

Forgiveness as an Intervention in Family-Owned Business: A New Beginning

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This article explores the notion of bringing a family business's family values and traditions regarding religion and forgiveness into their everyday lives to create healing when family business differences have broken or severed family relationships. The philosophy of the ritual is to pair it with other family rituals and use it as a tool to begin to focus on the future. The ritual helps the family understand that hurts are inevitable in the context of family businesses, but that the ritual is a way to get beyond them and start over again. The forgiveness ritual that is created draws on the family's history and use of religious traditions to create forgiveness and a new beginning.

In my original career as a family counselor, I worked in a medical clinic. My office was located in the specialty center right next door to the clinic where five family practice doctors regularly saw patients. It was not unusual in that setting for one of the nurses to come over and indicate that one of the doctors was seeing a patient and wanted to know if I was available to sit in on their discussion. Invariably, the patient was seeing the doctor for something that the doctor could find no physical diagnosis.

I would then start seeing the patient for counseling and usually what we discovered was a situation where the stress and discomfort in the patient's life was caused by some traumatic experience or wound. Someone such as a parent, a teacher, a friend, or a sibling had hurt the patient

and he or she had not forgiven the person for what had been done. D. Patrick Miller, in his book *A Little Book of Forgiveness* (D. P. Miller, 1994), mentions this dynamic in his own life and it motivated him to write the book. He mentions that after multiple visits to his physician he was referred to a psychiatrist who helped him realize the impact not forgiving was having on his life. I learned at an early stage in my career the power of forgiveness, and much of the work I did in those days was helping people forgive the perpetrator of the wound so as to free the individual of continuing to relive in their life the pain that they had experienced.

Fast forwarding ahead 15 years—I found the same dynamics operating within family businesses. The assumptions, expectations, and role

confusion that often plague family businesses can and do create major hurts both in family as well as business relationships that overlap each other and cause considerable hurt and frustration. It's not unusual in family businesses where this dynamic occurs for siblings and parents and children not to be talking to each other or for various branches of the family to be excluding another branch. In some of the most dramatic cases, family members have sued each other. Witness the history of the Koch Refining family as well as the recent Pritzker family situation where one family member is suing another. In both these situations, people had not forgiven each other and then initiated the legal process as a remedy. The end result of the legal process will be to exacerbate the already strained family relationship to the point that a schism is created within the family that will affect the family for multiple generations to come.

The Family Forgiveness Ritual[©] is designed to avert this process by ritualizing the process of forgiveness, drawing on the family's tradition of religious values and creating a ceremony that draws on the family's fundamental values of love, generosity, and sense of abundance. The goal of the Family Forgiveness Ritual[©] is to bring the family's religious tradition into its everyday life. Nash and McLennan discuss this very topic in their book on how to integrate people's faith lives with their lives at work, *Church on Sunday, Work on Monday* (Nash & McLennan, 2001). Their focus is primarily on public companies, so it seems this integrating should be much easier to implement in the context of a family business where all family members have a common religious background.

Family Forgiveness Rituals[©] are always done in the context of a family business consultation. The process starts with a series of individual inter-

views designed to create an understanding about the issues facing the family in preparation for the Family Business Planning Meeting. Both during the individual interviews and the Family Business Planning Meeting, assessments are being made as to the family's readiness to achieve its goals. In those instances where obstacles to their achievement exist, family members are encouraged to use the "Collaborative Team Skills" (CTS) (S. Miller & Miller, 1994) as a model to resolve their differences. (CTS is a system we utilize with our clients for communication and management of differences.) To the extent they are not capable of being resolved in the family meeting context, it is not unusual to suggest either individual meetings or dyadic discussion to further explore how to resolve family business differences.

The introduction of the possibility of a Family Forgiveness Ritual[©] is normally done in one of the early family meetings, but the details are specifically discussed in individual meetings. In these meetings, the concept of forgiveness and responsibility are broached and clients can discuss their response to the idea of participating in the ritual. It is important to note that Family Forgiveness Rituals[©] are always done in the context of the overall consultation so that appropriate support and encouragement can be given before, during, and after the ritual has occurred. Family members are always encouraged to share their reservations as a part of the decision-making process as to whether or not to proceed.

One of the critical issues facing the consultant thinking about using the Family Forgiveness Ritual[©] is the question of timing. In most instances, the ritual is used as a summary process to celebrate what the family has achieved through its family meetings and individual discussions.

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The ritual basically solidifies what the family has accomplished and ritualizes it deeply in the traditions of its religious values and family heritage.

In other instances, the forgiveness ritual is used as a spiritual sparkplug to ignite the family's compassion and spiritual traditions. In these types of situations, a road block has occurred and the hope is that the grace created as a result of the ritual will generate a sufficient amount of healing to allow the family to move forward in a positive way. When the process is utilized, it is always followed up with individual or dyadic type meetings, that is, father and son, or brother and sister type meetings.

From a forgiveness point of view, it's important to define what I mean by *forgiveness*. There are multiple definitions, but the one I like the best is from Dr. Frederic Luskin's book, *Forgive for Good* (Luskin, 2002). His book is a part of the Stanford University forgiveness project that teaches individuals about forgiveness and is able to demonstrate in both a before and after fashion the effects of forgiveness training. His definition of forgiveness is as follows.

Forgiveness is the feeling of peace that emerges as you take your hurt less personally, take responsibility for how you feel, and become a hero instead of a victim in the story you tell. Forgiveness is the experience of peacefulness in the present moment. Forgiveness does not change the past, but it changes the present. Forgiveness means that even though you are wounded, you choose to hurt and suffer less. Forgiveness means you become part of the solution. Forgiveness is the understanding that hurt is a normal part of life. Forgiveness is for you and for no one else. You can forgive and rejoin a relationship, or forgive and never speak to the person again. (Luskin, 2002, p. 68)

In his book, Luskin talks about the benefits of forgiveness. The first benefit, and the most important one, is that forgiveness is our assertion that we are

not victims of our past. It basically allows people to speak with emotional balance about the people they feel wronged by. He goes on to say: "When we forgive, we become calm enough to say confidently that what our parents taught us was dead wrong. With that calmness, we can chart the best course for our lives. Forgiveness is the beginning of a new chapter, not the end of the story."

The second benefit of learning to forgive is how we can help others—essentially be a role model for them. The most wonderful illustration of this concept is Martin Zaidenstadt, survivor in the book *The Last Survivor* (Ryback, 1999). Zaidenstadt, a Polish Jew, was shipped to Dakow in 1942. He was 29; now he's 88. After the war, he settled in the city of Dakow, an unusual thing for a Jew from the camps to do. Martin is a witness—55 years after the fact. Each day he stands outside the ovens witnessing to what he knows. He knows because he was there, because he lost a wife and daughter in this camp, and because he still wakes up screaming. He knows he never left Dakow. This is what Martin had to say on forgiveness.

When people see that I have made a life in the place where I was brought to die, they understand that they too must learn to forgive, that if I can forgive the Germans for what they tried to do to me, they can forgive as well. (Rybeck, 1999)

Not only was Martin healing himself by his witness, but in addition, he was becoming a wonderful role model for all of us in terms of the notion of forgiveness.

The third benefit of forgiveness, according to Luskin, "emerges as we give more love and care to the important people in our lives" (Luskin, 2002, p. 73).

Oscar Wilde was quoted on this topic and said: "Children grow up loving their parents; as they

grow older they judge; sometimes they forgive them” (Hazelden, 1986).

In the commentary that accompanied this, the author acknowledges the benefit achieved by forgiving our parents.

Every situation has limited choices, and we work with what we’ve got. As adults, we realize this is exactly where our parents were when we were children. They, too, were born into an important world and to do the best they could. When we can forgive our parents, we are free to accept them as they are, as we might a friend. We can accept them, enjoy the relationship, and forget about collecting old debts. Making peace with them imparts to us the strength of previous generations and helps us be more at peace with ourselves. (Hazelden, 1986)

Wilde’s quote captures for me the awesome benefit of forgiveness as it applies to our parents. But the same principle can apply in all our relationships.

Essentially, what Luskin and Wilde are talking about is what I used to speak about metaphorically in my counseling sessions. When you turn your water off to the house, you turn it off at the street, and the whole house is without water. As a result, metaphorically speaking, when we hold a grievance in our heart, we lose our ability to express and receive love from those people who are so close to us.

Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, in his book *From Age-ing to Sage-ing* (Schachter-Shalomi & Miller, 1995), talks about the healing properties of forgiveness. He says: “One of the most powerful tools we have is to reformat the template of our being is forgiveness. . . . [W]e can reach back to repair the places of great hurt—the broken promises, the acts of betrayal, the ruptures and the heartache that come with the territory of intimate relationships, marriages, and divorces. All of us have unhealed emotional scar tissue that

keeps our hearts closed and armored against repeated injuries” (Schachter-Shalomi & Miller, 1995, p. 97).

Rabbi Zalman talks about the issue of responsibility in managing differences and forgiveness. He comments on the importance of people realizing their role, even if it’s unconscious, in creating problems in families. He says:

We often fail to account for the role that we unconsciously play in creating dysfunctional relationships and situations. All too often we don’t ask ourselves, “How did my hidden agenda—my expectations, unacknowledged needs, and unresolved emotional conflicts—lead to my getting hurt?” We cannot forgive the offending party as long as we have not taken responsibility for our own contribution to the misunderstanding. By portraying ourselves as victims we avoid dealing with the pain that we unconsciously inflict on ourselves. Forgiving another’s deed against us requires forgiving ourselves for our complicity in the affair. (Schachter-Shalomi & Miller, 1995, p. 98)

One of the key philosophical cornerstones of the ritual is self-responsibility and the notion that each one of us contributes to whatever the issues are in our families. This has often been the hardest part of the ritual for family members to accept.

Another concept of forgiveness that’s important to note is “what forgiveness isn’t.” Forgiveness does not mean condoning or accepting someone or something that hurt you. This common notion is to forgive and forget with emphasis on forgetting rather than forgiveness. It is important for people to realize that they need not continue to place themselves in situations of continual hurt or pain. When it comes to forgetting, I not only encourage clients not to forget, I actually encourage them to embrace and celebrate the hurt as a precursor to letting go. Jon Kabat-Zinn, in a lecture from his book *Full Catastrophe Living* (Kabat-Zinn, 1990), speaks eloquently about the

paradox of embracing the pain in order to let it go.

McClendon and Kadis comment on this phenomenon in their book *Reconciling Relationships and Preserving the Family Business* (McClendon & Kadis, 2004).

Moreover, forgiving does not mean that future hurtful acts done by persons who caused earlier afflictions will be excused, avoided, or ignored. Nor does it mean that permission is given for relationships to go back to the way they were before, or that past offenders are now freed from accountability for their actions. Instead, forgiving is a conscious choice to release oneself from the burden of anger and resentment, as well as from overwhelming preoccupation with hurts, which for some people can be an obsession. Forgiveness can also help others release themselves from the anger they hold toward themselves for having participated in the problem, if only as bystanders. (McClendon & Kadis, 2004, p. 179)

The idea is to remember fully, but release yourself from the burden and pain of anger, resentment, and deep hurt. By forgiving, not only do you release yourself from this burden, but you also make it possible, by coming to a place of emotional neutrality, to allow the other to be released and open to new possibilities for the relationship. D. Patrick Miller comments on this phenomenon when he states in his book *A Little Book of Forgiveness*: “Forgiveness allows one to share what has to change in order for the relationship to continue” (D. P. Miller, 1994, p. 15).

McClendon and Kadis, in their book *Reconciling Relationships and Preserving the Family Business* (McClendon & Kadis, 2004) note: “Apologizing and forgiving are behaviors of choice—transitional acts that aid family in reestablishing necessary good will, rebuilding relationships, and refocusing on the future” (McClendon and Kadis, p. 177).

In my work I present forgiveness to clients as a new beginning. Forgiveness allows the client system to generate the necessary goodwill to reestablish the family process of building the family’s emotional equity and trust. Forgiveness allows the family to create the positive emotional reservoir that is essential to survive the hard times in any family business.

The Ritual

For the clients to understand what the forgiveness ritual is, I explain the different kinds of forgiveness, although the emphasis throughout the Family Forgiveness Ritual[©] is on the area of acknowledging what you’ve done to contribute to the problem and/or to hurt other people.

But at the same time I point out and read a series of quotes that are designed to help people develop a positive perspective about forgiveness, to use as inspirations to assist them in identifying both the things that they have done and the things that have hurt them. The inspirations I use come from a book entitled *A Little Book of Forgiveness* by D. Patrick Miller (D. P. Miller, 1994). He talks in the book about forgiving yourself and forgiving others—two of the most challenging things about forgiveness. His quotes for forgiving others include:

Begin not with the idea that you are doing a favor to someone who hurt you, but that you are being merciful to yourself. To carry an anger against anyone is to poison your own heart, administering more toxin every time you replay in your mind the injury done to you. If you decline to repeat someone’s offense inwardly, your outward anger will dissipate. Then it becomes much easier to tell the one who hurt you how things must change between you. (D. P. Miller, 1994, p. 15)

“Forgive and forget” is a popular distortion of the work of surrendering grievances. The real process is “Remember fully and forgive.” If it were actually possible to forget everything you forgave, you could teach very little to others seeking freedom from their resentments. When you are trying to decide whether or not someone deserves your forgiveness, you are asking the wrong question. Ask instead whether you deserve to be someone who consistently forgives (D. P. Miller, 1994, pp. 16–17).

The inspirational messages for forgiving yourself include:

Forgiving your flaws and failures does not mean looking away from them or lying about them. Look at them as a string of pitiful or menacing hitchhikers whom you can't afford not to pick up on your journey to a changed life. Each one of them has a piece of the map you need hidden in its shabby clothing. You must listen attentively to all their stories and win the friendship of each one to put your map together. Where you are going—into a forgiven life of wholeness, passion, and commitment—you will need all the peculiar denizens of your dark side working diligently on your behalf. (D. P. Miller, 1994, p. 38)

In addition, I also use some quotes from the *Art of Forgiveness, Lovingkindness and Peace* by Jack Kornfield (Kornfield, 2002). Kornfield has a series of meditations that allow the reader to focus on the value of forgiveness. His meditations cover forgiveness from others, forgiveness for ourselves, and forgiveness for those who have hurt or harmed us. Each one of these meditations inspires people to forgive themselves or others and makes it possible to start anew. In addition, outside the context of the Family Forgiveness Ritual®, individual discussions have usually occurred to support the positive expectations of people being successful in the forgiveness process.

The actual ritual starts with the presentation from the consultant's point of view on the nature of forgiveness and utilizes some of the previously mentioned inspirational quotes to frame the psychological perspective about forgiveness. In addition, the family's clergyperson, who has been selected by the family, shares the family's religious background, its religious philosophy of forgiveness, and how it fits into the culture of the religion and family.

The second step of the ritual is to allow people to talk about what they want to be forgiven for—what may have occurred with them that they are willing to forgive. For many families this is a very emotional part of the process. Even families that didn't anticipate they would have anything to talk about in terms of wanting to be forgiven are able to share thoughts about their contribution to the problem. Some of the most emotionally moving and positive sharing has occurred in families who thought they had nothing to share.

The next item is an absolution ritual, which has always been uniquely different based on the religion and clergyperson involved. It's an opportunity for people to, ritualistically speaking, wash away the hurts and create a ritual of forgiveness that allows them to heal.

The next step is a Eucharistic celebration. This has been uniquely different based on the family's religious background and minister, so that each one that has been done has been different. Since the ritual has only been done with Christian families, this has been the format that has been used.

The final step of the ritual is the potluck meal. Families have traditionally gathered around meals for holidays and rituals, and so the Family Forgiveness Ritual® incorporates that tradition by asking people to do a potluck meal. In some

instances that hasn't worked because of logistics and the family has gone out to a restaurant. But nevertheless, the culmination and celebration of the ritual is the metaphor of the banquet feast.

Case Study

The first attempt at this ritual occurred in November 1998 with the Danz family—a family that had been plagued by family business troubles for 10 years prior to our engagement and had made several previous attempts at resolution of its differences, but had not been successful.

The presenting problem was the fact that the father and oldest son who worked in the business were not speaking and had not spoken for the past four years, despite the fact that they worked side by side. All their communication was run through the younger brother, who was working with them in the business. After many years of frustration, the younger brother finally indicated his unwillingness to continue unless the two of them worked out their differences.

One of the unique characteristics of this family had to do with the father's name, which was Wimp. I refused to call him that until I realized the its significance. His father, as it turned out, was a butcher and when he would go to work each morning, he would ask his son what he would like for dinner, and his son would reply, "hamburger." The dad would reply: "[t]hat's my Wimp," referring to Wimp in the Popeye cartoon. As it turned out, the boy's father died when he was 10 years old, and that was his most enduring memory of his father. When I understood this and realized the name's significance, I was also able to understand the issues between the father and son and redefined the problem as an issue of

loss. The father had lost his dad to a heart attack when he was a young boy of 10 years old. The oldest son in the family business had lost his dad to business tensions and the issues between he and his father and the rest of the family regarding the business. As I began to talk about that issue with the family members who were participating in the engagement, which included the father, the mother, the oldest son and his wife, and the youngest son, each of them identified loss issues in their family. As a result of sharing that, we were able to create some positive innovations and move forward in the short space of three or four meetings.

However, in addition to that, there was a bigger issue having to do with the vilification of the oldest son by the other five children in the family. When I suggested to the family that was the problem and recommended the Family Forgiveness Ritual[©] and the use of their pastor, they were eager to proceed. I made my presentation on the psychological aspects of forgiveness and the pastor made his observations from a religious perspective. The Danz family was a conservative, traditional Catholic family, and the priest who was participating was a Benedictine monk. His remarks were able to draw on the Church's long tradition of forgiveness and he shared a very positive perspective about it with the family.

When it came time for people to talk about what they wanted to be forgiven for, there was a very, very long silence. I had thoughts running through my mind about whether this was the right thing to do until the silence was broken by one of the middle sons who had flown in from Memphis to participate in the ritual. He said to his father, "I want to ask for your forgiveness for taking so long to tell you that I was gay." He had previously

shared with his family that he was gay, but was now asking for forgiveness for taking so long and not trusting his parents.

After another very long silence, the dad responded, “I want to ask for your forgiveness for how I handled hearing that you were gay.” At that point, the mother began to cry and each one of the family members in turn went around sharing what they had contributed to the problem. When it got to the daughter-in-laws who had just recently joined the family, they said they couldn’t think of much of what they’d done to contribute to the problem, but they certainly wanted to be a part of this process.

The priest then conducted an absolution ritual and the home Eucharist. It was followed by a potluck meal that the family had prepared.

The ritual started at 9:00 that morning and at 7:00 that evening when the family was cleaning up, many of them were sitting in the living room as families do after family celebrations, reminiscing about family stories. The oldest brother, who at the beginning of the ritual was isolated in a corner, was now the heart of the family sharing.

That Christmas, the brother from Memphis brought his partner home for the first time, and they had the best Christmas they had ever had.

In February 2004 I talked with the mother who indicated that the family was getting together to celebrate their 50th wedding anniversary. In that conversation, she mentioned the business was doing very well and the family has never been better. As a matter of fact, she said the whole family was getting ready to leave for a cruise to celebrate their anniversary.

In other families, the absolution ritual has been different. One of the more dramatic instances of this was done with a Presbyterian minister and a

family where there had been deep hurts because of business differences.

The absolution ritual included the distribution and collection of family IOUs and an explanation by the minister that the original “Our Father” was worded in terms of debts—“forgive us our debts as we forgive those who have debted against us.” He explained that in the Old Testament when you offended someone, that not only were you emotionally indebted to somebody, but you were financially indebted. The use of the IOUs was a wonderful symbolism that allowed the family to get beyond the hurts and create healing and move forward.

In another family, the absolution ritual included olive oil that was blessed by the priest who was conducting the ceremony. Family members dipped their thumbs in the olive oil and blessed each other with the sign of the cross saying, “God’s forgiveness, our forgiveness, love.”

So you can see, the ritual changes based on the family, but the result is a healing process that allows the family to start anew in a positive way and go forward. Although I recommend Family Forgiveness Rituals© regularly, there are some families who have been reluctant to do them. Several instances have occurred where other professionals, even psychological professionals, have advised a family that they’re not ready to participate in such a ritual. My belief is that participating in the ritual opens the door to positive healing within the family that changes their perspective and that it’s not necessary to wait until people are completely ready. My belief is that the ritual itself has an inspirational message that allows people to go beyond their hurts to move forward in a positive way. I believe Frederic Luskin’s work at Stanford supports the conclusion that people can

be taught to forgive and the results are measurable thereafter.

There are some families where participating in a Family Forgiveness Ritual[©] has not been successful. In one such instance, the family was so steeped in its hurt and wounds that they were unwilling to give up their despair and hurt and move forward in a positive way. Unfortunately, as this article is being written, they are embroiled in litigation where their mutual hurts are being fought over in a courtroom.

Family Forgiveness Rituals[©] are an opportunity for family members who have been hurt or broken by business and financial differences to create healing in their families and to short circuit the distance, anguish, and hurt that often occurs. The success of the ritual is a function of the family's ability to draw on their deep well of emotional and family traditions as well as their religious traditions. In doing so, they are able to utilize the internal wisdom of their family and move forward in a positive and caring way to create a new beginning.

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