Leadership Through Organizational Forgiveness

By Kim Cameron

After experiencing organizational harm, damage, trauma, or injustice, one challenge facing leaders is to help the organization heal, replenish, restore efficacy and positive energy, and enhance resiliency. Fostering forgiveness is one effective mechanism for achieving those outcomes. This is a brief summary of guiding principles for leaders relating to organizational forgiveness.

Foundations and Assumptions

The nature of forgiveness is often misunderstood and misinterpreted. Consequently, it is important to begin with an understanding of what forgiveness is and is not.

1. Forgiveness is a universal human virtue. Almost every day individuals offer forgiveness to others for offenses or affronts in their interpersonal relationships. Likewise, virtually every modern religious tradition advocates forgiveness.

2. Forgiveness usually occurs in collaboration with other virtues such as compassion, humility, gratitude, hope, and love.

3. Complete forgiveness has both an intrapersonal dimension (a reframing of personal feelings and attitudes) and an interpersonal dimension (reconciliation in relationships), so both personal and interpersonal change is required.

4. Forgiveness is not neutral. It does not require abandoning anger or resentment, nor does it require pardoning or dismissing the offense. It involves acknowledging and reframing negative feelings and attitudes.

5. Forgiveness is not weak, cowardly, or a retreat. It is a gift that requires strength and the ability to create transformational change.

6. Forgiveness fosters healing, restitution, and restoration in both giver and receiver. Forgiving individuals experience positive outcomes such as greater life satisfaction, empowerment, self-esteem, and faster and more complete recovery from disease. It also reduces anxiety, depression, anger, and physical illness. Forgiving organizations experience more trusting alliances, social capital, humanness in the workplace, productivity, quality, customer care, and a sense of calling among employees.

7. Forgiveness is active not passive. It involves not only the cancellation of negative emotions and attitudes, but also the development of positive emotions and attitudes.

8. Forgiveness is not all or nothing. People differ in the motives and maturity with which they can forgive. For example, six points of a continuum might be considered:

   (1) "We will forgive if we can punish the offender."
   (2) "We will forgive if justice is done."
   (3) "We will forgive if society expects it."
   (4) "We will forgive if an authority or prevailing code demands it."
   (5) "We will forgive if it re-establishes order."
   (6) "We will forgive because we love the offender." The prevalence of the first few contingencies in most individuals suggests that organizations must often provide justice and restitution for forgiveness to occur.

The Role of Leadership

In fostering and enabling forgiveness, the challenge of leaders is to provide meaning, vision, legitimacy, and support.

1. Leaders provide meaning and vision.
Leaders acknowledge the trauma, harm, and injustice that their organization members have experienced, but they define the occurrence of hurtful events as an opportunity to move forward. A new target for action is identified.

Leaders associate the outcomes of the organization (e.g., its products and services) with a higher purpose that provides personal meaning for organization members. This higher purpose helps replace a focus on self (e.g., retribution) with a focus on a higher objective.

High standards are not compromised. Forgiveness is not synonymous with tolerance of error. Forgiving mistakes does not mean excusing them or lowering expectations. Forgiveness should facilitate excellence and improvement rather than inhibiting it.

2. Leaders provide legitimacy and support.

Leaders communicate that human development and human welfare are as important in management priorities as the financial bottom line. When individuals experience understanding and support, as well as positive developmental experiences, they catch sight of an avenue for moving past injury. These experiences and support also provide the foundation upon which positive financial performance is built.

Since forgiveness is usually offered in partnership with other virtues, the common language used by leaders includes the use of virtuous terms such as forgiveness, compassion, humility, courage, and love. Public expressions using virtuous language make it visible and legitimate for employees as well as external stakeholders to feel and behave virtuously.

Virtuous actions are highlighted, celebrated, and amplified through reinforcing structures, systems, and networks. Stories and scripts that define the core values of the organization contain examples of forgiveness and virtue. Organizational resources are made available to support expressions of moving past the trauma.

Some Leadership Prescriptions

Some prescriptions that characterize best organizational practice, that facilitate forgiveness and the ability of the organization to move forward, include:

1. Acknowledge anger and resentment. Recognize that forgiveness does not occur quickly. Allow time for grieving.
2. Clarify the target of forgiveness. Identify the human beings involved—both offenders and victims. The target of forgiveness is people, not objects.
3. Provide opportunities for interaction and conversation. Forgiveness usually requires opportunities for verbal expressions, empathetic listening, and human support.
4. Demarcate the end of the hurtful or victim phase from the beginning of the healing and restoration phase, often with a symbolic event. Provide visible avenues to help people begin to move toward desirable objectives.
5. Provide opportunities to develop and display positive affect, often by doing good as well as doing well. Find ways for victims to serve others. Allow people to practice giving.
6. Honor justice and equity. Work toward justice for offenders as well as restoration for those harmed. Most people have difficulty forgiving in the absence of justice, apology, or restitution.
7. Create positive memories. Celebrate the best of the past, and move on. Hold a "funeral" to memorialize victims, but articulate a bright, new future.
8. Provide reinforcement and resources for activities that help organization members progress toward meaningful, instrumental objectives. Foster an optimistic climate and a sense of hope.
9. Maintain leadership visibility and accessibility to those harmed in order to inspire confidence, clarify vision and reinforce concern.
10. Gather and record stories and examples of virtuousness. Recount incidents where the organization fostered virtue.

Among my favorite examples of organizational forgiveness is illustrated by Desmond Tutu's explanation of the peaceful transition in South Africa from conditions of inhumane oppression to freely offered forgiveness. An excerpt explains the meaning and power of forgiveness.

"Forgiving and being reconciled are not about pretending that things are other than they are. It is not patting one another on the back and turning a blind eye to the wrong. True reconciliation exposes the awfulness, the abuse, the pain, the degradation, the truth.
It could even sometimes make things worse. . . In forgiving, people are not asked to forget. On the contrary, it is important to remember, so that we should not let such atrocities happen again. Forgiveness does not mean condoning what has been done. It means taking what happened seriously and not minimizing it; drawing out the sting in the memory that threatens to poison our entire existence. It involves trying to understand the perpetrators and so have empathy, to try to stand in their shoes and appreciate the sort of pressures and influences that might have conditioned them . . . Forgiving means abandoning your right to pay back the perpetrator in his own coin, but it is a loss that liberates the victim. . . we will always need a process of forgiveness and reconciliation to deal with those unfortunate yet all too human breaches in relationships. They are an inescapable characteristic of the human condition.” (Desmond Tutu, No Future Without Forgiveness, 1999.)

Footnotes:
This material emerged from a research project conducted by the author and sponsored by the John Templeton Foundation on forgiveness and organizational virtuousness after organizational downsizing and crisis. It also is based on literature associated with forgiveness as illustrated by various compilations of writings, including:

