

Forgiveness

The ability to forgive is an essential competence for any leader who seeks to make a difference. My post elaborates the *situations where* forgiveness is warranted, *why* the act of forgiveness is a powerful liberating force, and *how* to learn to forgive.

Great leaders show us that forgiveness creates a climate where bitterness, retaliation and anger are dissipated, enabling individuals, organisations and even nations to be in harmony and perform at their best. These words of wisdom from renowned leaders show all of us the way forward.

'Forgiveness liberates the soul. It removes fear. That is why it is such a powerful weapon.'
– Nelson Mandela

'The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong.'
– Mahatma Gandhi

'Forgiveness is not an occasional act; it is a permanent attitude.'
– Martin Luther King, Jr.

When to forgive

Forgiveness is a process that is uniquely personal and has to be embraced consciously before it can translate into leading self, others, organisations, teams or even nations.

At a personal level forgiveness affects all relationships where you might be vulnerable: a longstanding friendship lost, where you felt let down; a marriage breakup caused by an affair; a business partnership destroyed because of a costly mistake; loss of a loved one or permanent disability resulting from medical negligence. Organisationally it could be decision that leads to insolvency, loss of the company, a poorly-handled redundancy; an unfair accusation of bullying or sexual harassment; and many more situations.

For nations where there is a long history of leaders who do not forgive and who constantly remind their people of suffering at the hands of others. For example, Slobodan Milosevic who by reminding the Serbs of six centuries of wrongs perpetrated upon them, caused a decade of war and genocide in the Balkans. Nelson Mandela, in contrast, strove to halt the endless retribution in South Africa by refusing to wallow in the bitterness of the past and moved the divided nation towards reconciliation.

Not forgiving

People who cannot forgive get stuck in a downward spiral of negativity that is crippling for themselves and others. Regrettably, revenge comes more naturally than forgiveness. We all have an innate sense of justice and want others to be held to account and punished for what they have done to us. We want them to acknowledge the pain and hurt they have caused – we want an apology. These frequent and intense negative thoughts about the past and demands for justice obstruct our happiness, interfere with relationships, create a climate of blame, retribution and fear, diminish job satisfaction and productivity, and block effective leadership at all levels.

Forgiveness is a sign of strength, not a weakness or submission to circumstances. On the other hand, forgiveness does not mean:

- ✓ Forgetting who and what caused you offence
- ✓ Excusing the person's words and actions
- ✓ Avoiding conflict with the wrongdoer
- ✓ Being tolerant of repeat behaviour.

An eye-for-an-eye only ends up making the whole world blind

Mahatma Gandhi

Learning to forgive

Forgiveness isn't just saying a few words and moving on. True forgiveness is an act of generosity. It means permanently letting go of resentment and thoughts of revenge. It '*means accepting the apology you'll never receive*'. ⁽¹⁾

When you forgive you relinquish the victim mentality, you feel compassionate

and humble, creating positive internal energy for yourself and healthier relationships with others.

I like the analogy of opening the palm of your hand, dropping what you've been holding on to, and walking away – you have forgiven and let it go. This is the power of acceptance of what is. To surrender to the past and move on.

Everett Worthington, a respected forgiveness researcher, says "You can't hurt the perpetrator by not forgiving, but you can set yourself free" and outlines five steps to do this, using REACH as a mnemonic:

1. **Recall the hurt, visualise the circumstances:** Establish the facts without minimising or exaggeration
2. **Empathise with the perpetrator:** Try to see the events through their eyes, their circumstances, needs
3. **Altruistically grant forgiveness:** This is a gift, an act of compassion without self interest
4. **Commit yourself to make your forgiveness public:** Hold yourself accountable and seek support
5. **Hold on to the forgiveness:** Internalise the positive feelings. Stay with it, sense it in your body.

Everett and other researchers have shown the major and lasting benefits of forgiving – but also counsel against expecting these to flow quickly or easily from REACHing.

A final word

Forgiveness is about healing the memory of harm, not erasing it. It's certainly not about excusing bad behaviour.

Forgiving doesn't change the past, rather it enables you to change the future by releasing you from your own self-destructive thoughts and feelings. Transformational leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, and Martin Luther King, Jr. figured this out, refusing to replay past hurts, and choosing serenity and happiness over righteous anger.

Read more on this topic

- ✓ [Leaders Who Can't Forgive](#) Harvard Business Review by Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries
- ✓ [5 ways forgiveness makes you a better leader](#) by Mark Goulston

(1) Attributed to **Dr Shawne Duperon**, founder of the Nobel Prize-nominated *Project Forgive*.