luchies, Finkel, McNulty, and Kumashiro (2009) provide evidence that disrespected victims experience a "doormat" effect when they forgive, negatively impacting their well-being. In this section we examine individualized consideration, justice/fairness, and systems for voice as promoters of forgiveness culture emergence.

Individualized consideration. Leaders are often criticized for being largely indifferent to their employees' personal success, happiness, and well-being. However, some are lauded for their willingness and motivation to act as mentors to their employees. Central to this concept of treating employees with respect, dignity, and fairness is individualized consideration (Bass, 1985). Previous research supports the utility of individualized consideration as a means through which organizations can positively impact employee commitment, satisfaction, and performance (Bycio, Hackett, & Allen, 1995). Research has even conceptualized individual consideration as a form of altruism whereby leaders engage in frequent and efficacious prosocial behavior with their subordinates (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999). Extended to the context of forgiveness, individualized consideration can be expected to facilitate a culture of dignity and respect between leaders and employees when conflict arises. From a social learning perspective, employees who witness individualized consideration should likewise seek to treat their coworkers similarly, further enabling the emergence of a culture of forgiveness.

Justice and fairness. Respect for employees' dignity is not only instantiated through leader behaviors, but also through structures that encourage and value justice and fairness. Specifically, research suggests that organizations can cultivate dignity and respect through norms for both interpersonal justice, which emphasizes politeness, dignity, and respect in the allocation of resources, and procedural justice, which emphasizes fair and transparent procedures in the allocation of resources (Bies & Moag, 1986; Colquitt et al., 2001). Social psychological research furthermore confirms that forgiveness is facilitated by victims' feelings of voice (Frantz & Bennis, 2005) and self-respect (Fehr et al., 2010). Thus, we hypothesize that cultures of forgiveness will emerge when organizations foster dignity through justice and fairness.

Systems for voice. As an organizational structure, respect for employees' dignity can also be transmitted through organizational dispute resolution (ODR) systems, typified by procedures for arbitration, mediation, and formal grievance (Olson-Buchanan & Boswell, 2009). Beyond their practical efficacy, research suggests that ODR systems are critical for facilitating a sense of respect and fairness within organizations (Ury, Brett, & Goldberg, 1988). Indeed, Olson-Buchanan and Boswell (2009) cite fairness perceptions as a primary goal of ODR system implementation. As with norms for justice and individualized consideration, ODR systems can be expected to facilitate forgiveness culture emergence by enhancing employees' perceptions that they are appreciated and treated with dignity, fairness, and respect.

FORGIVENESS CULTURE IN ACTION: HELPING, BUILDING, AND CREATING

Central to our theory of forgiveness culture emergence is the assertion that cultures of forgiveness are not just food for thought but food for action – that they display meaningful and lasting consequences for organizations and their various stakeholders. Since a comprehensive review of all potential consequences of forgiveness culture is beyond the scope of this paper, we focus on three key categories of behaviors to illustrate its wide-ranging effects: helping, building, and creating. Whereas our primary focus is on the cross-level effects of cultures of forgiveness on individual behavior, we assume that these effects can lead to aggregate organizational outcomes such as intra-organizational network density and organizational effectiveness.

Helping. Previous research first indicates that forgiveness exerts a direct and positive effect on helping behavior. After granting forgiveness, victims are more likely to make personal sacrifices for the partner, to respond constructively to future destructive acts, and to cooperate with their offenders in social dilemma tasks (Karremans & Van Lange, 2004). Research on gratitude suggests a reciprocal effect as well, such that offenders are more likely to help their victims after forgiveness is granted (McCullough, Tsang, & Emmons, 2004). Beyond the victim-offender dyad, research furthermore suggests that forgiveness can encourage more helping behaviors in general. When the concept of forgiveness was made salient, Karremans, Van Lange, and Holland (2005) demonstrated significant increases in willingness to both donate money to a charity and spend time volunteering for the same organization.

Building. The second positive organizational consequence of a culture of forgiveness is its impact on relationship repair and relationship development. Forgiveness is closely associated with reconciliation following workplace transgressions (Aquino et al., 2006) and is likewise associated with the quality of the relationship after reconciliation takes place (Fincham, Paleri, & Regalia, 2002). Research on social network dynamics implies an even broader set of consequences of forgiveness on organizations' relational structures. Following the tenants of balance theory, reconciliation between victims and offenders can be expected to produce triadic

transitivity (Contractor, Wasserman, & Faust, 2006). Through reconciliation and triadic transitivity, organizations can therefore also build dense social networks with concomitant implications for firm performance (Oh, Chung, & Labianca, 2006).

Creating. Beyond helping and building, cultures of forgiveness also hold implications for “creating” behaviors. By this we refer to individuals’ and organizations’ capacity to achieve their goals with respect to creative performance and innovation. When mired in conflict, people exhibit cognitive rigidity and a narrowed focus on the conflict event (Deutsch, 1969; Staw, Sandelands, & Dutton, 1981). Multiple studies have in turn shown that conflict is particularly detrimental to performance on subsequent creative tasks, which require broad thinking and defocused attention – the antithesis of the types of cognitive states typically found during conflict (Carnevale & Probst, 1998). Research on forgiveness suggests that victims who forgive are conversely able to move beyond the offense, exhibiting decreased rumination over the focal event (Fehr et al., 2010). These findings suggest that forgiveness could restore cognitive resources and provide a hereto unexamined performance advantage.

CONCLUSION

In previous theoretical treatments of workplace forgiveness, scholars have mentioned the perceived relevance of forgiveness as one barrier to its integration into organizational cultures. To quote Stone (2002):

“When I interviewed executives in the USA the common opinion was that forgiveness was an abstract philosophical or religious idea that was ‘inappropriate’ to discuss in the workplace. It often brought up fears about losing trust and/or control. There was a common fear that the balance of power would be disrupted and it would create a permissive environment that would lead to chaos and anarchy” (p. 278-279).

In this paper we present an alternative view – that forgiveness cultures in fact facilitate organizational performance through multiple affective, cognitive, and motivational processes. Through a tripartite model of the core values that facilitate forgiveness culture emergence we likewise present multiple paths to forgiveness for managers seeking to incorporate the concept into their own organizations. At the same time, we recognize potential boundary conditions to the positive effects of forgiveness cultures. Forgiveness should be predicated upon goodwill toward the offender, lest the victim become a “doormat” (Luchies et al., 2009). Furthermore, efforts in fostering a forgiveness culture must reflect organizations’ values, or companies risk negative attributions from employees and stakeholders (Nishii, Lepak, & Schneider, 2008). Caveats aside, we suggest that cultures of forgiveness are predominantly positive, leading to workplaces that are at once compassionate, caring, and productive.

ENDNOTE

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