

# WHY LEADERS MUST FORGIVE

Though families and communities have evolved to rely on the power of forgiveness to deal with disputes and conflict, the tool remains underdeveloped in business conflicts, reports **Bongani Mgayi** – a business strategist and consultant who is involved with USB's advertising and social engagement initiatives.



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**W**e remember those violent days. News reports in the 1980s and 1990s were filled with images of minibus taxis burnt to the ground during the feud between rival taxi associations.

Today, a new Toyota Quantum minibus costs approximately R305 000. Taxi owners are charged an interest rate of up to 36%,

paying around R11 000 per month instead of about R6 280 per month paid by consumers at the prime rate. The insurance premiums are just as high because insurers consider the taxi industry high risk. These are the costs of years of violent rivalry in the taxi industry.

In the paper *The Art of Forgiveness: Differentiating Transformational Leaders* (2013), Manfred Kets de Vries juxtaposed >

the impact of the leadership actions of Nelson Mandela and Robert Mugabe on their countries: "Instead of generosity, restraint and forgiveness [as demonstrated by Mandela], Mugabe opted for bitterness, vindictiveness, anger and hatred. Subsequently, Zimbabwe became a land with a ruined economy, populated by citizens living miserable and fearful lives under the threat of terrible human rights abuses.

"Truly transformational leaders are acutely aware of the cost of bearing grudges. They recognise the havoc that can be created by an unforgiving attitude. Exceptional, transformational leaders recognise that holding grudges is a form of arrested development; it holds people back."

Said Ziphilele Capuka, chairman of the Cape Amalgamated Taxi Associations (CATA): "We drove around with guns in the front cubbyhole, but years of violence didn't achieve anything." His sentiments were shared by Vusumzi Miselo, chairman of the Cape Organisation for a Democratic Taxi Association (CODETA): "Today we are left with many widows and children without parents."

The two chairmen were addressing the crowds gathered at Nyanga taxi rank on 4 March 2012, when CATA and CODETA, the two rival taxi associations, invited the community to witness as they asked forgiveness from each other and committed to never again use violence to resolve their differences.

The taxi leaders chose to forgive each other so that their industry could have peace and business could continue.

Forgiveness is the cessation of the right to retaliate; the act of giving up a feeling, such as resentment, or a claim to requital or compensation. Forgiveness can re-establish or resume a relationship ruptured by wrongdoing.

American exchange student, Amy Biehl, was brutally murdered in Gugulethu, a township of Cape Town, by youths from the Pan African Student Organisation. Four young men, aged between 18 and 22 years, were convicted and sentenced to imprisonment for 18 years for the murder of Biehl. They applied for amnesty in terms of Section 18 of the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act, and after five years in prison received amnesty and were

released from prison (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 28 July 1998).

In his address to the Amnesty Committee, Amy Biehl's father said: "We recognise that if this process had not been a pre-negotiated condition your democratic free elections could not possibly have occurred. Therefore, and believing as Amy did in the absolute importance of those democratic elections occurring, we unabashedly support the process which we recognise to be unprecedented in contemporary human history.

"At the same time we say to you it's your process, not ours. We cannot, therefore, oppose amnesty if it is granted on the merits. In the truest sense it is for the community of South Africa to forgive its own and this has its basis in traditions of ubuntu and other principles of human dignity."

Amy Biehl's parents went on to establish the Amy Biehl Foundation in commemoration of their daughter and the cause she lived for. They chose not to bear grudges or seek recourse but instead established the foundation to serve youths from the same community where their daughter was killed.

South Africa, like many transitional democracies, has to deal with the legacy of its violent history. Before 1994, the political leaders from the liberation movement and new power-brokers had an opportunity to administer justice for the wrongs committed to them. But to realise the profits of a 'rainbow nation' the country had to learn to work together. Diversity and the call for transformation in the workplace have resulted in victims and perpetrators sharing offices, and working together towards achieving a common businesses strategy.

As Kets de Vries put it: "To energise their people, truly effective leaders need to be at peace with themselves and past and present events in their life, which includes forgiving others for transgressions, and not bearing grudges. When we let go of our grudges, we build collaboration, reduce conflict and release a lot of pent-up energy that can be used to move countries, institutions, organisations, teams and individuals forward."

In the paper *The Political Economy of Forgiveness* (7 September 2010), Boettke

**'In the truest sense it is for the community of South Africa to forgive its own...'**

and Coyne wrote: “We are not arguing that there is never a benefit to pursuing justice. There will often be net benefits to pursuing justice for past wrongs. But it is important to realise that investing resources in the administration of justice means that those resources are diverted away from other transition activities that can also yield a future stream of benefits. In other words, there is an opportunity cost to investing resources in the administration of justice.”

Translated, the Latin adage *Si vis pacem, para bellum* says: If you want peace, prepare for war. Those who subscribe to this motto believe that peace or victory can only be achieved if your strategy includes intimidation and combat. However, others see forgiveness as a viable strategy to secure peace or victory.

Dr Dion Forster, executive committee member of Unashamedly Ethical and the EXPOSED anti-corruption campaign, says: “What is certain is that there is a direct link between a lack of forgiveness and economics. Whether one considers the global cost of armaments to ‘keep the peace’ in the Middle East, or whether it is the cost of taking funds from the education budget in the Western Cape to pay for community policing in Manenberg so that children can go to school. Facilitating peace through forgiveness makes economic sense, quite apart from the fact that it has very positive social consequences.”

According to Advocate Murray Bridgman, litigation lawyer and member

of the Cape Bar, “Alternate Dispute Resolution is gaining momentum as a better way to resolve conflict. As a very rough guide it can cost approximately R300 000 to litigate, provided the matter is fairly straightforward. Add to this the difficulty to enforce the order once a default judgement is issued.

“Settling or compromising a case makes all the sense in the world. This form of forgiveness and forgoing your rights leads to the re-establishment of trust.”

Bridgman concludes: “Consider this example of a business supplying pipes to the municipality. Someone in the accounts department messes up the documentation and despite countless reminders and demands for payment the invoice remains unpaid. Now, which is better: To instruct your lawyer to badger the supply chain manager for three days in court telling him how incompetent he is; or reaching a compromise about the payment of the account, while still getting to continue doing business with the municipality?” <sup>a</sup>

**Citations:**

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- Statement by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission on amnesty arising from killing of Amy Biehl. Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 28 July 1998.



## – GET STARTED –

While South Africa is renowned for its ability to resolve disputes and conflict peacefully, the application of modern negotiation and mediation practices to civil and commercial disputes has lagged behind developments in, for example, community, family and labour disputes.

The Africa Centre for Dispute Settlement (ACDS) at USB has positioned itself as a catalyst and thought leader in developing the theory and practice of mediation in all its forms, with a special emphasis on conflict involving economic actors. See [www.usb.ac.za/disputesettlement/](http://www.usb.ac.za/disputesettlement/).

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