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FIRMS DO NOT ALWAYS NEED TO BE RUTHLESS TO SURVIVE

A more forgiving culture can empower businesses

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When Nelson Mandela was released from jail after some 20 years, he chose to forgive his captors: South Africa's apartheid government.

Myanmar's Nobel Peace laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, when she was freed in 2010 after some 15 years under house arrest by the military government, declared that her country needed "reconciliation, not retribution".

Rather than dwell on the past or submit to personal vengeance, great leaders like these have shown the ability to move forward for the greater cause. Their stories are inspiring for the extraordinary forgiveness they have shown despite having endured the hardship of seeing a large part of their adult lives taken from them.

Around the world, cultures and religions universally praise the virtue of forgiveness — pardoning someone who has done you wrong — whether the harm was caused knowingly or unknowingly.

Yet in the business world, it is often a different story, with many seemingly uncomfortable with the notion of forgiveness.

A common belief among leaders and managers is that success depends on a take-no-prisoners approach: Roll up your sleeves, get tough and fight.



In the cases of Nelson Mandela (picture) and Ms Aung San Suu Kyi, offering forgiveness instead of holding on to grudges gave these two leaders power to help move their nations forward. PHOTO: AP

It is a perception often reinforced in the media through shows such as The Apprentice.

However, in a study I carried out at the National University of Singapore (NUS) Business School with researchers from the United States, the Netherlands and Singapore, it was found that having an unforgiving state of mind is much like carrying a heavy burden. It weighs victims down, colours judgments and holds people back from achieving their full potential.

The study showed that in the aftermath of conflict, forgiveness — as well as improving the victim-offender relationship — actually improves the victim's well-being and outlook and gives them increased energy.

PUTTING FORGIVENESS TO THE TEST

The act of forgiveness has been found to bring with it many health benefits. These include lower stress and blood pressure, and a decreased risk of depression.

The first study examines how forgiveness changes a victim's perceptions, how it lightens this metaphorical "burden" and how that translates into physical results, even in apparently unrelated situations.

A group of 48 individuals were asked to write about a past conflict. Half were asked to describe a situation where they had forgiven the perpetrator, and the other half were asked to detail a similar encounter, but one where the perpetrator had not been forgiven and is still viewed negatively.

Then the participants were individually brought to a hill and asked to estimate its incline.

Results showed that those who had

CONTINUED ON PAGE 14

Source: *TODAY*, p13-14
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CONTINUED FROM PAGE 13

expressed forgiveness perceived the hill to be less steep than their counterparts who had not.

In the second study, a group of 160 individuals was split into three smaller groups.

The first were asked to write about a conflict in which they had forgiven the perpetrator; the second about a similar situation but where no forgiveness was offered; and a third about a neutral interaction that did not involve harm or questions over forgiveness.

All three groups were then asked to perform a simple test: To jump as high as they could.

Here, it was observed that those who had not forgiven perpetrators, and who were focused on negative feelings towards them, jumped significantly lower on average than those who had offered forgiveness.

Moreover, no difference was found in the averages between those who had forgiven their perpetrator and those who had written about a neutral encounter.

These findings indicate that holding a grudge can literally weigh people down. They also suggest that the benefits of forgiveness may go beyond psychological health.

There may be lasting implications for how forgivers perceive and interact with the world — they see challenges as less daunting and can perform better at physical tasks.

SENSE OF POWER THROUGH FORGIVENESS

These differences in physical ability may be due to an interaction between forgiveness and a sense of one's own power.

Victims who are unable to reconcile with their offenders often feel a sense of powerlessness, while those who forgive have a greater sense of self-worth and power. This can often translate into enhanced physical ability: Those who think they are stronger often find they really are.

In the cases of Mandela and Ms Aung San Suu Kyi, offering forgiveness instead of holding on to grudges gave these two leaders power to help move their nations forward.

In both cases, they also agreed to work with their former captors on drafting and implementing critical reforms. As a result, South Africa found itself welcomed back into the international community after years of boycotts and isolation, and today Myanmar is travelling a similar path albeit with different challenges.

The experiences of these two leaders show that forgiveness is not only empowering, it can clear the way for collaboration and the ability to tackle seemingly insurmountable problems.

In the business world too, establishing a culture of forgiveness can help foster an organisational outlook that is not confrontational, but collaborative in nature.

As customers become more demanding, collaboration is critical to future business success. By working together, organisations can gain new knowledge, apply their combined skills and expertise to generate solutions to new demands and develop innovative products to meet them.

Despite this, the belief remains persistent in many firms that they need to be unforgiving to survive. As a result, many companies and leaders find it hard to even admit their mistakes, let alone be forgiving — putting an enduring roadblock in the way of opportunities for collaboration.

To enjoy the benefits of collaboration, firms must undergo a shift in their thinking about what it means to be an organisation.

By developing a culture that is more forgiving, firms may find they are able to solve bigger problems, reach higher, as well as nurture and develop both their staff and new business opportunities.

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