



Write Lance Woodbury at Family Business Matters, 2204 Lakeshore Dr., Suite 415, Birmingham, AL 35209, or email lance.woodbury@pinionglobal.com

Forgiveness

Hard Work in a Family Business



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Living and working in close proximity with family members creates challenging situations. Miscommunication, misunderstanding and conflict between business partners are commonplace. At some point in the family business, you will hurt, and be hurt by, those you love. Forgiveness, then, is a difficult but necessary element of being in business together.

In 2022, Pastor Tim Keller wrote his final book, “Forgive: Why Should I and How Can I?” He uses the biblical parable of the unforgiving servant (Matthew 18:23-35) to suggest that the human capacity to forgive is dependent on God’s forgiveness. Along the way, he offers a view of how forgiveness is seen in society today and gives compelling arguments for why forgiveness is important to all of us.

The State of Forgiveness

Keller highlights three models of forgiveness in today’s society. The first is “nonconditional forgiveness,” where the entire focus is on the offended party recovering from anger and pain. Confronting the person who caused the pain may or may not happen; the point is for the victim to get over his or her hurt.

The second is a “transactional forgiveness” model, where the focus is on making the person who caused the pain “earn” forgiveness. If he or she shows enough remorse or makes the right apologies, forgiveness by the victim is merited.

The third is “no-forgiveness,” which focuses only on justice. The only recourse is to make the offending party pay for what they did. The problem is that the first

model doesn’t hold the perpetrator accountable, and the latter two models are based not on forgiveness but on elements of revenge.

Keller argues all three models are supported by a modern “therapeutic culture,” where society’s focus is on the individual and the pursuit of personal goals. We miss the biblical emphasis on community and forgiveness as central tenants of the Christian faith. Moreover, the secular models don’t satisfy the hunger we have as humans to be in relationship, and to be reconciled, with others.

The Cost and Practice of Forgiveness

Knowing society’s models don’t satisfy, how should we approach forgiveness in our relationships? First, the forgiver must realize the high cost of forgiveness. Knowing someone hurt you, you make a decision to accept whatever reparation that person will make, even if none, and let go of the issue that caused the pain. In a word, you are “absorbing” the cost of letting go.

Keller suggests forgiveness “is a practice before it is a feeling.” We should think about the ways we could make the other person pay for their offense and, in refraining from doing so, realize that we are practicing the act of forgiveness. Then, we “promise not to keep bringing the matter up to the person, to others or even ourselves.”

Forgiveness also involves going privately, and perhaps more than once, to the other person in as courteous a manner as possible and confronting the wrong behavior. Two caveats apply here. First, be open to the idea that you may also have wronged the other person. Second, focus on the other person’s behavior, what he or she did, versus character, who that person is.

A final step, if necessary, is to involve another person or two to facilitate healing. Can a third party help the perpetrator understand or hear more effectively, or hold you both accountable for creating a different relationship going forward?

Forgiveness takes substantial internal and external work. It will challenge you beyond any management, ownership or operational issue you face. It is costly from an emotional and relational standpoint. But, a reconciled relationship, particularly with a family member, positively affects both current and future generations. ///

“Forgiveness is a promise we make to keep despite our feelings.”

—TIM KELLER