
----- WHAT'S UP, DOC? -----

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"Creating Leadership Solutions for Profit and Growth"

THIS MONTH'S THEME: THOUGHTS ON FORGIVING

I recently conducted a seminar discussion on customer service, and the group involved people who dealt with the same customers over a period of years. In some cases, their customers were, shall we say, challenging people. As I promoted the idea of working to build strong partnerships, even friendships, with customers, some participants resisted the idea: they found the behavior of some customers in the past to be unforgivable. This opened up the whole idea of forgiveness: when to forgive, if at all, not only in professional life, but in all of life. We spent some time on this before getting back to our customer service focus, but the discussion, and everyone's interest in the topic, prompted me to put some thoughts together for this newsletter. We all confront the question of what to forgive in real life, and we all confront the need or desire to be forgiven from time to time. These issues come up in professional life, and yet they transcend professional life. There is a reason why themes of betrayal, redemption and regret recur so often in the great works of literature across cultures. My perspective here is purely subjective, and guided by my training in psychology. And so this month, I offer you a few thoughts on the subject of forgiving.

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THIS MONTH'S QUOTES:

"If they can get you asking the wrong questions, they don't have to worry about the answers." -- Thomas Pynchon

"In everyone's life, at some time, our inner fire goes out. It is then burst into flame by an encounter with another human being. We should all be thankful for those people who rekindle the inner spirit." -- Albert Schweitzer

"We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit." -- Aristotle

1. THOUGHTS ON FORGIVING

1. THE PRECONDITIONS FOR FORGIVENESS

I am sure there are other lists out there, but here's mine. For a person to be forgiven, it seems to me the following conditions should be met. First, the offending person must indicate genuine recognition of the wrong or hurt done to another, and of the full scope of the harm done. Next, this recognition should prompt a genuine and spontaneous interest in compensating those hurt in a way that does not unduly burden the injured with pressure to forgive the offender. Sometimes, those harmed don't want any contact with the offender, and that should be respected. In such a case, the offender should find other ways to do right by those similarly harmed by others. Third, the offender should demonstrate a continuous and genuine effort over time to learn from his error. This includes an understanding of oneself sufficient to identify all of the personal weaknesses that led to the offense. Fourth, the offender should demonstrate, over time, a consistent effort to behave in a reformed manner, not only through the absence of new offense, but through observable efforts to have a positive effect on others based on new learning and personal growth. Now, some people include another element, namely, that an offender must explicitly ask to be forgiven. I agree that this may at times be necessary for a personal relationship to be rebuilt between an offending person and the one hurt, but asking for forgiveness is tricky. Many who offend seek to short circuit the full process of reform by asking for forgiveness prematurely, and this, in its way, reinjures the victim. Some victims may never want to discuss the past again and may wish to move on, even if they are able to forgive in their own way. In my opinion, it is possible to forgive someone whose behavior demonstrates genuine reform even without requiring the potential humiliation of a formal apology or petition for forgiveness. Not everyone will agree with me on that one, but that's my sense of the matter. The power dynamics of asking for forgiveness, and the possibility that just bringing up the subject again can cause new pain, means for me that sometimes

actions can speak more eloquently than words when forgiveness is at issue.

2. FORGIVENESS IS SOCIALLY USEFUL (IF PROPERLY APPLIED)

Premature forgiveness is not useful from a societal point of view. Letting an offending person off the hook before he has shown remorse, learned and demonstrated reform obviously rewards the offending behavior in some way. But on the other hand, holding out the possibility of forgiveness as genuine promotes attempts to reform by the offender, which helps bring people back into the mainstream of the “tribe,” so to speak. And what’s more, those who have been able to reform successfully often acquire special knowledge or wisdom that others do not possess: they have new abilities and insights to offer to society. They stand as models who can inspire and help others to reform or to avoid harming others in the first place. Forgiving is a social good, one that enhances the strength of a whole society when practiced on an individual level and on behalf of deserving people.

3. FORGIVENESS IS GOOD FOR THOSE DIRECTLY INVOLVED (IF PROPERLY APPLIED)

Again, if properly applied, forgiveness benefits both the forgiven person and the forgiving person. The benefit to the one forgiven is obvious. The benefit to the forgiving person is this: injuries retain their power over us when we hold onto them. Forgiving allows for letting go and moving on. There is psychological and emotional freedom to be derived from forgiving. Premature forgiving tends not to promote justice, and those who hold out before forgiving may simply be expressing a sense that justice has not been served, or that the original offending person has not wholly reformed. Nothing wrong with that. However, there are some individuals who choose to forgive even before justice has been served, before an offending person has wholly reformed, simply for the psychological and emotional freedom that comes from letting go of a sense of injury in order to live life unencumbered by resentment. While this may not serve a society’s interests to promote justice, it can reflect a recognition that perfect justice is never really served in human society, so why not just move on? There is some wisdom in this, and so, on an individual level, the ability to forgive when ready can be quite beneficial (as long as a forgiving person does not habitually place himself in the position of being harmed repeatedly).

4. THE LEADERSHIP DILEMMA: WHAT TO FORGIVE?

Leaders are responsible to the missions of their organizations. In the service of these missions, they must make decisions about people and behavior, and draw lines to make clear what is tolerable, what is forgivable from an organizational point of view, and what lies beyond

the pale. Mistakes that do not indicate a fundamental lack of competence are and should be forgivable, as long as the one in error is indeed dedicated to learning and improvement. The best leaders do not punish mistakes, but reward continuous learning among their associates. Dishonesty, theft or other such behaviors that indicate a betrayal of the organization, its team members or its mission should not be tolerated. A leader can choose to forgive on a personal basis, but from an organizational point of view, such people must be let go if the organization's culture is to survive or remain healthy. Much of the art of leadership lies in knowing what to do in the many situations that require judgment of people, their careers and their roles in an organization. The hard part for most leaders involves encouraging the right amount of independence and diversity of viewpoint while still holding the organization together toward a common mission.

5. FORGIVING LEADERS WHO FAIL?

Leaders fail. Some have the courage to apologize or acknowledge their errors, and some see such acknowledgement as weakness. Now, no leader should spend undue time apologizing, as everyone will make errors, but glaring errors that let members of an organization down should be acknowledged. Some leaders rely on the tools of public relations damage control as a way to avoid the kind of personal accountability implied by the steps outlined in item #1 above. Few members of any organization are really taken in by such machinations, even if a given leader can wiggle out of trouble in the immediate term using these tactics. Leaders who betray the trust of those in their organizations, or of their organization's core values and mission, should be let go. No one is irreplaceable. Leaders should not be marked for life by past errors, and perhaps everyone should have the opportunity to reform after having made mistakes, through the process of reform outlined in item #1 above.

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6. “HUMILITY IS THE ABILITY TO SEE ONESELF RIGHTLY”

I can't remember where I came across that quote somewhere in my youth (okay, my twenties), and Google hasn't helped me place it. But I always remembered it. Here's what this quote means to me. I could have been born anyone. I could have been born anywhere. Most of what people tell themselves about their personal fitness or “superiority” is bologna. A sane person recognizes that anything we achieve rests on a foundation of the many people and social systems that have shaped and propelled us through our lives. The first step in seeing oneself rightly is to recognize this basic truth. We are stewards of whatever abilities and relationships we have, and should focus on doing the best we can to care for and nurture those talents and relationships for the greater good. Along the way, we all fail. We betray people: sometimes intentionally, often unintentionally. We fall prey to our own demons (metaphorically speaking). I spoke recently with a friend who expressed frustrated exasperation over the behavior of another friend who was clinging to choices in his life that were perhaps not wisely made. As understandable as such frustration may be, none of us can hold ourselves up to the standard of having made perfectly wise, rational choices throughout our lives. As a mentor of mine used to say, “We all have to go through what we have to go through. Often what we go through is of our own making.” And so it is. I say all this because the subject of forgiving is inseparable from the subject of judgment, and to make good judgments, we must see others rightly, seeing as much of their full lives and circumstances as we can. To do that, we must first see ourselves rightly, without flinching from our failings and faults, without undue recrimination, and with neither denial nor inflation of our strengths, talents or virtues. We come by our strengths more or less by luck, and should only take measured satisfaction in how well we are able to cultivate them for the good of others. It takes a bit of living to come to that level of understanding: when I first read the idea that humility is the ability to see oneself rightly, I was far from having – ahem! – a balanced view of myself. I'm closer now. One final word on forgiving: not everyone merits forgiveness, and not all behaviors should be tolerated. But people do have the capacity to learn if they choose to do so, and forgiveness, I imagine, should always be an option, both for the one injured and the one who has offended. That's just my point of view.

2. RECOMMENDED BOOKS AND ENTERTAINMENT

MUSIC: Playlist from our “End of Summer” Barbeque

We recently invited friends and some of my clients to join us for grilled fajitas, margaritas, music and fun, and I’m going to tell you what five CD’s I chose to put into the stereo carousel to create the right atmosphere. The mix is eclectic, and includes a bit of Latin music, for two reasons: first, I’m half Latino, and second, the food we served was all Latin American and Mexican themed (fajitas, saffron rice, papusas, tamales, etc.: yum!). I set the CD player to random so all the songs came up from each disc in any old order. Some good time music from my collection: “Tupelo Honey” by Van Morrison, “All By Hissself (Live at the Lonestar)” by Dr. John, “The Sweetest Peaches (Part Two)” by Etta James, “El Rey de Tumbao (The Best of Tito Puente)” by Tito Puente, and “Instinto y Deseo” by Victor Manuelle. Great stuff. The last one, by Victor Manuelle, is the salsa album of the crew. If you have happy Latin hips, you should own this record.

FILM: “Hitch,” available in DVD.

A silly, fluffy, fun romantic comedy starring Will Smith, who does his best bit of charm in an updated Cary Grant-like role. While not as good as the classic screwball romantic comedies of days gone by, and a little weak in the third act, the movie nevertheless entertains. In the old days of Hollywood, movies like this were churned out like clockwork, and this is on a par with the better B-movies of the old days. The talents of Smith and his supporting cast members carry the film. It makes for silly, light fun, and it’s this month’s recommendation. Find out more [here](#).

3. CHUCKLES

You’re all going to hate me for this one:

A man runs into the vet's office carrying his dog, screaming for help. The vet rushes him back to an examination room and has him put his dog down on the examination table. The vet examines the still, limp body and after a few moments tells the man that his dog, regrettably, is dead. The man, clearly agitated and not willing to accept this, demands a second opinion.

The vet goes into the back room and comes out with a cat and puts the cat down next to the dog's body. The cat sniffs the body, walks from head to tail poking and sniffing the dog's body and finally looks at the vet and meows. The vet looks at the man and says, "I'm sorry, but the cat thinks that your dog is dead too."

The man is still unwilling to accept that his dog is dead. The vet brings in a black Labrador. The lab sniffs the body, walks from head to tail, and finally looks at the vet and barks. The vet looks at the man and says, "I'm sorry, but the lab thinks your dog is dead too."

The man, finally resigned to the diagnosis, thanks the vet and asks how much he owes. The vet answers, "\$650."

"\$650 to tell me my dog is dead?" exclaimed the man...

"Well," the vet replies, "I would only have charged you \$50 for my initial diagnosis. The additional \$600 was for the cat scan and lab tests."

4. PROMOTE YOUR OWN GROWTH

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5. ABOUT DR. SCHULER

A. J. Schuler, Psy. D., an expert on leadership, negotiation and organizational change, provides consulting services, keynote presentations and seminars for client companies. His trademark is highly personalized service that leads to measurable increases in productivity, profit and growth. He also provides personalized leadership education and coaching for highly motivated clients.

Dr. Schuler, President of Schuler Solutions, Inc., has served diverse

organizations in the private and public sectors, including The Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company, Sony Development, Nomura Securities and the Executive Office for Immigration Review.

A graduate of the Wharton School of Business, Dr. Schuler has successfully led the profitable growth of a dynamic, international consulting firm while serving as Operations Director, and has successfully coached over five hundred CEO's and corporate executives.

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NEWSLETTER ETHICS: This e-Newsletter will be sent to subscribers only upon REQUEST, though subscribers may forward this letter to anyone they wish. Subscriber identities or contact information will NOT BE DISCLOSED to any other persons or entities under any circumstances. (An attorney friend recently pointed out that, technically, I'd have to give up my list if compelled to do so by a court of law. He's technically right, of course, but let's face it: that won't happen!)

Have a great month. . .

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“Make each day your masterpiece.” -- John Wooden

P.S. - Remember to send in your comments and successes, and to forward this newsletter to at least one friend! Thanks . . . AJS