

Forgiveness as a Buffer against Incivility among Teachers

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ABSTRACT

Rising level of incivility and mistreatment in workplaces is largely affecting the functioning of organizations. In the educational settings, the prevalence of deviant and negative behaviour is hampering the overall well being and performance of teachers which has an impact on the working of institutions. Therefore, it is imperative to focus on possible solutions to deal with such behaviours. The field of positive psychology stresses the importance of forgiveness as character strength for handling uncivil and rude behaviour at workplace. People who are forgiving in nature have healthy interpersonal relationships, positive work qualities and function at their highest levels. The purpose of this paper is to give an overview of the concept of workplace incivility and its negative consequences on the well being of teachers. It reviews the concept of workplace forgiveness and highlights its importance as a coping strategy to deal with negative behaviours in organizations.

Keywords: Teachers, well being, workplace forgiveness, workplace incivility

The psychosocial organizational environment is conceived to be an important aspect as it is held responsible for various positive organizational outcomes. It also determines the quality of workgroup interaction. However, interpersonal conflicts and offences are widespread in organizations. As a result of disagreement, wrongdoing or hurtful acts, people have to face unkind situations (Paul, 2009). These unfriendly interactions have negative consequences for the organization as well as for the workers (Aquino, Grover, Goldman, & Folger, 2003; Butler & Mullis, 2001).

Workplace incivility

As per Andersson and Pearson (1999), workplace incivility is reflected through low-intensity deviant behavior which has ambiguous intent to harm the target. It is bypassing the workplace norms requiring employees to respect each other. Being uncivil is a display of rude and discourteous behaviour and total disregard for the coworker, juniors and seniors. In accordance to this definition there are different aspects of workplace incivility which separate it from similar and overlapping concepts falling under the broader term of counterproductive behaviours like bullying, aggression, violence, mobbing, harassment (Schilpzand, De Pater, & Erez, 2014). It is a low intensity or subtle form of behaviour which lacks any form of physical violence. The intensity can be judged keeping in mind the views of the target or the ones witnessing such behaviour. Moreover, being a culture specific concept, people may hold varied views regarding the intensity of same behaviour. Secondly, the intention of harming the other person is ambiguous in nature that is there lies subjectivity in the goal of incivility. Thirdly, it comprises of behaviours which are against the general norms followed by an organization, though, these undocumented set of group behaviours may differ from one institution to another. It is a form of negative interpersonal conduct which includes lack of respect for others, insults, rude remarks, degrading the other person (Vagharseyyedin, 2015).

Consequences of workplace incivility

Incivility though being mild in nature is harmful at both organizational and personal level (Vagharseyyedin, 2015). It leads to a toxic work environment which hinders the performance and development of the employee which in turn costs the organization (Schilpzand, De Pater, & Erez, 2014). The decline in the desired outcomes within an organization results from uncivil behaviour. Workplace incivility has a positive relationship with absenteeism, turnover intention and negative relation with willingness to work, productivity (Pearson, Andersson, & Porath, 2000; Sliter, Sliter, Jex, 2012) and job satisfaction (Schilpzand, De Pater, & Erez, 2014). In a large scale study done on employees of U.S organizations, Pearson et al. (2000) reported that there was a high rate of turnover intention among the employees facing uncivil behaviours, five percent engaged in theft of property from the organizations whereas 25 percent were

intentionally not putting in their maximum efforts leading to low outcomes for the organizations. Other negative outcomes are in the form of loss of financial profits, claims and medical costs (Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Gardner & Johnson, 2001).

The psychological and physical health of the individual is negatively impacted by workplace incivility (Reio & Ghosh, 2009). It leads to feelings of alienation and avoidance among the employees (Vickers, 2006), high level of psychological distress, feeling of nervousness, anxiety, sadness and lower overall well being (Martin & Hine, 2005). Gardner and Johnson (2001) stated that incivility resulted in lack of sleep, stress, losing concentration and worrying excessively among employees of organizations.

Indian perspective on forgiveness

Forgiveness has its roots in various religious philosophies and traditions (Jacinto & Edwards, 2011; Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2015). It has been discussed in major western monotheistic traditions like Judaism, Christianity, Islam and in eastern traditions of Hinduism and Jainism (Jacinto & Edwards, 2011, McCullough & Worthington, 1999).

In the holy scripture of Hinduism, Bhagavad Gita, forgiveness or 'Ksama' in Sanskrit, has been advocated as an important virtue which individuals need to attain, in order to lead a happy and fulfilling life. Individuals should not only forgive others but also seek forgiveness from individuals who have been wronged or mistreated directly or indirectly by them. According to the basic philosophy of Hinduism, there is no difference between any living organism and all are one with God. Thus, to forgive is not recognizing the offender as separate from one's own self on which one can direct its resentment or anger (Hunter, 2007). Also, Hinduism believes in the principle of 'karma' which suggests that if a person is facing any mistreatment in its present life it is because of his own past deeds and only he is responsible for what he is going through, not others. Hence, there is no need of showing anger towards the wrongdoers as they will be punished according to their karma.

Similar to this philosophy, Jainism, propagates 'Uttam kshama' or supreme forgiveness, which can be achieved by following a path of nonviolence or 'ahimsa' and knowing the true nature of the self, in order to live a life of peace and harmony. Jainism advocates that every human being is capable of showing 'Uttam kshama' as it is an inborn quality of the self. When one realizes the true nature of self, he/she is free from hurt, anger or revengeful thoughts and expresses 'Uttam kshama' in pure and unconditional form. It is independent of any external factor like an apology from the wrongdoer or acceptance of the transgression by the offender. 'Uttam kshama' not only helps in the spiritual growth of an individual but also improves interpersonal relationships (Jain, 2018).

Workplace forgiveness

Though the concept of forgiveness has been propagated by philosophers and theologians for centuries, however, it received importance as a psychological construct towards the end of 20th century (McCullough, Pargament, & Thoresen, 2000). It was highlighted in the field of positive psychology, where it was defined as a character strength, which is an innate capacity or disposition present within individuals that helps them to perform and function at the highest and most fulfilling level in their lives (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). McCullough, Worthington, and Rachal (1997) defined forgiveness as a transition of motivations from negative to positive form as one experiences decreased motivation to counter-attack or maintain distance from the wrongdoer and have increased motivation of reconciliation and compassion for the offender.

In the words of Aquino, Grover, Goldman, and Folger (2003), interpersonal workplace forgiveness is a process where a conscious step is taken by an employee who encountered any form of offensive behaviour, to bring under control various negative emotions like rage and anger towards the culprit and additionally to hold back oneself from harming the offender even when it feels rational on moral grounds to do so. Boonyarit, Chuawanlee, Macaskill, & Supparerkchaisakul (2013) conducted a qualitative study on 348 professional nurses in Thailand and found diminishing negative approaches towards the transgressor, relinquishment of negative judgment, enhancing positive approaches and kindness towards the transgressor, awareness of the advantages of forgiveness, and forgiveness according to Buddhist beliefs as the five dimensions of workplace forgiveness.

Benefits of workplace forgiveness

Forgiveness in organizations can serve as an important and powerful tool for mitigating any form of conflict arising among workers of an organization (Fehr, Gelfand, & Nag, 2010; Kurzynski, 1998). Butler and Mullis (2001) highlighted the need for forgiveness in organizations by suggesting that harboring negative feelings for coworkers leads to low level of job performance. Workplace forgiveness is helpful for building

up of positive work qualities of mutual trust and respect among the employees as one gives up on the negative emotions and moves in the direction of strengthening the working relationships for better future interactions. According to Kurzynski, (1998), if an employee remains worried about the consequences for the mistakes done during the job or failure to accomplish the task as per the expectations of the organizations, then it curtails the creative thoughts. Further, it demoralizes an employee to an extent that the efforts exerted to meet the objectives of the given organization are lowered and also there is diminished zeal to take risk for the organization. However, workplace forgiveness encourages people to become more productive, think creatively and work at their best level as they do not hold the fear of being judged or being defined for their wrong actions only and have the confidence to move in a progressive direction. As a result of practicing forgiveness, employees tend to be more cheerful, cooperative and engage in prosocial behaviour (Karremans, Van Lange, & Holland, 2005).

Workplace forgiveness helps in developing a work friendly environment, improves relationships with other employees, results in better task performance and higher workplace satisfaction (Law, 2013; McCullough et al., 2000). Aquino et al. (2003) note that workplace forgiveness is similar to forgiveness in other settings as it evokes similar forms of cognitive and emotional responses. Workers are able to adapt in a better manner and their level of spiritual peace is also high (Lagzian, Kafashpor, Mansourian & Farhadinejad, 2013).

Research has also been conducted to show the negative effects of not practicing forgiveness in organizations (Madsen, Gygi & Hammond, 2009). Davidhizar and Laurent (2000) found in their study that managers who didn't practice forgiveness in workplace led to negative outcomes for the organization like reduced productivity at individual and team level, increased level of aggressive behaviour.

Workplace forgiveness and incivility among teachers

As a profession, teaching is highly stressful (Kyriacou, 2001). Studies reveal that job stress is a matter of concern for teachers of higher educational institutions (Bowen, & Schuster, 1986; Smith, Earl, Anderson, & Lovrich, 1995). They have to deal with various stressors which may be in relation to students like their bad conduct, complaints from parents, in relation to the job like long duty hours, ambiguity of the role, workload and time pressure or in relation to institutional factors like limited resources and poor facilities (Shull, 1972).

Another major source of stress among higher education teachers is interpersonal offenses. This may result from frictions, rude or uncivil behaviour among the coworkers, staff, and management (Hastings & Bham, 2003). Hostile and unfriendly behaviour among colleagues, superiors or subordinates may lead to negative psychological effects for individuals like feelings of helplessness, low self-esteem, low self-confidence (Wet, 2010), turnover intentions, frustrations, depression, anxiety, anger (Szigety, 2012; Yaman, 2010).

According to Madsen, Gygi, and Hammond (2009) organizational issues like spreading of gossips, engaging in conflicting arguments, differences between various departments, and lack of support from superiors on important issues have a detrimental impact on the well being and health of the teachers which further influences the learning and development of the students. Hence, the researchers have focused on developing effective coping strategies for the teachers so that they can respond positively under such stressors and work to the best of their abilities (Boyle, Borg, Falzon, & Baglioni, 1995; Kyriacou, 2001). Researches reveal that teachers who use forgiveness as an effective technique to cope up with conflicts and stresses are better able to manage negative behaviours and establish better relationship with others (Bugay & Demir, 2010). They have high level of self-respect, empathy, and happiness (Sezgin & Erdogan, 2018).

In a study conducted by Khan and Singh (2013) on eighty teachers of schools in Himachal Pradesh, results showed a high level of forgiveness in female teachers in comparison to male teachers. 436 teachers in Turkey belonging to different departments like biology, chemistry, physical education, history, education, education in art were studied by Sariçam, Çardak, and Yaman (2014). Their study revealed that there was a significant relationship between workplace mobbing and forgiveness among teachers. Forgiveness of others and forgiveness of situation were negatively associated with discrimination, humiliation and communication barriers. It was interpreted from the findings that forgiveness helps in reducing the negative workplace behaviours like mobbing in educational institutions as individuals high on forgiveness level have better skills of communicating among each other, they can resolve conflicts effectively and have improved interpersonal relationships, which helps in creating a positive and peaceful workplace environment. Burgaz and Bakan (2015) based on their qualitative study on teachers of Turkey noted that interpersonal conflicts were a result of both workrelated and personal problems. Teachers tend to forgive their colleagues in case an apology has been made or fairness is maintained by the managerial position of

the institution whereas level of forgiveness is reduced when transgressor does not repent or when they perceive unfair treatment.

Conclusion

Workplace incivility being low-intensity behaviour is often neglected by managers and leaders of organizations, however, repetitive incidents of uncivil behaviours can take the form of high intensity or violent behaviour, which is detrimental for both employee and the organization. It is essential to develop high quality work relationships for smooth running of organizations. Workplace forgiveness acts as a facilitating agent for employees of organizations and affects their performance and well being in a positive manner. Hence, the focus should be on encouraging such positive behaviours of forgiveness in face of stress or interpersonal transgressions instead of responding with negative emotions of vengeance and anger. Inculcating forgiveness will improve the psychological and physical health of teachers which in turn will help them to work efficiently in peaceful work environment for the betterment of students and society on the whole.

Suggestions for future research

Workplace incivility being a major concern in workplace settings needs to be further reviewed in educational institutions in relation to forgiveness in workplace which is a relatively new field of inquiry. In-depth research is required to understand these constructs in relation to organizations. Limited studies have been carried out in nonwestern population hence, it is important to conduct more research on workplace forgiveness and incivility in India specifically in the field of educational organizations. Policies and programs need to be implemented in institutions which will help in curtailing the acts of uncivil behaviour in its initial stages so that it does not escalate into more violent form. Considering the beneficial effects that forgiveness has on both the organization and its employees, it is essential for developing ways to increase a culture of forgiveness in workplace through interventions. The effectiveness of interventions and expansion of the capacity to forgive through training can be further explored in teachers of higher education.

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