

If we do not forgive, we become prisoners of our past

By Jack Keogh

Whole person leadership

A key element of [my company's](#) approach to leadership development and team-building is what I call "[whole person leadership](#)." We believe that 90% of being an effective leader is about self-leadership. The charisma, relationships, and vision a leader creates come from the inner core of an individual. Self-leadership includes understanding your strengths and your governing values. It means knowing how to manage your emotions and the emotions of others. When we discuss emotions in organizations, anger is usually mentioned first and seems to be the most pervasive – especially amongst men.

Emotions

Fear, anger, sadness, and joy are the four possible responses generated in the brain stem, the most primitive part of our brain. They are hardwired into our flight or fight survival response. We know, from physiology, that within less than seconds of becoming angry our brain and body are flooded with internal chemical changes. When this occurs, we operate from our brain stem. It's responsible for the fight or flight response and our autonomic nervous system (breathing, heart rate, body temperature etc.). When we are in this mode, we bypass the rational portion of the brain. This spells trouble because we are not using our neo-cortex, the most evolved part of our brain responsible for our rational thinking. Anger energizes aggressive behavior and is both protective and destructive at the same time.

Anger can be defined as "a strong feeling of displeasure and usually of antagonism. It suggests neither a definite degree of intensity nor necessarily outward manifestation. It can be an emotional reaction to a perceived injustice." The word "anger" has different meanings for different people. In common English usage it refers to a very normal emotion. Anger is somewhat further along the spectrum of aggravation and frustration but not yet converted into "rage." Academics, social workers, therapists and counselors sometimes use the word "anger" in a clinical sense meaning uncontrolled or disproportionate anger. This latter meaning is what most of us would call "rage."

Conflict resolution

In the mid-1980s, I helped establish an organization called "[Cooperation Ireland](#)" that sought reconciliation between the two communities involved in the conflict between North and South in Ireland. With the founder, [Dr. Brendan O'Regan](#) I had the

opportunity to observe anger taken to the limit in communities on both sides of the border. In the process, I learned an important lesson. Dr. Frederic Luskin, Director of the Stanford Forgiveness Project, sums up this lesson in his book “*Forgive for Good*”

He says, “We brought a group of people from both sides of the conflict in Northern Ireland, each of whom had had a family member killed in the “troubles.” Most swore on a stack of Bibles that they would never forgive, they would never move, and they would never change. When we did an exit piece the prevailing sentiment was, “When I came I was convinced that all Catholics (or Protestants) were evil and from Hell and that is really the way I was raised. But, after spending a week like this, I have come to three conclusions. I don’t have any reason to hate them all. They are not all bad. And they suffer in the same way I do. I may never fully forgive the one person who shot my son in cold blood, but he is not going to control my whole life. The world is bigger than that. It is filled with suffering and pain and the people that I met from the other side of this conflict suffer in the same way.”

When I come across anger and conflict in the corporate world I try to use what I learned from the Irish conflict: in order to move on, we need to learn to forgive what happened and then move away from it. If some people in Ireland found a way to reconcile 800 years of oppression and hatred then surely there is hope for our corporate conflicts. My boss at Cooperation Ireland, Dr. Brendan O’Regan staked his hope on developing interpersonal relationships between the two communities in order to achieve reconciliation. We used the word “reconciliation” which was acceptable to all – whereas the word “unification” was a negative trigger-word.

Life lesson

Before working with Cooperation Ireland I had spent twenty years with the [Legionaries of Christ](#). I worked closely with the now disgraced founder, Fr. Marcial Maciel. Most objective observers would suggest that I had reason to be angry with the Founder who was very manipulative and controlling of his subordinates while, it turns out, he was leading a scandalous double life. When I made a “leap of faith” and decided to leave the Legion ([see my memoir](#)) I found that I had to explain – to myself and to others – why I had spent twenty years in the Congregation, much of it against my better judgment. In so doing, I think I learned another important lesson which has served me well in life and in my work as a consultant.

Grievance story

At first I felt very angry. Even after making big changes in my lifestyle I still felt controlled by my previous experience. Eventually, I came to realize that some sense of “forgiveness” was the way forward for me. I was helped in this realization by my own

experience and what I saw happen with some of my former colleagues who also left the Congregation. Each of us developed our “grievance story.” This was our personal version of all the bad things that happened to us, the “terrible things” that others did to us. I saw how easily it was for the “grievance story” to obsess on details, how easy it was to convert it into a distorted account of how someone else was responsible for our present misery. I neither could change Fr. Maciel the Founder nor could I change the rules of the Congregation. All I could change was my own attitude, my own reaction to him. If I didn’t change my “grievance story,” I was allowing someone from my past to continue to have power over me.

Forgiveness

These experiences taught me something about forgiveness. First, I think it can be taught, just like compassion can be taught. The key question that helps is “how much suffering are you willing to experience now from something that happened in the past which you cannot change?” The answer involves taking information and reprocessing it in the light of the present so as to suffer less. It is about re-perceiving the event from the past. It involves rewriting the “grievance story.” This is what forgiveness is about. Note that I am not making any connection between forgiveness and religious belief. Something bad happened to you, something you did not want. It is something that you cannot change – but you can do something, in the present, to suffer less.

In my personal life, there is no doubt I was deeply connected to the Legion of Christ and to Fr. Maciel, the Founder. Once I left, I soon realized that the best way to get over that close connection was to get on with my new life. This method of untangling myself from the prior twenty years had nothing to do with the past. It was a decision and an action made in the present. “Getting a new life” for me meant finding a new job, a place to live, settling down, getting married and, eventually, raising a family. This process, this focus on actions in the present began to change my perception of the past. I learned to be forgiving of myself and of the Founder. To do this however, I had to try and “disconnect” from the Legion, I had to reformulate my “grievance story.” I have since come to believe that we can learn to forgive to whatever extent we choose. That is not to say I can forgive everything – but I do see the liberating possibilities of untangling oneself from the past event and focusing on “getting a life.”

Key to Emotional Intelligence

Psychologists have found that people who forgive themselves and others experience reduced feelings of restlessness, nervousness and hopelessness. I believe that it is a key component of what we call “emotional intelligence.” In order to decide to forgive someone for past hurts, it can help to clear up a misunderstanding: forgiveness does not mean the offended person has to become vulnerable toward the offender. It does not mean that anger should not be expressed or that justice should not be sought. It is possible to forgive, and at the same time, not trust someone who has inflicted hurt. The

resolution of anger with an offender and the investment of trust toward that person are two related but different processes.

Creating a culture of forgiveness

One aspect of forgiveness is to forgive one specific person or event. The more powerful and healing aspect of forgiveness is learning to develop the ability to be able to continually forgive when things don't work out the way we want them to. Maybe this is so powerful because this ability allows us to have an "open heart." When things are not going the way we expected we don't need to get so upset.

It is truly life changing to be able to forgive the things that can discourage us, the things that can turn us from enjoying our lives to the fullest. By developing the ability to deal compassionately with the "small" things that are beyond our control, we prepare ourselves for those events in life that will truly test our resilience. We can practice on the unimportant things – the shopper who causes a delay at the checkout, the stressed and impolite ticket agent, the small child crying in the row behind you on the airplane. Then we will be more prepared to forgive colleagues at work, and, most importantly, the people you love. When you are hurt and offended, recall the negative power of the "grievance story," and try not to fall into the obsessive repetition of how the other person hurt you. Opt for your ability to forgive, in the present.

Anger

It is my experience that some people learn to employ anger as a defense against their mistrust and fear of betrayal. I have come to believe that when we do not let go of our anger we may well be controlled by the offenders for the rest of our lives. As John Paul II said, "If we do not forgive, we become prisoners of our past." I think that anger can hide strong feelings of anxiety, insecurity and guilt. I see this working with teams of corporate leaders - especially with men. More often than not when I ask workshop participants to name a dominant emotion, anger is the first one to be named. Of the three ways that I know of for dealing with anger (denial, expression, forgiveness) the only one that is healing seems to be forgiveness.

I wonder if sometimes we prefer not to let go of our anger because it is one of the things that "makes us feel alive." Anger can convey a sense of power and I have seen it used to form bonds with others as a group uses it to mask a feeling of emptiness. Revenge sometimes seems like an attractive option because it conveys a sense of power and strength. Forgiveness, on the other hand, conveys a sense of weakness to those who do not understand its power. When I see long term anger tainted with bitterness I find myself wondering if the aggrieved derive some sense of power and attention from what has essentially morphed into a sense of self-pity.

Forgiveness is a process

Failure to adequately resolve anger issues arising from experience can easily spill over into our married lives, our relationship with our children or our parents. Unresolved anger nurtures a feeling of perpetual sadness. In the measure that we can learn to forgive we overcome the underlying sadness and anxiety. It is not a one-time cognitive decision. It does not mean that we are not assertive or that we have to trust the people that we choose to forgive. Forgiveness is a process, not an event.

Relationships and events often do not turn out the way we planned. Indeed all relationships can be a source of disappointment. Nonetheless, an attitude of forgiveness liberates us from the past. In my case, it eventually allowed me to accept the pain caused by Fr. Maciel, the founder of the Legion of Christ. Then I saw the life changing power of forgiveness on people involved in conflict in my native Ireland. Now, as a management consultant, I see its power in the workplace where it can help untangle interpersonal conflicts leading individuals and teams to newfound productivity and work-life balance.