



THE POWER OF FORGIVENESS: A KEY TO HIGH PERFORMANCE LEADERSHIP

Lessons from the father of a murder victim

By Professor George Kohlrieser – February 2010

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Imagine what your life would be like if someone murdered one of your immediate family members. What if it was your son or daughter? Think about the anger and bitterness you would feel towards that person. Surely it would consume both your personal and professional life. Would you ever be able to move on?

Hopefully, none of you reading this have endured such a tragedy. But surely all of us have dealt with profound feelings of betrayal, injustice and loss of an important expectation whether on the job or at home. Do you let such occurrences consume you or hold you hostage? Or are you able to go through the recovery and grieving process so that you defeat and overcome the adversity as quickly as possible, not vice versa? No person better personifies this than Azim Khamisa, a former investment banker who tragically lost his only son to gang violence. His story epitomizes how one can learn to forgive and to ultimately find peace again in all areas of life.

Azim Khamisa's story

On January 21, 1995, Azim Khamisa's 20-year old son Tariq was shot and killed by four youth gang members. Fourteen year old Tony Hicks pointed a gun and with a single shot took the life of Tariq Khamisa because he had refused to deliver a pizza without first being paid. It was a long process, but ultimately Azim Khamisa chose not seek revenge over the loss of his son. Instead Azim chose forgiveness and peace. "I took a different response to this tragedy," stated Azim to an audience of participants during IMD's High Performance Leadership program. "I saw Tariq was a victim of the 14 year old, and I saw the 14 year old as a victim of society. Both were victims at opposite ends of a gun."

Azim shares that as a member of society, he too felt responsible for the bullet that took the life of his son. Even more stunning, he then reached out to Tony's grandfather, Ples Felix, who had custody of Tony at the time of the murder, with a hand of compassion and forgiveness. Together the two men from two completely different backgrounds founded the Tariq Khamisa Foundation that is helping to bring attention to teen violence worldwide and is teaching peace and forgiveness as a means to conflict resolution. Azim has spoken with Tony on multiple occasions and upon his release from prison, Tony will have a job awaiting him at the Foundation.

Azim was able to forgive Tony in order to move through the grieving process and ultimately find joy again. He states: "Forgiveness is something you do for yourself. If I did not forgive Tony I would be very angry at him and if I am angry who does it hurt? Myself."

How does forgiveness relate to high performance business leadership?

How does this connect to your daily professional activities? We rarely speak about forgiveness in an organizational or professional context. However, to understand effective high performing leadership you have to be cognizant of the many people in organizations suffering emotional pain inflicted by others for whatever reasons and to various degrees. There are many types of losses of trust in which people do not let go, but rather hold onto resentment. How do you deal with unwarranted criticism and backstabbing attempts on the job? How do you overcome betrayal, jealousy, rejection, disrespect, disappointments and the long list of possible negative work-related experiences.

In addition, how do you deal with disappointments and letdowns in your personal life? As work and home are interconnected, it should come as no surprise that most individuals satisfied in their personal life perform better on the job. On the other hand, major upheaval in one's personal life often leads to a sense of dissatisfaction and underperformance at work.

Effective leaders must be at peace with themselves and the events in their life past and present. Everyone, especially leaders, must make attachments, create bonds and go through separations and grief to recovery and return to the full joy of work and of life. You can deny it or you can deal with it. There are eight stages of grief: denial; protest and anger; sadness, missing or longing; fear about what will happen next; mental and emotional acceptance; forming new attachments or renewing a bond; forgiveness; and finally finding full gratitude and joy again.

Of these eight, forgiveness can be one of the hardest and at the same time the deepest healing experiences. Forgiveness means to literally be able to give again. In other words, it means that we use our energy to be able to "give for" and to go back out to others. People who are not able to forgive tend to become victims or persecutors. They are unhappy, cynical, negative, over defensive and they suffer. In effect they become "hostages" or "take others hostage". The victim and the victim-turned persecutor tend not to be able to experience real joy, genuine love or full gratitude. If you look at the cycle of grieving, you will see that forgiveness is the fundamental stage to experience gratitude and the joy of life again.

If Azim could forgive someone for the murder of his only son, surely all of us too can work towards resolving conflicts and overcome adversities to unleash in ourselves the energy and power to lead more effectively. As a result of his actions, Azim has been recognized with a number of prominent awards, including *The Search for Common Ground International Award* (acknowledged along side Desmond Tutu and Ted Koppel) and the *National Crime Victims Special Community Service Award* presented by former US President Bill Clinton and former

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Attorney General Janet Reno. Perhaps you may never gain such high-profile recognition but surely, like Azim, you can use the power of forgiveness to reach new heights as a leader and at the same time be a model for others to learn this very important emotional intelligence skill for themselves.

Professor George Kohlrieser is Program Director of the High Performance Leadership program and Advanced High Performance Leadership. He also teaches the "Leading at the Edge" stream during Orchestrating Winning Performance.

Professor Kohlrieser is author of Hostage at the Table: How Leaders Can Overcome Conflict, Influence Others, and Raise Performance (Jossey-Bass, Warren Bennis Series), an international best-selling book translated into 12 languages. The book was awarded Best Leadership Book in France and Best Management Book in Germany.

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