
FORGIVENESS IN LEADERSHIP: A COMPASSIONATE ROAD

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Introduction

When advised to forgive those who have harmed me, the suggestion feels dismissive and hurtful.

Everyone assures me it is for my own good—that I must let things go, detach, forgive, and move on for my mental peace. But none of these words seem to resonate with me. I am also told that, as a leader, I have a moral obligation to forgive—that failing to do so would mean failing in my leadership. I am told that demanding or even insisting on an apology would disrupt harmony and reflect poorly on my role (Dhillon, 2018).

This advice leaves me with more questions than answers: Why is leadership often associated with the concept of forgiveness (Kets de Vries, 2013)? How do we navigate harm and repair relationships without losing our sense of self? Why do certain expectations feel so heavy and impossible to reconcile?

But let me be clear: I'm not referring to small mistakes like forgetting to submit a file, mismanaging a schedule, or making an accounting error. Those kinds of operational missteps are an inevitable part of the workplace and are easily forgiven. The harm I'm speaking about runs deeper. It's the kind that challenges your very identity, integrity, and capacity to lead—harm that is systemic, intentional, or targeted in ways that leave a lasting impact. It's the kind of harm often invisible to those who perpetuate it and dismissed by those who witness it.

As a leader and as a Brown immigrant woman, I have experienced this type of harm too often. It's not about being unwilling to forgive—it's about questioning why forgiveness is

expected without any recognition of the more profound harm or accountability for it. And why does this burden fall disproportionately on those whose leadership already disrupts dominant norms?

This piece explores these questions, not to reject forgiveness entirely but to reimagine it.

Identity and Leadership: A Complex Intersection

As a leader, my experiences are deeply intertwined with my identity as a Brown immigrant woman in the United States. These identities do not merely accompany me; they shape how I navigate leadership and how others perceive and treat me in positions of power. When harm is directed at me, it often goes beyond professional disagreements or workplace politics—it becomes personal.

In predominantly White and patriarchal spaces, my identity makes me both hyper-visible and vulnerable. As someone seen as “different,” I am scrutinized more closely, judged more harshly, and held to unspoken standards that others may not face. And yet, the harm I encounter is often minimized, dismissed as a misunderstanding, or reframed as a failure on my part to “let things go.”

I recall a conversation with a friend who, after hearing me describe the challenges I faced at work, remarked, “It seems like there’s always something wherever you go.” Her words, though likely intended to be sympathetic, hurt me deeply. They implied that the problem was me—that my experiences of harm were a result of my own actions or presence rather than systemic inequities or targeted behaviors.

It was in that moment I realized the complexity of my situation: I am a Brown immigrant woman who also holds visible leadership roles. To many, this duality is “complicated.” I am both a member of a minoritized group and someone in a position of authority. This combination often means I am expected to rise above harm and show resilience without acknowledgment of the unique challenges I face. It makes me very vulnerable to scrutiny by all.

This harm that I experience is compounded by systemic forces of Whiteness. By Whiteness, I refer to the attitudes, values, and norms that sustain privilege and often define what is

considered “professional” or “appropriate” in predominantly White spaces. At times, I am placed in close proximity to Whiteness because of my professional role, yet I am never fully embraced within it. My leadership, therefore, exists in a state of constant tension—balancing my responsibilities with the emotional labor of navigating spaces that were not designed for someone like me.

I’ve seen this same pattern in other leaders of color: individuals who are silenced, publicly canceled, or driven out of their positions, even committing suicide, often without their stories being heard or their harm being acknowledged. I, too, have been canceled—left to weather harm alone, without justice, without apology, and without support.

How does one lead under such circumstances? How do you continue to rise when you are left to carry harm that others cannot see or choose not to address?

The Role of Accountability and Justice in Forgiveness

Forgiveness is often framed as a personal virtue—a leader’s ability to rise above, let go of harm, and maintain harmony. However, when harm intersects with identity, it cannot be addressed solely through personal resilience. True forgiveness, especially in the context of leadership, requires accountability and justice. Without these, forgiveness becomes a one-sided expectation disproportionately placed on those who have already been harmed.

For me, as a Brown woman leader, the harm I experience is deeply tied to my identity. It’s not just professional—it’s personal, systemic, and reflective of broader structures of racism and sexism. This is why the call to forgive can feel so unjust. I’m often asked to forgive not because the harm has been meaningfully acknowledged or addressed but because of who I am. There’s an expectation that I, as a woman of color, should embody nurturing, patience, and self-sacrifice.

The narrative suggests that asking for accountability—a direct apology or meaningful recognition of harm—disrupts harmony and reflects poorly on my role as a leader. But how can forgiveness be authentic when the harm remains unacknowledged, when those responsible do not take ownership, and when no effort is made to repair what was broken? An example here is a leading scholar on forgiveness Worthington (2014), who says that forgiveness is not in the relationship but in the context; however, he does frame forgiveness as

an individual decision made by an individual to forgive. But then, what happens to the context? Who corrects that?

Forgiveness, in these cases, risks becoming a tool of dismissal—something used to silence the pain of those harmed and to maintain an illusion of peace. This is especially damaging for women leaders like me because the harm we endure is often layered: professional, personal, and systemic.

Accountability and justice are not obstacles to forgiveness; they are its foundation. Justice strengthens forgiveness, creating the space where trust can begin to be rebuilt. This is why I believe that true healing in leadership and organizations cannot happen without accountability (not apology because anyone can apologize). Justice does not negate forgiveness—it strengthens it. Justice demands that harm is recognized, that those responsible take ownership, and that systems change to prevent future harm.

Forgiveness, Power, and Societal Expectations

Leaders possess various types of power, but they must also combine this with skills, emphasizing the virtue of forgiveness. As Brown women leaders, we often find ourselves in positions of authority yet lack the systemic power to bring meaningful change.

For leaders like me, societal expectations amplify this burden. We are often expected to embody qualities like kindness, understanding, and forgiveness, and when we resist or ask for accountability, we risk being labeled as “angry,” “difficult,” or “uncooperative.” These stereotypes are deeply rooted in patriarchal and White-centric workplace cultures, where expressing legitimate emotions like anger or frustration can jeopardize our credibility. I have often been told to keep my voice low, to smile through injustices, and to avoid showing negative emotions—even when facing harm. The expectation is not just to forgive but to forgive in a way that maintains the comfort of others. This creates tension when harm occurs, as we are expected to forgive, even when doing so feels like a betrayal of our own selves. What happens to us as leaders when we resist forgiveness but lack the power to create the change needed for healing?

Coming from a collectivist cultural background in India, where forgiveness is often viewed as a communal act, I've found this expectation even more challenging to navigate. In the U.S.,

forgiveness is framed as an individual responsibility, placing the burden squarely on the person who has been harmed. This disconnect between cultural paradigms complicates my leadership journey further, as I am forced to balance authenticity with conformity to dominant norms.

Forgiveness, when it is authentic, can indeed be a powerful force for healing and transformation. But, forgiveness, I strongly opine, does not give us closure; it is only a systemic transformation together with an apology and accountability that will provide us with that closure.

Where do we go from here?

Michelle Obama (2022) said, “We go high when they go low.” This phrase is not a call to forget or to forgive, but rather a reminder to stand firm in our values and integrity, even in the face of harm. It’s about recognizing the wrongs done to us, while refusing to let others define us or ascribe negative traits to us. For example, Michelle Obama chose not to forgive those who spread birther conspiracy theories about her husband, Barack Obama, and put their family in danger. Her decision to withhold forgiveness wasn’t out of spite, but because of the real harm those actions caused—and because she refused to accept the narrative that forgiveness would somehow bring peace and comfort to all parties.

The burden of forgiveness should never be used as a tool to force leaders to choose between being authentic and being accepted. We, as leaders, must not be asked to be more than human. Our strength is not infinite, our emotions are valid, and our need for support is just as vital as the support we offer others. No leader should ever have to bear the weight of these struggles alone. Forgiveness and healing are communal journeys, not individual ones, and they should be approached with care, solidarity, and a commitment to real transformation.

Where do we go from here? Instead of treating forgiveness solely as personal, we could reframe it as a catalyst for broader institutional change. Forgiveness has the potential to open up crucial conversations about harm, exclusion, and systemic inequities within organizations. However, for this to happen, organizations must be willing to embrace vulnerability and critically examine their systems and policies. They must make an effort to recognize the harm that has been done, to understand the conditions that allowed it, and to take meaningful steps to address those conditions. Only then can forgiveness move beyond being a mere performative gesture and become a transformative process that benefits everyone.

The Limits of Forgiveness and the Possibilities of Compassion

The limits of forgiveness often become apparent when we recognize that forgiveness alone cannot heal all wounds, particularly in the context of systemic harm. People who advocate for apology and forgiveness only see a problem as between individuals, not systemic. While forgiveness can offer personal peace, it is not a solution for the deep-rooted injustices that many leaders, especially those from marginalized backgrounds, face. When harm is tied to identity, as is often the case for leaders of color, forgiveness can risk perpetuating the cycle of harm if it is not coupled with genuine accountability and transformative action.

This is where compassion becomes a powerful alternative. Compassion is not about excusing harm or brushing it aside; it is about acknowledging the pain, the complexity of the situation, and the humanity of both the person who has harmed and the person who has been harmed.

For leaders, especially those from marginalized communities, compassion asks for the courage to recognize harm while also recognizing our own needs—emotional, psychological, and professional—and it calls for systems and organizations to create environments where leaders can heal without the expectation of immediate forgiveness. Compassion is a process, not a single act, and it must be nurtured within communities committed to collective healing.

In this way, compassion offers a more sustainable path that recognizes human relationships' complexity, and the long-term work required to transform harm into healing

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