



# CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP

## AND

# FORGIVENESS

MARJORIE COOPER

### ► ABSTRACT

Christians in business and organizational leadership are under pressure to perform and to adapt to rapidly changing circumstances perhaps more than at any other time in recent memory. Because of so much pressure and urgency, it is understandable that leaders and followers will have missteps and commit transgressions, which lead to finding themselves at odds with other leaders, followers, or external constituencies. It is at such times that the role of forgiveness acquires special relevance. Sometimes leaders need to seek forgiveness; sometimes they need to offer forgiveness to transgressors over whom they exercise oversight. In both cases, Christians need to consider their responsibility before God as to how to deliver a genuine apology and to seek forgiveness as well as when and under what circumstances to offer forgiveness to offenders. To uphold moral and ethical principles in businesses and other organizations, leaders require many skill sets, not the least of which is a mindset of humility and grace.

### ► INTRODUCTION

**T**oday's leadership is scrutinized more closely than possibly any other generation of leaders throughout history. Social media, Internet news stories, and opinion blogs populate the airwaves in addition to 24/7 "news" reporting and commentary. The pitfalls for anyone in the public eye or even in the private sector are many and varied. It would not be unusual for many, if not most, leaders to have to make apologies for how they have handled some situations and seek forgiveness from various constituencies. Because organizations are complex and accountable to their publics, it would also not be unusual for followers to transgress organizational norms and ethical standards such that they also stand in need of forgiveness—whether from supervisors, colleagues, employees, or other of the orga-

nization's constituencies. Even a superficial review of "leadership" and "forgiveness" articles in a Google search verifies the timeliness and growing interest in the subject of forgiveness as part of a manager's skill set and toolbox.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the act of forgiveness more closely from both biblical and managerial perspectives with a twofold thrust: Christian leaders asking for forgiveness and Christian leaders granting forgiveness to followers. In this article, I discuss some definitions of forgiveness and offer some biblical perspectives, coupled with examples, on the application and practice of asking for and granting forgiveness for Christians in leadership roles.

## ▶ DEFINITIONS OF FORGIVENESS

**S**ocial science experts define forgiveness as a social-psychological phenomenon that manifests itself in the context of everyday activities.<sup>1</sup> The importance of forgiveness lies in the fact that it is instrumental to restoring interpersonal harmony after a transgression takes place.<sup>2</sup> The context for such restoration may be close personal relationships, as in family or friendships, but forgiveness can also take place in a more formal setting, such as the workplace. In these contexts, forgiveness may be viewed as letting go of negative feelings toward another and may entail adjustment of claims for restitution or retribution. In his classic article on forgiveness, Horsbrugh argues that forgiveness begins with a volitional decision, the decision to forgive. As one moves through the process of forgiveness, negative feelings are overcome, and reconciliation is accomplished.<sup>3</sup> To achieve reconciliation, it is important that the offender is no longer defined in terms of the offense, but, instead, is viewed in a more balanced way that acknowledges the offender's positive characteristics, unique contributions to the organization, and potential for growth and future contributions. This does not negate confession of culpability and the need to make restitution, but it treats the manager or subordinate as more than just the summation of his or her transgressions.

For Christians, the practice of forgiveness has a long and venerated precedent grounded in the Scriptures. Therefore, a biblical understanding of forgiveness is paramount, since, when understood in a hermeneutically correct way, biblical instruction and injunctions on the subject are definitive as to God's view of forgiveness. The Koine Greek word for forgiveness in the New Testament is a common word, ἀφίημι

(ἀφίημι), that carries with it more than one meaning, depending on context. When used for "forgiveness," it means "to release from a legal or moral obligation or consequence." It can be translated "cancel," "remit," or "pardon." In the Old (Septuagint) and New Testaments, when used as the absolution of misdeeds, the word frequently refers to divine forgiveness.<sup>4</sup>

Forgiveness is one of the critical issues addressed in the Lord's Prayer and should be observed regularly.<sup>5</sup> Forgiveness is also a reflection of how the Lord has forgiven us.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, one cannot but be reminded of Peter's query as to how many times one should forgive and the Lord's answer of "seventy times seven," essentially setting up limitless forgiveness.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, it should be noted that in the gospel writer's reporting of this occurrence, the Lord does not stipulate the terms for forgiveness, which, from other passages seem, at a minimum, to entail repentance on the part of the wrongdoer as a necessary precursor to forgiveness. As will be discussed later, such a stipulation coheres well with the idea of the wrongdoer being re-integrated into the community. Rather than labeled exclusively as a transgressor, the wrongdoer is recognized as a valuable member of the community, and the intent of the community focuses on reconciliation rather than revenge.<sup>8</sup>

Forgiveness involves restoring relationships within the community without sacrificing either justice or restitution for wrongdoing.<sup>9</sup> Certainly the delegation of justice to the state can result in wrongdoers being lost to the community instead of being restored as well as suggesting a lack of accountability on the part of wrongdoers directly to the community that was wronged. Along these lines, Christian theologian N. T. Wright writes in his book, *Evil and the Justice of God*, that although God holds his creatures accountable and metes out discipline (to believers) and retribution (to unbelievers), his measures are fundamentally restorative in intent.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, Christian leaders are obligated to invoke legal consequences for some acts of wrongdoing in accordance with biblical injunctions to obey the laws of the state.<sup>11</sup>

## ▶ WHAT FORGIVENESS IS NOT

**F**orgiveness should not be confused with offering lack of accountability for one's transgressions. Even in secular literature, forgiveness does not mean that a leader condones,

excuses, or justifies bad behavior.<sup>12</sup> “Condoning” means to overlook or disregard an action, treating it as unimportant. Condoning is a poor response to transgression, because so doing undermines the significance of the wrong that was perpetrated and falsely minimizes the damage that was done to others and to the organization. Forgiveness is also not the same as “excusing” a wrongdoing. Applied to minor offenses, excusing simply lets the offender “off the hook,” so to speak, because the leader is too lazy to mete out punishment or too timid to demand restitution. Similar to condoning, excusing merely invites more of the same type of transgression. Finally, forgiveness should not be the result of “justifying” the offender’s behavior, because of reasons to “understand” why the offender acted as he or she did. In each of these cases, forgiveness is wrongly applied, which further exacerbates the damage done by the offense in the first place. Thus, although forgiveness is an important tool in the leader’s repertoire of leadership capabilities, forgiveness as practiced must adhere to ethical parameters.

In a Christian context, Zacchaeus is a good example of the responsibility of a convert upon receiving the Lord’s forgiveness and kindness. Zacchaeus immediately recognized his need to not only accept the Lord’s graciousness but to also make restitution to those he had harmed through the illicit manipulation of his secular power in the role of a tax gatherer. To show his genuine change of heart, he offered to give back fourfold to those he had defrauded. The Lord’s response was not, “Oh, Zacchaeus, you don’t have to do that. You are forgiven.” Rather, the passage indicates that the Lord approves when he says, “Today salvation has come to this house.”<sup>13</sup>

## THE NEED TO PRACTICE FORGIVENESS

**B**y asking for forgiveness when they are clearly at fault, leaders show humility and the willingness to repent of their transgressions. The act of asking for forgiveness is often indicative of a person’s integrity; that is, asking for forgiveness reflects honesty and consistent adherence to moral and ethical principles, an acknowledgment that those principles apply to themselves as well as to others. For Christians in leadership roles, asking for forgiveness may indicate a willingness to learn from one’s mistakes and a heart that submits to God’s overriding authority and sovereignty as well as a high degree of personal awareness and recognition of one’s own faults and weaknesses.

For example, the head nurse at a large regional hospital, who was also a Christian, became embroiled in a rather vocal argument with a doctor in the hospital. Several other medical personnel who were involved in the patient case under discussion were un-

comfortable witnesses to the confrontation. One of the head nurse’s assistants, who was also a Christian, pulled the head nurse aside and told her that such a public display of disagreement was not good and that the head nurse and the doctor needed to continue their discussion in private. The head nurse realized her fault immediately; she apologized to the other nurses present and to the doctor, showing both humility and a willingness to learn from her mistake.

Leaders who grant forgiveness may demonstrate the kindness and reconciliation that they themselves have received from the Father through faith in Christ. A manager of a large retail establishment overheard two of his employees vocally criticizing company policies in front of three customers. When the manager intervened and pointed out their disloyalty and inappropriate remarks, one of the employees, who was a Christian, immediately confessed and apologized

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for the behavior. The manager, after counseling privately with both employees, forgave them and put the incident behind them with the employees' assurance that such a lapse would not happen again.

On the other hand, Christian leaders who are unwilling to ask for forgiveness or grant forgiveness may be exhibiting a stubbornness and hubris—and even lack of integrity—that is not fitting for a Christian. Such traits in leaders routinely lead to disruption, dysfunction, economic instability, and other management breakdowns in businesses and organizations. Integrity, the “cornerstone of leadership,” is necessary for society's flourishing.<sup>14</sup> It is simply the case that everyone who holds any form of leadership—from parents to church leadership to CEO's of billion-dollar organizations—is in need of repentance and forgiveness at times and is also called upon to offer similar considerations to others. By refusing to admit the need for personal forgiveness and rejecting the grace to offer forgiveness to others, leaders commensurately sacrifice integrity to expediency and self-protection on the one hand or revenge tactics and retaliation on the other hand. Along these lines, many leaders have destroyed everything good they accomplished and done irreparable damage in the process. In some cases, the core problem behind a lack of forgiveness and leadership hubris is an unwillingness to acknowledge ethical

breaches, to confess sin, and to ask for forgiveness, as well as an unwillingness to forgive others.

The Lord himself pointedly illustrates the need to offer forgiveness in the account reported in Matthew 18:23–35. The king's servant is in jeopardy, because he owes the king a large debt. However, as a result of the servant's pleading, the king relents and forgives the debt. A fellow servant owes the first servant a small sum, but the first servant refuses to forgive him and has the debtor thrown into prison. When the king hears of this, he imposes severe judgment on the first servant. The Lord then explicitly warns his hearers that the Father will take a similar tack with his people who are unforgiving, certainly a serious warning to us all.

Besides the need to act with integrity and honesty themselves, leaders are often called upon to decide how to respond when followers in their organizations commit ethical

transgressions.<sup>15</sup> A few offenses are serious; many are not so important. However, some transgressions will jeopardize the organization's good name, reputation, and even legal status. Other transgressions have their biggest effect on the climate within the organization causing disruption in operations, as well as employee burnout, job dissatisfaction, and high levels of attrition.<sup>16</sup>

## ASPECTS OF LEADERS ASKING FOR FORGIVENESS

**W**hen a leader asks for forgiveness, what does this act entail? The biblical evidence suggests that asking for forgiveness entails both repentance and confession. In the New Testament and the Septuagint Old Testament, the word for repentance is μετανοέω, which means “to change one's mind, to repent, to convert.”<sup>17</sup> The word implies a turning away from something. For example, in Jeremiah 8:6, the word is used explicitly to represent turning away from wickedness. When someone asks for forgiveness, the implication is that the person has recognized his or her sin and is turning away from that wrongful action. Another key passage in the New Testament with respect to forgiveness is 1 John

1:9, where we are told that if we confess our sins he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins. The word for “confess” is ὁμολογέω, and it means “to share a common view,” “to concede that something is true,” and “to acknowledge something, ordinarily in

public.”<sup>18</sup> That is, we are saying the same thing that God says about our actions; we are acknowledging our sin and taking God's perspective rather than attempting to rationalize it away with excuses. Thus, a significant aspect of an apology is both confession that a transgression has taken place and turning away from that behavior for the evil that it is.

As mentioned earlier and illustrated by Zacchaeus, asking for forgiveness may also include an offer of restitution and/or some type of remediation of the consequences of the transgression. For all these reasons, we conclude that

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asking for forgiveness is reflective of a believer's integrity before God. In asking for forgiveness, one is admitting to transgression instead of trying to cover up or excuse one's actions, confessing—perhaps even publicly—that one has committed a transgression, and perhaps offering restitution if appropriate.

The topic of asking for forgiveness is particularly relevant as applied to leaders because research shows that leaders feel entitled to earn more, to contribute less to the public good, and to expect extra grace when they violate group norms.<sup>19</sup> Of course, leadership that expects extraordinary consideration is

not a new phenomenon. It is referenced in Scripture and by the Lord himself. For example, the prophet Samuel describes in detail the oppression the elders of Israel have chosen for the nation by rejecting the theocratic rule of God in favor of a king, so they could be "like all the nations."<sup>20</sup> Jesus comments on the fundamental nature of Gentile rulership, which is one of both privilege and oppression.<sup>21</sup> Rulership over God's creation has taken an ominous turn since Eden, and its destructive tendencies continue.

The Lord's perspective on human self-elevation could not be expressed more clearly than in the case of Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon. In Daniel 3, Nebuchadnezzar sets up an image of gold on the plain of Dura, which he commands everyone to worship along with great fanfare by members of the court's pageantry. The account of how Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego defied the king and refused to worship any other than the God of Israel should be known to all Christians. What some may not realize is the "rest of the story" as related in the very next chapter of Daniel. Even after being warned by Daniel of the meaning of his dream, in Daniel 4 Nebuchadnezzar once again reveals his narcissistic self-importance when he says in his heart "Is this not Babylon the great, which I myself have built as royal residence by the might of my power and for the glory of my majesty?"<sup>22</sup> For that expression of pride, the Lord sent him out to eat grass with the beasts of the field for seven years until Nebuchadnezzar recognized that "the Most High is ruler over the realm

of mankind and bestows it on whomever he wishes."<sup>23</sup>

Leaders who fail to take note of how very insignificant human achievement really is and the enablement of grace that has allowed one's endeavors to prosper may find themselves experiencing a divinely administered attitude adjustment. Successes should be opportunities to honor God and others, and failures should be opportunities to demonstrate humility and acknowledge both transgressions and the universal

need for forgiveness. The willingness to both ask for forgiveness and to offer forgiveness begins with an honest understanding of one's true place in the universe and a recognition that God sovereignly

bestows his blessings on whomever he chooses, such that we should not think of ourselves more highly than we ought to think.<sup>24</sup>

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## ▶ ASPECTS OF LEADERS OFFERING FORGIVENESS

One aspect of granting forgiveness to followers is that forgiveness is a key response to restoring interpersonal harmony after a transgression takes place.<sup>25</sup> Forgiveness also may be viewed as letting go of negative feelings toward another and may entail adjustment of claims for restitution or retribution.<sup>26</sup> However, such assessment should be considered in light of the best course of action for the organization and the transgressing follower in the long run. Rosabeth Moss Kanter writes, "One of the most courageous acts of leadership is to forgo the temptation to take revenge on those on the other side of an issue or those who opposed the leader's rise to power." She adds, "Instead of settling scores, great leaders make gestures of reconciliation that heal wounds and get on with business."<sup>27</sup>

Multiple benefits may accrue to leadership that practices forgiveness, reconciliation, and relationship-building within the organization. For example, each follower's gifts and talents are preserved and encouraged for the benefit of the entire organization, rather than being discarded and wasted.



This is especially true if the offender has heretofore been an important contributor to the organization's successes. Forgiveness and restoration also may salvage future contributions of those who are novices and still learning proper ethical behaviors.

An important study of motivated reasoning specifically related to moral reasoning indicates that people's internalized self-sanctions are learned socially, and that individuals are motivated to uphold the moral standards they have learned. Thus, because of the need to see themselves as morally good, they tend to adhere to those standards to avoid self-punishment and the censure of others. But, as fallen humans, we are often motivated to engage in behaviors that we know violate our standards and, more seriously, God's standards. Thus, a rationalization is called for to justify behavior. Two methods of justification especially relevant to willingness to forgive are seeking moral justification for retribution and punishment while simultaneously blaming and dehumanizing those who may oppose the leader's preferred behavior.<sup>28</sup> This is the essence of hypocrisy: The tendency to present oneself as a moral agent (even a moral judge) while rationalizing one's own immoral behavior creates tremendous psychological barriers to exercising humility and offering forgiveness.

Christian leaders need periodic conscious reminders of how God's grace has aided them in achieving some measure of success and how important it is to likewise offer gracious correction to others. Dehumanization occurs when victims are blamed for their plight, transgressors are portrayed as wholly evil or worthless, and the community becomes a battleground of wills and violations on the part of many. Because it is easy to summon an appeal to "God's judgment" in the way leaders treat offenders, it may be more difficult to objectively view one's own problematic behavioral responses.

## ▶ THOUGHTS ON THE PRACTICE OF FORGIVENESS

### SUGGESTIONS FOR LEADERS WHO NEED FORGIVENESS

1. Apologies are essential, but a defensive series of excuses makes a bad situation worse. Also, timing is critical. Delayed apologies increase the likelihood that the apology

will be perceived as pro-forma and insincere.

2. The best advice is to ignore those who instruct managers not to apologize, because they will lose their authority from a power dynamic perspective. In the case of a heartfelt apology, such is rarely the case; accepting fault and responsibility for mistakes is generally viewed in a positive light. This is especially true if a leader acknowledges responsibility and presents a plan to fix the problem.
3. Beware of "non-apology" apologies. If a leader seeks to excuse, minimize culpability, or denigrate victims, people quickly sniff out self-serving motives rather than genuine contrition.
4. Research shows that apology alone and restitution alone are effective in eliciting forgiveness, but that restitution combined with apology enhances the effect of apology.<sup>29</sup>

### SUGGESTIONS FOR LEADERS WHO SHOULD OFFER FORGIVENESS

1. An initial, privately held debriefing should take place to uncover the real reasons for a follower's transgression (see the previously recounted case of the store manager). Multiple causes are possible, and it is impossible to address the core problem unless it is surfaced for examination.
2. Prayerfully assess the situation and ask for wisdom from the Holy Spirit. Justifiable discipline, correction, and imposed retribution should not be by-passed when called for and may, in fact, be necessary for complete restoration of the offender. This was certainly the case involving Paul's instruction to the church at Corinth in 2 Cor 2:5-11.
3. If ethical expectations are unclear to followers, efforts would be needed to set more specific boundaries and even sponsor training sessions on ethical and moral applications within the organizational milieu.
4. Take action to assist a penitent transgressor in the process of becoming fully restored and integrated back into the community. Here again, we reference Paul's instruction to the Corinthians.

## ► CONCLUSION

**W**hen transgressions occur, apology and seeking forgiveness becomes mandatory. Christian leaders often find themselves in a position where they must seek or offer forgiveness. It is important for the long-term reputation and smooth functioning of organizations that forgiveness criteria maintain ethical boundaries appropriate to each unique situation. Condoning, excusing, and justifying bad behavior does not serve offenders or the organization well in the long run. Research and the Bible show the proclivity of transgressors to protect themselves, to put the best construal on their actions, and to avoid ruthlessly honest self-appraisal. However, Christian leaders and followers have a higher obligation, and that is to honor God, whether from leader or follower positions. The role of forgiveness is to acknowledge that someone committed an offense and that restitution and/or punishment may be needed, but that restoration of relationships and a community of goodwill and ethical commitment is the ultimate goal of forgiveness.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**MARJORIE J. COOPER** is Professor of Marketing at Baylor University in Waco, Texas, where she has taught for 35 years. Dr. Cooper has published more than 50 articles in refereed journals, including the *Journal of Marketing*, *Journal of Advertising*, *Journal of Advertising Research*, *Journal of Business Research*, and *Journal of Business Ethics*, among others, as well as more than 100 business-related articles in practitioner publications. She is currently the Editor for the Keller Center Research Report published by the Keller Center for Research at Baylor University. She holds a Ph.D. in Business Administration from Texas A&M University and a Th.M. from Dallas Theological Seminary.



## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Michael E. McCullough and Everett L. Worthington, Jr., "Religion and the Forgiving Personality," *Journal of Personality* 67 no. 6 (1999), 1141-1164.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 1143.

<sup>3</sup> H. J. N. Horsbrugh, "Forgiveness," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 4 (1974), 269-282.

<sup>4</sup> Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, revised and edited by Frederick W. Danker, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 156-157.

<sup>5</sup> Matt 6:12.

<sup>6</sup> Col 3:13.

<sup>7</sup> Matt 18:22; Luke 17:4.

<sup>8</sup> A good example can be found in 2 Cor 2:5-11, where Paul comments concerning transgression, forgiveness, and restoration in the Corinthian church.

<sup>9</sup> Everett L. Worthington, Jr., "Empirical Research on Forgiveness with Christians: What Have We Learned?" *Journal of Psychology and Christianity*, 27 (2008), 368-370.

<sup>10</sup> N. T. Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006).

<sup>11</sup> Rom 13:1-7

<sup>12</sup> Marcia J. Kurzynski, "The Virtue of Forgiveness as a Human Resource Management Strategy," *Journal of Business Ethics* 17 (1998), 77-85.

<sup>13</sup> Luke 10:1-10.

<sup>14</sup> Col. Eric Kail, "Leadership Character: The Role of Integrity," accessed February 23, 2020, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/guest-inights/post/leadership-character-the-role-of-integrity/2011/04/04/gIQArlZLO3H\\_blog.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/guest-inights/post/leadership-character-the-role-of-integrity/2011/04/04/gIQArlZLO3H_blog.html); Farzana Suri, "Integrity, the Cornerstone of Leadership," accessed February 23, 2020, <https://www.peoplemattersglobal.com/blog/leadership/leadership-integrity-20756>.

<sup>15</sup> Jerry Goodstein and Kenneth D. Butterfield, "Extending the Horizon of Business Ethics: Restorative Justice and the Aftermath of Unethical Behavior," *Business Ethics Quarterly* 20, no. 3 (2010), 453-480.

<sup>16</sup> Ronald E. Riggio, "Organizations from Hell: When Leadership Fails," accessed February 22, 2020, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/cutting-edge-leadership/200906/organizations-hell-when-leadership-fails>.

<sup>17</sup> Bauer, 640.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 708.

<sup>19</sup> Ken Auletta, *Greed and Glory on Wall Street: The Fall of the House of Lehmann* (New York: Warner Books, 1986); Dacher Keltner, Deborah Gruenfeld, and Cameron Anderson, "Power, Approach, and Inhibition," *Psychological Review* 110, no. 2 (2003): 265-284; Roderick Kramer, "The Harder They Fall," *Harvard Business Review* 81 (October) (2003), 58-66; Jeroen Stouten and Thomas M. Tripp, "Claiming More than Equality: Should Leaders Ask for Forgiveness?" *The Leadership Quarterly* 20 (2009), 287-298.

<sup>20</sup> 1 Sam 8:10-18 (NASB).

<sup>21</sup> Matt 20:25; Mark 10:42 (NASB).

<sup>22</sup> Dan 4:19-27 (NASB).

<sup>23</sup> Dan 4:30-32 (NASB).

<sup>24</sup> Rom 12:3 (NASB).

<sup>25</sup> Robert D. Enright and R. P. Fitzgibbons, "Measures of Interpersonal Forgiveness," in *Forgiveness Therapy: An Empirical Guide for Resolving Anger and Restoring Hope*, Ed., R. D. Enright and R. P. Fitzgibbons (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2015), 251-269; R. D. Enright and Joanna North, *Exploring Forgiveness* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998).

<sup>26</sup> Robert D. Enright, S. Freedman, and J. Rique, "The Psychology of Interpersonal Forgiveness," in R. D. Enright and J. North (Eds.), *Exploring Forgiveness* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1998), 46-62; J. J. Exline, E. L. Worthington, Jr., R. Hill, and M. E. McCullough, "Forgiveness and Justice: A Research Agenda for Social and Personality Psychology," *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 7, no. 4 (2003), 337-348.

<sup>27</sup> Rosabeth Moss Kanter, "Great Leaders Know When to Forgive," accessed February 22, 2020, <https://hbr.org/2013/02/great-leaders-know-when-to#comment-section>.

<sup>28</sup> A. Bandura, "Moral Disengagement in the Perpetration of Inhumanities," *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 3 (1999), 193-209.

<sup>29</sup> Nicholas DiFonzo, Anthony Alongi, and Paul Wiele, "Apology, Restitution, and Forgiveness after Psychological Contract Breach," *Journal of Business Ethics* 161 (2020), 53-69.