Development of a Leadership Forgiveness Measure

—Annelies Verdoold and Dirk van Dierendonck

In a sense, organizations are communities formed out of relationships between the people working there. As such, leaders are faced with the challenge of creating a culture where people get along and stay on good terms with one another. However, mistakes and faults—sometimes even offenses—are an inevitable part of working together. It is a fact of life that relating to others inevitably exposes people to the risk of being offended or harmed by those other people (McCullough, 2001). People are not perfect, which can cause friction. There are different ways in which people can react to potential negative situations caused by the mistakes of others. When harm is the greatest, when injury is most noticeable, or when offense is most intentional and pointed, responses such as retribution and vengeance are more likely than forgiveness (Cameron & Caza, 2002). It shouldn't come as a surprise that when it comes to social relationships, Berry and Worthington (2001) found that the quality of the relationship can be predicted significantly by two dispositional attributes: unforgiveness and forgiveness. Where unforgiveness is a reaction of trait anger, forgiveness is a response with love and empathy. They stated that the more a relationship is characterized by forgiveness, the healthier this relationship will be. For the people involved, physical, mental, emotional, and social health have been associated as long-term benefits of working with forgiveness.

Until now, forgiveness has mostly been studied at the individual and dyadic level. However, as was also argued by Madsen et al. (2009), forgiveness can and should also be studied at organizational level. This level logically includes the other levels, for each organization is formed by individuals and relationships between these individuals. The practice of forgiveness supports the development of organizational cultures characterized by greater internal harmony and healing (Stone, 2002). Lack of forgiveness at especially the team level, on the other hand, may produce internal

competition, which can lead to kingdom building within an organization, with potential negative results for performance.

Organizational forgiveness is a way for individuals to repair damaged workplace relationships and overcome debilitating thoughts and emotions resulting from interpersonal injury (Aquino et al. 2003). Interpersonal workplace forgiveness is a process whereby the injured employee overcomes negative emotions toward his or her offender, and refrains from causing the offender harm even when he or she believes it is morally justifiable to do so. Cameron and Caza (2002) define organizational forgiveness as the capacity to foster collective abandonment of justified resentment, bitterness, and blame, and instead, it is the adoption of positive, forward-looking approaches in response to harm or damage. To allow for this to happen, people must be aware of this virtue, and know how to handle it. It should be known how to practice the art of forgiveness, for the lack of forgiveness could have impact at each level within the organization (Stone, 2002).

Leaders play an important role in cultivating forgiveness as part of the organizational and team culture. They function as role models and by showing intentional forgiveness; they help build an open, noninvasive and consistent dialogue in the organization regarding conflict issues (Ferch & Mitchell, 2001). Intentional forgiveness is defined as the deliberate decision to work through debilitating emotions and choose relational justice, in which a leader chooses to create an environment in which forgiveness can be asked and granted. Leaders can play two vital roles in fostering forgiveness and, consequently, the healing that allows the organization to move forward (Cameron & Caza, 2002). One vital role is to provide meaning and vision about forgiveness. Provision of legitimacy and support is also essential. Leaders can exemplify, highlight, and celebrate virtuous actions such as forgiveness, by initiating and supporting organizational structures, systems, and resources that are aligned with forgiveness and other important virtues (Madsen et al., 2009).

Forgiveness is particularly relevant for servant-leaders because of their primary focus on followers (Van Dierendonck, 2011). This link can be directly extrapolated from Patterson's model (2003) of servant-leadership, which consists of agapao love, humility, altruism, having vision for the followers, trust, serving, and empowering followers. Most notably, it can be argued that agapao love and humility are essential for forgiveness. Agapao love means to love in a social or moral sense. A leader considers each person as a complete person, with needs, wants, and desires (Winston, 2002).

Forgiving another person is also a social or moral action, and agapao love can be a helpful ingredient. True humility means that the leader is not self-focused but rather focused on others, the followers. Humility is not having a low view of one's self or one's self-worth, but it means viewing oneself as no better or worse than others do. To forgive is an expression of humility, for it is retreating into the background in case of hurt by the other party; it shows modesty as an aspect of humility (Van Dierendonck & Heeren, 2006).

Leadership forgiveness is expected to be related to ethical leadership. According to Brown et al. (2005), employees can learn about the ethical conduct via role modeling, in which leaders are an important and likely source of such modeling. When the leader is an ethical leader, he or she is nurturing followers, empowering them, and promoting social justice (Yukl, 2000). Brown et al. (2005, p. 120) define ethical leadership as "the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making." So, ethical leadership is about relationships within the organization, and the behavior of the leader toward followers, which should be morally justifiable.

In conclusion, leadership forgiveness is not only very challenging but also an essential element of attaining a more nurturing and fulfilling climate at work, and it is proving itself to be a promising area of research. Presently, only few researchers have reported the direct and indirect effects of forgiveness on job performance and well-being at work. The purpose of this article is to introduce a short measure that will allow future studies into the influence of forgiveness by leaders. The theoretical foundation of this measure is the interpersonal forgiveness literature. As such, the measure aims to provide an empirical bridge between the servant-leadership field and insights gained from forgiveness theory and research.

METHODS

Participants

The survey was an open online survey conducted within the network of the first author. One-hundred and ten persons filled out the survey, 51 percent men and 49 percent women. Their mean age was 27.5 years (SD = 7.0).

Forty-eight percent worked in a nonprofit organization, 52 percent in a profit organization. The gender of their leaders was 72 percent men and 28 percent women.

Measures

Leadership Forgiveness. Forgiveness is mostly studied toward self and toward others. Thompson et al. (2005) extended this perspective by adding forgiveness of situations. They developed a new measure of dispositional forgiveness of self, others, and situations: the Heartland Forgiveness Scale (HFS). The eighteen items of their measure were reformulated for the purpose of this study to acknowledge the perspective of the leader as experienced by followers. All questions are answered on a Likert-scale, with six categories ranging from "hardly ever" to "practically always."

Ethical leadership was measured by the scale developed by Brown et al. (2005). This measure consists of twelve items, internal consistency is .92.

Servant-leadership. The agapao love and humility elements of servant-leadership are measured with scales from the Dennis and Bocarnea (2005) measure. Each scale consists of five items. Internal consistencies are .86 and .76, respectively.

Results

Exploratory factor analysis was used to determine the dimensional structure of the scale. First, the conditions are checked to see if they allow for a stable factor structure. Although the sample size is relatively small, with 110 it is still above the absolute minimum of 100 respondents mentioned in the literature and the subject-to-variables ratio is 6.1:1, which is above the accepted minimum of 5:1 (Ferguson & Cox, 1993). Skewness and kurtosis of all items was between the +/– 2.0 range, confirming that they were normally distributed. The appropriateness of the correlation matrix to produce a factor structure not found by change alone was confirmed by the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin test of .777 (minimum is .5) and a significant Bartlett test of sphericity (645.817, $df = 153$, $p < .001$).

Second, to determine the number of factors underlying the items, we used the scree test together with a conceptual check of the resulting rotated solution. The scree test suggested that either two or three dimensions would fit best (eigenvalues: 5.03, 2.34, 1.45). The three-dimensional structure did not replicate the structure reported by Thompson et al. (2005) in terms of self, other and situation. It also was less interpretable than the two-dimensional structure. The division of the items within the two-dimensional structure suggested a positive oriented factor, and a negative oriented factor. Varimax rotation was used to determine the items that best exemplified each factor. To be included an item had to have a minimum factor loading of 0.4 on one factor only and a minimum difference with the other factor of 0.3 (Ferguson & Cox, 1993).

Eight items were excluded from the final version. Table 1 shows the items and factor loadings. Each dimension consists of five items. Based on the item content, we called the first dimension "reconciliation" and the second "retaliation." Internal consistencies are .81 and .78, respectively. Their intercorrelation is –.39.

Table 2 shows the intercorrelations with ethical leadership and servant-leadership. As expected, these are moderately strong and in the expected positive and negative direction. Most striking are the strong correlations between reconciliation and ethical leadership and the agapao love element of servant-leadership. This indicates that both forgiveness dimensions have conceptual overlap with these leadership theories, but that the measure also contributes unique variance.

Conclusion

This study set out to introduce a measure for leadership forgiveness grounded in the personality and social psychological theory of forgiveness and linked to key elements of servant-leadership theory. Building on the measure of Thompson et al. (2005), a short ten-item measure was developed consisting of two sub-dimensions: reconciliation and retaliation. Our operationalization is in line with the two interpersonal dimensions revenge and reconciliation described by Aquino, Tripp, and Bies (2006). The psychometric properties in terms of factorial validity and reliability are promising. Our measure contributes to the servant-leadership field by specifically focusing on this mostly neglected aspect of servant-leadership.

Table 1

Leadership Forgiveness Measure, items and factor-loadings

	I Reconciliation	II Retaliation
1. If things go wrong for reasons that can't be controlled, my supervisor gets stuck in expressing him/herself negatively about it.	−.20	**.75**
2. With time, my supervisor develops an understanding for mistakes made by employees.	**.79**	−.21
3. When my supervisor is disappointed by uncontrollable circumstances in the organization, he/she continues to express negatively about them.	−.11	**.80**
4. With time, my supervisor can be understanding of bad circumstances in the organization.	**.78**	−.26
5. My supervisor continues to be hard to employees who have hurt him/her.	−.20	**.63**
6. Learning from mistakes that my supervisor has made, helps him/her to get over them.	**.71**	.01
7. If employees mistreat my supervisor, he continues to treat them negatively.	−.24	**.63**
8. With time, my supervisor develops a better understanding of the mistakes he/she has made.	**.79**	−.13
9. It is really hard for my supervisor to accept negative situations that aren't anybody's fault.	−.02	**.63**
10. When somebody disappoints my supervisor, he/she can eventually move past it.	**.64**	−.22

Table 2
Descriptives and intercorrelations of Leadership Forgiveness, Ethical Leadership, and Servant-leadership (N = 110)

	M	SD	1	2	3	4
1. Reconciliation	4.05	1.01				
2. Retaliation	2.13	.88	−.39			
3. Ethical Leadership	4.55	.84	.55	−.43		
4. Humility	3.92	1.04	.38	−.37	.59	
5. Agapao Love	4.04	1.06	.54	−.31	.81	.54

Note. All correlation significant $p < .01$.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Annelies Verdoold graduated at the Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University, The Netherlands, where she received her MScBA in Human Resource Management. Her thesis focused on the leader's propensity to forgive to its influence on a culture of openness and fairness within a team. Presently, she works as a job coach at a foundation that focuses on the reintegration of homeless people in Rotterdam.

Dirk van Dierendonck is Associate Professor of Organizational Behavior at the Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University, The Netherlands. He is co-founder of the Erasmus Centre for Leadership Studies. His primary research interest is servant-leadership with specific attention to its influence on the flourishing of people within organizations. He co-edited with Kathleen Patterson *Servant-leadership. Recent Developments in Theory and Research*, published by Palgrave in 2010.

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