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**Critical Incident Study on Forgiveness in the Organizational Context**

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## **Abstract**

Forgiveness has been subject of interest, mainly in the psychology fields of study. Relatively to the organizational context, this topic has been somehow put aside and settled as something that is purely an intra-individual phenomenon which organizations cannot force, or even stimulate.

As conflicts are common within organizations and being often difficult to overcome, eyes have turned into the role forgiveness might take in this scenario.

Despite forgiveness being accepted as an intrapersonal decision and a result of predisposition as it is a result of education and culture. This study, as some already done, refuses to accept forgiveness as an unchangeable behavior that cannot be manipulated or induced by managers or by organizational context. Therefore, offering a set of incidents as well as their classification, that have been identified by individuals performing different types organizational roles in different organization which is believed as being a genuine way of delivering to the reader a set of actions and behaviors that if taken, may incentivize or inhibit forgiveness.

**Key words:** Forgiveness, incidents, offense, organizations, transgression, offender, victim.

## Literature Review

Forgiveness has been on the spotlight of human psychology study for many years as well as its value, motivations and causes. Despite the interest forgiveness awakens, only until recent studies, forgiveness was believed to be, mostly, an intrapersonal capability and decision, isolated from influences from the surrounding context. (Bies, Barclay, Tripp & Aquino, 2015; Fehr & Gelfand, 2012).

Furthermore, there is little agreement when it comes to the value of forgiveness itself and when should an individual forgive the trespasses of another. Jesus Christ and Mahatma Gandhi were popular public defenders of forgiveness as a positive natural response to insults against others identifying it as one of the biggest love expressions a human can make towards another. (Rynne, 2008) Defending opposite perspectives towards forgiveness are popular thinkers such as Friedrich Nietzsche, who diminish forgiveness to the level of actions taken by social impotent individuals, demonstrating therefore, inability of effectively retaliate against more powerful offenders. (Nietzsche, 1887/1967)

A definition of forgiveness offered by *The Academy of Management Annals* which is a result of the integrative study of forgiveness across different disciplines is as follows: “*Forgiveness is the internal act of relinquishing anger, resentment, and the desire to seek revenge against someone who has caused harm as well as the enhancement of positive emotions and thoughts toward the harm-doer*”. (Bies, Barclay, Tripp & Aquino, 2015)

There is also a structural difference between forgiveness and reconciliation which is, by many, difficult to identify but Aquino enlightens the distinction. In fact forgiveness does

not imply a change in the behaviors of the victim towards the offender but rather a change in emotions and thoughts towards the offender. Moreover forgiveness does not necessarily imply reconciliation whereas reconciliation, if it is complete, implies forgiving the offender. (Aquino, Tripp & Bies, 2006)

Several objections stand against the discussion and even application of the term “Forgiveness” in organizational context:

- 1) Forgiveness is generally used in close and valuable interpersonal relationships (i.e. valuable relations), making dubious the plausibility of discussing forgiveness in the organizational context once the goal of organizations is that all individuals that are part of it, being aligned towards common goals. (Bies, Barclay, Tripp, & Aquino, 2015). It seems on the other hand acceptable if the value every individual has to the relationship and to the organization, and vice-versa, is higher than the costs of revenging against the offender. (McCullough, Kurzban & Tabak, 2013).
- 2) The close association of the term and principles supporting forgiveness with religiousness is something that big and open-minded organizations that want to attract every kind of person might not want support in order not to scare people that are not religious. (Chusmir & Parker, 1991).
- 3) Forgiveness in organizations can actually be a sign, or just perceived as a sign, of lack of ability to react to offenses and may open the precedent to actual or trials of future offenses. (Fitness & Peterson, 2008).

Members within organizations are to share professional goals; therefore it seems intuitive that organizations benefit from maintaining those members in their teams in the case of

transgression, if possible. One of the interviewees, which is a board member, confirmed mentioning: *“Even if the best solution is the separation of the individual from the organization the part that loses the most is the organization because of investment made in each and every worker. In big organizations, we cannot teach everyone how to behave in every new situation an individual is faced with; the solution is creating mechanisms and procedures that guarantee the presence of the organization’s values in the activities of the individuals. Generally, organizations when faced with someone unable to meet his/her objectives, are willing to create opportunities within the company so that the experience and company knowledge of that specific person is not lost.”*

The willingness and motivation to forgive the offender has to have its origin in a genuine choice from within the victim and cannot be something forced by third parties not even forced by ourselves as it is possible to pretend having forgiven someone ac actually have not. (Enright & Coyle, 1998) Despite this fact, conflicts are going to exist, and as organizations become increasingly heterogeneous and ideas are questioned by individuals that possess different perspectives about the same reality.

When conflicts don’t focus on ideas but rather on people they are likely to stand as a personal offense jeopardizing the future of the relation. After the conflict taking place, relations might not be restored and people or groups that used to relate may part from each other in a definite condition, maintaining only a minimum or eventually no contact, which in the organizational context usually means low productivity and performance.



However, relationships may be restored, by a choice to forgive the wrong-doer. Forgiving is the choice of the victim for releasing anger, reducing the rumination over the offense, towards a blameworthy transgressor. (McCullough & vanOyen Witvliet, 2002.)

Forgiveness is a phenomenon resulting from the biological, psychological, marital, familial, community, cultural and also religious contexts in which an individual is inserted and influenced by, being, therefore, reasonable to induce that although being in the organizational context, individuals cannot part from the way he/she deals with forgiveness in any other circumstance or context of their lives. (Chusmir & Parker, 1991). This marginal influence of the context in which individuals are in the way forgiveness is dealt with was mentioned by an interviewee in the statement: *“My education as a Catholic doesn’t allow my behavior within the organizational context, to be different from what I believe it is the right way to act in every moment which is giving everyone chances to emend their bad deeds, and being willing to forgive in first hand.”*.

Some distinguish two types of forgiveness: 1) decisional forgiveness which is characterizes as a change in the behavioral motivations towards the offender and 2) emotional forgiveness which is defined as a substitution of negative, unforgiving emotions with positive, other-oriented ones. (Worthington, 2005)

Restorative justice, compassion and temperance are values that might foster a forgiving environment or climate in organizations. In this study, by, forgiveness climate focuses its actions and expectations on the offender’s side about behaviors such as apology and understanding what was wrong.

The values that contribute in a major part for the climates at organizations to be forgiving were redefined developed in the Fehr and Gelfand's study (Fehr & Gelfand, 2012), and we're taking this values as a point of departure and guide our analysis by them.

Restorative justice is the is the intra-organizational belief in the benefit of involving all the stakeholders of the conflict in the resolution of the same, therefore taking advantage of knowing all the information and creating the possibility of include and external member unbiased to judge behaviors and analyzed them in the context of the organization, in particular its values. All parties are asked to externalize all the perspective they have on the conflict. Victims are granted with the opportunity to show their hurt and influence the resolution process and offenders the opportunity to actively act in order to reintegrate in the organization and present the reasoning behind their actions. The studies cannot prove by any analytical way that restorative justice promotes forgiveness in organizations because if asked, stakeholders involved in a conflict wouldn't be able to measure if this value contributed to the outcome of the restorative process of the relation. Despite of the inability to be certain about answers, (Stanton, 2011) conducted case studies in US health care units that demonstrated that there is a positive correlation between Restorative Justice and Forgiveness as it becomes more common and valued by stakeholders of the organization.

Compassion is other value if stimulated it will create a more forgiving environment. Compassion is defined as the shared belief that individuals should care about others' pain and act in accordance to relieving others from what makes them suffer. Individuals that are aware of the importance compassion might have in an organization, usually are less likely to punish and will likely act in a just manner.

The third value is temperance which is defined as the self-control and by thoughtfully processing the information around a conflict in order to prevent parties from allowing a conflict to escalate unnecessarily.

### **Conflicts in Organizations**

The importance of discussing the forgiveness in organizations increases because of the fertility of the organizations material to the emergence of these frictions between individuals and the easiness with which people are offended by others' actions and behaviors. Conflicts are one of the biggest concerns of managers as they, in general, conflict damages relationships once its focus easily shifts from discussing ideas to defending one's pride, inhibiting to distinguish the scope of conflicts. Theories also defend that certain amounts of conflict are beneficial to organizations. Managers should, therefore, try to maintain optimum levels of conflict to keep their organizations and teams competitive and innovative. (Whetten & Cameron, 1989). A graph of the equilibrium amount of conflict is depicted in appendix 1.

Studies have shown organizations and teams promoting internal conflicts over matters are more likely to entail successful strategic decisions by being more prepared to unpredictable scenarios. It is also important to mention that the alternative to conflict is not reaching a consensus but apathy and disengagement. (Eisenhardt, Kahwajy & Bourgeois, 1997). These theories were indirectly mentioned during the interviews conducted: *"A personal opinion that comes from my experience in human relations and in professional relations is that when a company communicates as a family, directly and straight to the point with the objective of helping the other, conflict becomes a tool to help rather than to harm."*

In theory there are two types of conflicts: 1) Interpersonal conflict which is related with the disagreement about personal values, conceptions or culture. This type of conflict usually leads to low productivity and motivation within a team. 2) Task conflicts, which relates with divergences in perspectives, opinions and values. This type of conflict is usually related with innovation, better decision-making and might be categorized as the positive outcome from conflicts. (Huan & Yazdanifard, 2012).

A risk that every manager incurs is the vulnerability of conflicts changing from being just task related to the state of relationship, which might be counterproductive and instead of a positive outcome, it results can be offense which is what forgiveness aims to address.

## **Methodology**

Critical Incident Technique (CIT) is a method to extract from events the incidents/behaviors that are critical to accomplish certain goals. In the case of this work, CIT was applied to identify incidents in which forgiveness is expressed either positive either negatively in organizations and to establish standards concerning the perceived impact of different types of behaviors in the successfulness of forgiving in organizations.

Actions that might contribute to forgiveness and others that inhibit it to occur, the actions by which forgiveness, or the failure to forgive, is recognized by different people in different industries were identified and mapped.

As mentioned in the literature review, forgiveness cannot be forced it but has to come by own will. But many times forgiveness isn't obvious not immediate and a Critical Incident

study on the forgiveness in organizations may facilitate the process to people that might want to apply it in this same context.

The study was conducted through face-to-face interviews whose survey is presented in appendix 2. 17 audiotaped interviews were conducted originating a total of 79 incidents. Data collection time was around 8 hours and 30 minutes and interviews were transcribed to text in order to have more genuine and authentic information about the incidents collected. Different types of organizations took part in the study, from public sector, to private multinational to start-ups. These different organizations work in different industries, one in Agriculture, one in Technology, other in Health, other in Social Impact, and other in Telco.

It was applied to this study a quantitative measure of the incidents by its impact on the forgiveness of the organization in each example. This classification is called Likert-type scale which is characterized as offering an even number of possibilities to rate a qualitative action or behavior and this rating style is believed to transmit a more genuine rating than interval of values rating types and the scale goes from 1 to 7, the higher the number the more an incident contributes to the occurrence of forgiveness. (Statistics Roundtable: Likert Scales and Data Analyses.).

## **Results**

The types incidents extracted from the interviews are listed in appendix 3 and were grouped in **eleven** 2<sup>nd</sup>-order categories which afterwards were grouped in **five** broader 3<sup>rd</sup>-order types of incidents. This study takes a closer look to the 3<sup>rd</sup>-order incidents once are the ones that group representative incidents.

The **first** 3<sup>rd</sup>-order one was named *Collaborative Work to Manage Expectations* and is related to the efforts organizations make in order to incentivize transparency, promote open-communication and reaching agreements on how parties should act from the moment of the conflict onwards. This category sums 16% of the total incidents with has an average rate of 5,875 in the scale which makes plausible to believe that this type of incident incentives forgiveness although not occurring that often. An example of an incident from this category is transcribed: “*We perceived at a higher level of organization what was happening...By calling the ones involved both sides understood that the conflict was a complete nonsense by its lack of context. We had to put an end to the disciplinary procedure, creating thus an exception for this case.*”). A statement from a business owner also reinforces the usefulness of planning goals together: “*Organizations that have well-structured-defined goals, forgiveness works in a very different manner from what it works in organizations that do not have goals as clearly defined. This ability to forgive and accept the failures on achieving goals exist because it is easier to see the causes or even the justification can be supported, making it much easier to forgive and understand. It also stands as an advantage as feedback is easily and fairly given with justified causes and examples of behaviors being also useful when ranking the performance of an individual.*”

The **second** 3<sup>rd</sup>-order category is named *Share Knowledge on the process*, summing up to 10,13% of total incidents, being the category with less incidents it is the one with higher rating in the scale of contribution to forgiveness, with average of 6,16 out of 7. Incidents constituting this category are the ones involving actions of asking and giving feedback so that individuals and teams can adjust their behaviors accordingly to address the needs of the

organization as a whole, and also the ones that involve mentoring and training so that transgressions that have its origins in mistakes won't happen again. *"A director and his commercial team had a harsh relation and he hired my services to make a joint effort to get all parts accepting their different characteristics by perceiving that it could be complementary and beneficial for the company and values were set up to unite the group and it changed the mindset on how should everyone look at the organization, making everyone engaged."*

The **third** 3<sup>rd</sup>-order group of incidents was named: *Trust and Empower Teams*, caused by being composed by incidents that reflect the attitude with which organizations face the freedom and respect for the individuality of each worker. Only 14% of the incidents are allocated in this category but again, its incidents have an average rate of contribution to forgiveness of 5,89. An example of an incident within this category is the following: *"I was the youngest of the team and I was the coordinator, which did not inspire much respect. The motivation of the team members was only the pay check at the end of the month and they weren't being paid since several months. The mood of the team was very negative and it was affecting the results of the project. I decided to see with my team that I was trying to make things work by doing a competent job; moreover they realized I recognized they were right to feel cheated and that I was trying to make the company pay them. I also highlighted that we were not just there for the money and that the result was worth more than it."*

The **forth** 3<sup>rd</sup>-order category that was created is the *Unilateral decision Making-Disengagement* and is built with incidents that came from the decision of just one party of the conflict. It includes incidents form accommodation and conformation to actions as

Humiliation and marginalization of elements of the organization. Disregarding the reasons and the legitimacy of the causes, this type of actions culminates in disengagement of the individual due to not feeling as not belonging to the organization because they are not asked to participate in the decision-making process. This category accounts with 12,66% of the total incidents collected (10/79) and as an average rate of 3. An example of this type of incident is: *“A worker was nurturing a bad working environment and contaminating everyone around with it by not respecting privacy and personally offending. His direct superior humiliated him in front of everyone by unveiling personal confidential information. The result was the resignation of this person of that person followed by efforts persecute the director.”*. This reveals that normally in cases of attacking the integrity of an individual the result is a total, unsolvable, breach in relationship.

The **fifth** 3<sup>rd</sup>-order category gathers the incidents that correspond to the intention of finishing the relationship between the parts in the conflict definitely, and constitute this category three 2<sup>nd</sup> order categories worth mentioning due to its weigh: *“Formally Punish”* such as legal accusations in court of law, *“Cut communications”* as for the example of a person only communicating through an intermediary and finally the group of the *“Separation of the Team”* that involves being fired, relocating, suspending and others. This is the group of incidents that occurs with higher frequency, accounting with 46,84% of the total incidents, (37/79) with an average rate of 2,175. Thus standing, as the group with the lowest rate, meaning that interviews allowed assuming this type of action contributes to non-forgiving solutions when conflicts arise. It is, also, worth mentioning the two most frequent incidents, which are *“Firing”* and *“Relocating within the organization”*. The first,



firing someone is the act, either with or without consent, laying someone off the company because it is beneficial to at least the organization to be without that individual. It accounts with 12,65% of the incidents (10). The second, relocating someone, is the most common solution to conflicts according to the interviews, summing to 16,45% (13) of the total incidents. An example of a situation in which an incident within this category is presented by: *“A person was no longer useful in the team because he was not performing as we knew he could, and he was moved to another department which made him give value to his job, starting to perform as he should since the beginning”*.

The analysis of 3<sup>rd</sup>-order categories of incidents is depicted graphically in appendix 4, in which the horizontal axis is the number of the 3<sup>rd</sup>-order category cataloged by the labels on the right, the vertical axis expresses the contribution to forgiveness in the scale from 1 to 7 and the number inside the ball represents the average rate of all incidents in each category. The size of the boll represents the number of incidents in the categories. The numbers of incidents corresponding to each category are also expressed in appendixes 5 and 6, in the absolute and relative way respectively.

## **Discussion**

It figures that there are behaviors that express the will of the organization in being open to work together with individuals to face conflicts, are positive in promoting forgiveness. This incidents are activated through gathering parties to discuss the issue, to share information and to manage expectations and to plan future actions bearing in mind that the aim is the restoration of the relationship which to be fully accomplished must also have an intrapersonal willingness. It is also related with the values that (Fehr & Gelfand, 2012)

present of Temperance in the sense of ensuring that offense doesn't escalate into major conflict that would be of a more difficult healing, and also the value of Restorative Justice due to the fact that the biggest effort is if bring parts together promoting a transparent communication with a balanced power structure so that individuals that work in an hierarchical inferior position fell free to express their thoughts and beliefs. Regarding this data and conclusions, behaviors promoting the communication between parties involved in conflicts and planning together strategies to avoid recurrence of transgressions are most advised. Equally positive in terms of contribution to forgiving in organizations are behaviors that are fostered by the value of Compassion, as well, referred in the literature review, such as giving permanent feedback to help others improving and support mentoring from more experienced co-workers, thus allowing transgressors to feel that the organization cares for them and wants the relation to be maintained.

In turn, actions that show organizations imposition of decisions and rules without involving parties of a conflict in the decision-making process are inhibitors of forgiveness. Whatever the conflict is, if there is willingness of both parties to redeem and forgive the trespass but the organization imposes a solution that is not a consensual one, communications should be open and direct to try to understand every aspect of the solution. This can be in terms of imposition of rules or an individual being fired or suspended without insufficient information. This leads us to conclude that it seems very difficult to forgive when decisions are taken unilaterally. Actions as the ones that constitute the fourth and fifth categories of incidents are to be avoided if the objective is the forgiveness of parties itself, which usually is not the case.

Also interesting to highlight is the different rating in our scale that incidents falling in the category of “Relocation within the organization” are given by interviewees. While some interviewees classify those actions with a rate of 6 over 7, meaning that that specific action was contributing a lot to forgiveness, other interviewees classified those same behaviors with a 1 over 7. This difference allows for two different take-outs: 1) is the non-intuitively difference from emotional and decisional forgiveness discussed in the literature (Worthington, 2005) and 2) is the relative perspectives that forgiveness has accordingly to the different types of relationship closeness that victim-offender have prior to the offense.

### **Limitations**

Although organizations are groups of individuals working to towards common goals, there are distinctions in the way people face others’ trespasses and the way that an organization must deal with those same faults. Often a certain attitude cannot be tolerated in the organizational context because it jeopardizes not only the image of the organization in the market but also to other employees, although in the humane point of view those transgressions might not mean that the person is a bad professional or that isn’t aligned with the organization’s goals. There are cases in which a penalty, regardless of the harshness must be taken as a sign of the organization’s commitment to assuming a position. Therefore, organizations forgiveness is different to the personal forgiveness.

In the case of the CIT, there are incidents that express the reality in the view of an individual and others of the organization, but an analysis of incidents cannot ensemble a single strategy to deal with conflicts, because what works for some might not work for others.

It might be the case that is better for both organization and individual to being separate, i.e. the individual leaving the organization or a team is sometimes the best possible solution for both parties and forgiveness wasn't possible.

## **Conclusion**

Although it is not consensual how forgiveness is valued in the organizational environment (Bies, Barclay, Tripp & Aquino et. al) and there is no way to individuals inducing forgiveness in their actions or if it is even a possibility to mimic (Enright & Coyle, 1998) having as alternative other forms of conflict management measures such as reconciliation and peaceful co-existence that don't imply such deep emotional efforts as forgiveness.

Through the study of incidents that individuals in organizations have identified as contributors and inhibitors of forgiveness, it might be the case that, if restoration of relationships is the goal (which normally are not, even less in the organizational context, as the organization's goals are settled above the individuals' ones), these actions perceived as being, generally, contributors or inhibitors of forgiveness, if applied to future offense and conflict situations, function and deploy the same impact as the ones cataloged in this CIT study.

When conflicts pass the constructive level, personal conflict subject to escalation and breach in relationship may occur. When it happens and if the parties all want to restore the relationship because it would be beneficial to the organization, forgiveness is a way of achieving that restoration. Although forgiveness is a result of education, culture and

personality there are actions there are expressions of forgiveness and others that are the opposite of forgiveness, as revenge, rumination and anger.

Actions promoting communication and joint efforts made by the parties involved in a conflict, both transgressor and victim, through the sharing knowledge and perspectives on the trespasses in the post-trespass period (e.g. Creation of guidelines and Changing pre-established rules if it results in a higher quality of the relationship to both organization and individual), are fundamental to the establishment of common ground and clarify whether or not the relationship is worth restoring by assuring the transgressor commits to behave differently (e.g. Monitoring and Training). Actions showing trust and empowerment of parties in the post-conflict period are also identified as critical contributors to forgiveness.

Restoration of the relationship is only fully accomplished (Enright, 2001) if parties are open to forgive and be forgiven and if they feel their actions have an impact on the organization. Incidents showing this willingness to forgive are the cases of actions such as apologies, giving second chances, and the attribution of bonuses and prizes. There are also cases for certain businesses for which organizations pre-conceive that it is normal to make mistakes during the processes which allowing individuals to feel unconstrained from the fear of failing, once the organizations understands as a principle.

On the other hand, actions that show that organization don't take into consideration parties' needs and wants like actions that reduce individuals' value and rules enforced without consent from both parties are actions that everyone perceives, without judgement of value, as being associated with feeling of not feeling forgiven or inability of forgive as matters are

unilaterally solved and only one decides, usually, only the most powerful party, the organization, is capable to decide what happens without the other party's consent. Actions which result in the separation of the individuals as is the case of Relocations within the organization or Firing someone are related with situations individuals feel forgiveness did not had space as it was the best intention to the trespass to have the lowest negative impact possible.

Although forgiveness is in its essence a genuine feeling that no one rather the victim in a transgression relationship, can manipulate, and as long as one doesn't decide in his/her rational (Importance of cognition in the decision to forgive: Bies, Barclay, Tripp & Aquino et. al) that the relation is worth restoring, forgiveness is impossible. Despite being characterized as genuine, if the actions this CIT study have collected as identified as being, in most cases, perceived as contributors to forgiveness are taken, then forgiveness, even if not intrinsically felt, will possibly follow. If, on the other hand, actions considered in the majority of cases as being inhibitors of forgiveness are taken, then the result will most likely be not forgiving an offender.

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