

FORGIVENESS & MANAGEMENT

Forgiveness for corporate welfare, success and quality of life in business

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“A true leader is able to take advantage of problems and difficulties, no matter how hard they are, in order to ensure that, in the end, people are stronger and closer one to another.”

Nelson Mandela

FORGIVENESS, SCIENCE AND HAPPINESS

A comprehensive method of forgiveness to improve leadership in teams, accomplishing a stress and conflict reduction in workplaces and promoting an ethic corporate management at the same time. Forgiveness applied to well-being in work environment, to business life improvement and to new leadership skills, as well as social & life skills.

Forgiveness is part of a new form of education to awareness and happiness; an evolution strategy which is necessary for health, well-being and quality of life.

It is one of those personal and social skills necessary in a new form of education for all human beings, especially in the education of new leaders.

In the last few years the interest around forgiveness has increased enormously, spreading from spirituality and psychotherapy to science and medicine.

In the past five years several scientific researches about forgiveness have been published, involving neuroscientific studies (this topic will be explained later on). This interest from the scientific community has marked forgiveness as a fundamental instrument for human health and quality of life, not limiting it to the mere psychological and spiritual spheres. A true “Science of Forgiveness” was born, and its social and educational influences will get more and more significant in the future.

The process of forgiveness is a neuronal training that allows developing basic skills in personal, relational and social life: such as transforming problems into opportunities, conflict management, developing a mature form of empathy and a comprehensive view of peace.

EDUCATION TO CONSCIOUSNESS: Management & Forgiveness

“Forgiveness liberates the soul. It removes fear. That is why it is such a powerful weapon.”

Nelson Mandela

The ability to forgive and to stimulate the value of forgiveness in personal relationships and in the surrounding world is the key factor that turns a manager into a transformational leader, able to create and build up valuable changes.

In an environment where relation dynamics generate negative emotions such as anxiety and fear, being conscious and in peace and promoting a lifestyle which considers an error as an opportunity to grow and to learn, transforms management into a precious and valuable instrument for everyone.

Moreover, forgiveness creates the opportunity for creativity and exploration of one's leadership skills.

Warren Bennis describes as necessary conditions for a distinguished leadership a series of virtues that belong to every human being, and are more or less explicit. These are: integrity, magnanimity, dedication, humility, open-mindedness and creativity.

Everyone owns these qualities, but an education to awareness, through forgiveness, is the key way in order to develop them.

Admitting our own responsibility is a crucial factor both in the request of forgiveness and in the grant of forgiveness: the victim and the persecutor must realize that both of them are responsible, they both are the cause of what they experienced and the actions committed. Responsibility is a key factor in the process of forgiveness because it allows the individual to give a new meaning to past experience and to redefine individual identity. In the process of forgiveness, the perception that the resolution of the events takes place thanks to ourselves and depends from our own communication skills and ability to manage the conflict and negative emotions is crucial.

The first, very important step is focusing on our interiority, on what we feel, perceive and do. If the victim and the persecutor experience a sense of helplessness that prevents them from making any change, focusing the attention on internal processes (perceptions, emotions, feelings, thoughts, impulses and compulsions) will make them realize that it is necessary to start from the perceptive and cognitive system, in order to get to the external world. Concentrating on ourselves is the fundamental starting point that brings deep consciousness and balance, then moving to the external world and facing the events with a detached eye and a profound ability to analyse our resources, with much greater serenity.

In a comprehensive perspective, the process of forgiveness is not only limited to the therapeutical or the spiritual aspects, but it reaches, in its most advanced expressions, certain refined levels of human conscience.

If the need of forgiveness starts with the very human need of getting free from sufferance, whatever form this may take, the way to forgiveness helps in the healing from sufferance (physical, vital, emotional, mental and spiritual), sometimes in a very explicit way. However, the deepest and most authentic meaning of forgiveness transcends the therapeutic and spiritual dimensions, and expresses itself at a higher lever where the individual, thanks to a deeper awareness, gets to express himself and to affirm himself as a conscious being, beyond the duality victim-persecutor. Thus it is possible to define forgiveness as a true self-achievement and realization that starts from self-centred needs but leads to a true expansion of consciousness. This is the necessary requirement in order to develop a holistic view of what is defined and perceived as reality.

Learning Forgiveness in Management

It is also important to consider the other aspect of the process of forgiveness, which doesn't focus on who must forgive, but on who should ask for forgiveness. In the most advanced techniques of forgiveness, in the same process both the concession and the request are to be found together, reaching a broader vision of personal and interrelational processes.

Which are the benefits and the importance of asking for forgiveness?

According to the researches carried out by Monbourquette & D'Aspremont (2008), these are the most relevant benefits:

A liberating effect: when forgiveness comes genuinely from within. Acknowledging one's mistakes deeply influences all the different aspects that constitute the individual (physical, vital, emotional, mental and spiritual). The burden of the mistake can indeed provoke stress, guiltiness, anxiety, rigidity and other negative emotions that can weaken the immune system.

Personal and spiritual growth: genuinely asking for forgiveness develops humility, open-mindedness, peace, harmony, compassion, thankfulness and reconciliation, thus it is a great drive towards the psychological and spiritual growth of the individual.

Improvement in relationships: it increases the capacity of communication and empathy, it shortens emotional distance, erases resentments, enables to manage conflicts and the stress generated by tension and narrowness of mind. The interpersonal relationships which gain the greatest advantage from forgiveness are those related to relationships and family, especially when a parent asks for forgiveness to the child, for example for excessive severity and rigidity. In this last example, the request for forgiveness leads to reconciliation, respect and acceptance of the other's limits.

Social effect: it improves society, especially if educators and other powerful social roles have understood and accepted the process and dynamics of forgiveness. These, embodying role models for many people, can be an extremely effective way of conveying positive values such as: self-respect and respect for the others, compassion, empathy, stress management, management and resolution of conflicts, peace and social harmony.

In order to ask for forgiveness, it is necessary that different dimensions cohabit in the individual.

These are:

- empathy
- ability to change perspective and to face things from a different point of view
- ethical and moral sense
- mending action

FORGIVENESS, the Social & Life Skills of New Leaders

Quality of life, social and life skills and healing through forgiveness

It is necessary to start from the analysis of the physiological and psychological benefits that forgiveness produces in order to understand that revenge, even a “mild” one, or the neglect of conflict are unable to produce the same effects.

Science proves that forgiveness is a key factor for our physical and mental health.

Physical benefits:

It influences the immune and cardiovascular system: forgiveness eventually acts on HPA's activity (Hypothalamus-Pituitary-Adrenal) and on the production of cortisol, improving the immune system, both on a cellular and endocrine level, and the cardiovascular system (Sapolsky, 1994; McEwen, 2002).

Studies carried out by Salovey et al. (2000) highlight the relationship between negative emotions and the progressive elimination of immune globulin A production. If, on the one hand, negative emotions such as hatred, anger, revenge and guiltiness decrease the level of our immune defences, on the other hand, forgiveness enhances the production of antibodies by reducing the intensity of these emotions and producing positive emotional impulses. Moreover, conflict negatively influences the cardiovascular system (Kaplan, 1992; Williams & Williams, 1993), while forgiveness reduces the level of antagonism, positively affecting our health and reducing the risks of heart attack, hypertension and arteriosclerosis.

It influences the central nervous system: a mechanism through which forgiveness eventually acts on the central nervous system is related to the production of testosterone and serotonin in the hypothalamus (Bell & Hobson, 1994). Forgiveness could inhibit testosterone, which influences aggressiveness, and stimulate the production of serotonin (McCullough, 2000; McCullough et al., 2001).

It is also possible to relate forgiveness to the vagus nerve, which is linked to cardiovascular upsets, besides the expression and regulation of emotions. It is worth remembering that the activity of the vagus nerve inhibits the activation of central nervous system.

Psychological benefits:

The importance of forgiveness for mental health: the effects of forgiveness on mental health are to be found in the reduction of resentment and the stimulation of positive emotions. Mental health is typically related to events such as social support, interpersonal skills and healthy behaviours (Bausell, 1986; Mohr, Avena, Kenny & Del Boca, 2001), which are all influenced by the capability to forgive. The relationship between forgiveness and mental health is very deep: researches by Toussaint & Webb (2005)

point out that forgiveness reduces anxiety and improves well-being, in addition to positively acting on phobias, panic attacks, drug abuse and post-traumatic stress disorder.

Very interesting are the experiments and the studies by: Al-Mabuk et al. (1995) focused on a group of students who forgave their parents for not having loved them as they should have. At the end of the experiment, all subjects showed an improved self-confidence and a lower level of anxiety and depression.

Helb & Enright (1993) studied the effects of forgiveness on psychological damages experienced by middle-aged women. Patients were randomly divided into two groups, one based on experimentation, one on control, and after eight weeks the experimental group showed a significant higher level of self-confidence and well-being and at the same time a lower level of anxiety and depression.

Spiers (2004) applied his studies on forgiveness-resentment and mental illness on to 134 victims of violations of human rights, commissioned by the South African Commission for Truth and Reconciliation. 63% of the whole group showed a psychiatric diagnosis, while 42% a post-traumatic stress disorder. The research pointed out that those patients with low levels of forgiveness are more easily vulnerable to psychiatric problems.

In relation to such empirical evidence, we can affirm that forgiveness leads to a reduction of anxiety and depression and to an improvement of physical and mental health, acting on the quality of emotions: it produces positive effects through the development of positive feelings that influence the general health condition.

Relational and social benefits, Social Skills:

Beyond the effects on physical and mental health, it is important to mention the various processes through which forgiveness influences and acts on well-being and health:

Forgiveness and relational skills: forgiveness is one of the possible strategies in order to cope with stress, anxiety and negative emotions (Gross, 1998). According to Lazarus (1991), coping consists in “cognitive and behavioural efforts in order to manage specific external or internal needs (and conflicts between them), which are onerous or bigger than personal resources”. In relational skills, forgiveness would reduce the tendency to offend the partner, guilt and shame (Enright and the Human Development Study Group, 1996) and would represent an important element in the foundation of deeper, more stable relationships (Finkel et al., 2002).

Social support: the attitude to forgiveness creates more stable, long-lasting and supportive relationships which guarantee a higher social support. Consequently, physical health benefits from a higher quality and quantity of social relationships (Beownley et al., 1996). Researches by Uvnas-Moberg (1998) link the quality of social support with the release of neuropeptides that influence such relationships (oxyto-

cin and prolactin) and physical health, as oxytocin is capable to lower blood pressure, cardio frequency and the level of cortisol.

Neuroscience of Forgiveness

As we have just said, literature clearly shows that forgiveness represents a positive, “healthy” strategy to overcome a condition that otherwise would lead to stress also from a neurobiological point of view. Identifying its neural correlates is important in order to clarify which brain areas contribute to such an important biological function.

Most of the studies done until today, have been focused on different mental functions related to forgiveness such as empathy or self-compassion and/or revolved around the decision making process but, even if all of these functions and processes are involved in forgiveness, they don't completely define it. Forgiveness is a highly social process, even from a brain perspective.

The results collected show an involvement of different brain areas: the left lateralized network containing frontal, temporal and parietal regions, right angular gyrus and the prefrontal and posterior cingulate cortical areas, such as the left ventromedial prefrontal cortex.

One of the most recent studies to highlight is Piero Petrini's research at the University of Pisa. He has led a research on the cerebral parts involved in the forgiveness process, studying them through the functional magnetic resonance. This research shows how and when the following parts are activated while the process of forgiveness takes place.

- Prefrontal cortex is activated when we are able to transform difficulties in resources, redefining negative experiences as opportunities of growth and fulfilment.
- Inferior parietal cortex: associate with the mature empathy development during the forgiveness process.
- Precuneus is activated when we experiment the ability to change our own perspective, reaching the basic information necessary to overcome a conflict.

In conclusion, neuroscience of forgiveness gives some great insights into what happens in the brain when an individual forgives and how our brains are wired to 'deal' with forgiveness.

Forgiveness involves cerebral regions related to empathy, decision making, attention, memory and social cognition too, revealing its nature of complex and integrative process that could actually reorganize the whole cerebral network involved in social cohesion, intimate relationships, psychological wellness and global health.

A UNIVERSITY ON FORGIVENESS

ISF, International School of Forgiveness

Forgiveness is an authentic path to awareness which enhances quality of life, personal health, the ability to be happy and to develop healthy and truly fulfilling relationships. In order to set off a real change, it is necessary to start from the individual's consciousness so that a new generation of well-aware human beings will develop.

ISF, the International School of Forgiveness, an educational institute within My Life Design Foundation, was born in Barcelona in 2013.

The International School of Forgiveness teaches a comprehensive method of forgiveness structured on six different levels: physical body, vital energy, emotions, mind, past experiences and relationships, spirit, conscience.

ISF aims at opening up the experience of forgiveness to all those people who wish to experiment its deep impact on themselves, in the relationships, in communities, in organisations and in the society, with the sole purpose of making this process accessible to a vast majority of people who will be able to benefit from the positive effects that forgiveness produces on various levels of experience.

Forgiveness, awareness, thankfulness, happiness and love are fundamental striving forces from which a life existence starts.

ISF is the example that these forces can be experienced and applied to a new way of living. Among the main activities of the institute, it is worth mentioning: development of new models of forgiveness in relation to the improvement of social and life skills, education of children and adults, development of a peaceful approach to life and nonviolent resolution of conflicts, intercultural dialogue and solidarity.

In cooperation with the National Sanitary System, ISF has developed projects on the education to awareness through forgiveness in schools and as part of the training programme of medical and sanitary staff (palliative treatments).

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Daniel Lumera

Currently he is the director of My Life Design Foundation and he's the president of the International School of Forgiveness (ISF). He is also a teacher, an international trainer and lecturer.

He's studies and research gave life to the model "Life Design", the conscious design of one's life, a training path is well articulated, thanks to a decennial research of a team work, and to the collaboration with Universities, research bodies, the National Health care System and UNESCO.

He teaches in the Chair "Management of public-private dealing with trust" and is Head of Research, Development and Culture in the UNESCO Club for the Protection of Intangible Heritage.

Specialized in the sociology of communication and cultural processes, mainly dealing with conflict management and stress. Several of the courses he teach are: "The Science of Happiness", "The beliefs and the construction of reality: the code of success in work and life", "Leadership and manipulation: how to stop manipulating and being manipulated", "Forgiveness for health and relationships", "Life Design: the conscious design of our lives", "Meditation and quality of life: a new way of being human". He added many of his researches in university courses held at the University of Girona (Spain), where he began teaching in 2010.

He developed and managed international projects with innovative themes in science of well-being and quality of life, delving into themes such as happiness, the nature of consciousness, forgiveness and benefits of the meditation practice.

A key figure in his training was Anthony Elenjmittan, direct disciple of Gandhi, through whom he developed a mature vision of an education based on awareness, interculturality, cooperation and peace.

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