

**Leader-Expressed Forgivingness and Team Performance:
A Two-paths Model**

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Abstract

As role models and salient sources of social information, forgiving leaders are prosocial facilitators of team interactions, with consequences for team performance. Through a multi-source field study (227 teams/leaders) and a vignette-based experiment (101 teams), we show that (a) leader-expressed forgiveness predicts team performance through, serially, team forgiveness climate and team helping behavior, and (b) this indirect effect is stronger when the strength (i.e., the consistency of expressed forgiveness across team members) of leader-expressed forgiveness and team forgiveness climate are high. Findings also show that (a) leader-expressed forgiveness predicts team performance through, serially, team psychological safety and team creativity, and (b) this indirect effect is stronger when the strength of leader-expressed forgiveness is high. Our findings suggest that forgiving leaders may play an important role as enactors of several team processes and emergent states that make teams more effective.

Keywords: leader-expressed forgiveness; team forgiveness climate; team helping behaviors; team creativity; team performance; climate strength.

Introduction

The will to forgive might at first strike a team leader as an unnatural desire, something that conveys their weakness, particularly in organizations that emphasize competition and conflict over cooperation (Bies et al., 2016). Forgiving leaders may implicitly convey the message that offenders may prevaricate with impunity and damage the leader's status, legitimacy, and capacity to make "tough" decisions when necessary. However, such a risk is diminished because the leader has the power to retaliate if necessary. What is more, teams are social systems characterized by interdependence, and cooperation is paramount. The leader's ability to forgive is therefore essential to constructively manage conflict, mitigate the deleterious effects of offenses, repair relationships, foster high-quality leader–employee relationships, and nurture and sustain the sense of interdependence and the prosocial efforts necessary for team functioning (Brady et al., 2023; Fehr & Gelfand, 2020; Kets de Vries, 2014; Lin et al., 2016).

We therefore posit that forgiving leaders are prosocial facilitators of a positive team climate that positively impacts team performance. To substantiate our arguments, we draw on both social exchange (e.g., Blau, 1964; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005) and social-cognitive theories (e.g., Schunk & Usher, 2019; Wood & Bandura, 1989) to advance that forgiving leaders promote team performance through several serial-parallel team-level mechanisms, as explored below. We draw on *social exchange theory* and the corresponding norm of reciprocity to posit that when the team environment (i.e., the other team members and the team leader) provides socioemotional benefits, such as forgiving and helping behaviors, team members reciprocate pro-socially via efforts aimed at benefiting the team and its members (Blau, 1964; Gouldner, 1960; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). We draw on *social cognitive theory* to advance that by observing and interacting with their forgiving and prosocial-oriented leaders and teammates, team members

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develop forgiving and prosocial cognitions and learn about the suitability, usefulness, and outcomes of their forgiving and prosocial behaviors in the team context (Schunk & Usher, 2019; Morgenroth et al., 2015). With these two theoretical frameworks in mind, we advance that team members working for a forgiving leader develop cognitions about, and learn from, that leader and team environment and reciprocate pro-socially in the best interests of the team, thereby contributing to team performance (Gerpott et al., 2018; Molho & Balliet, 2020). The link we propose operates via two parallel paths.

Through the *prosocial* path, leaders as role models and facilitators of team norms affect how teams follow the path of forgiveness rather than revenge (Bies et al., 2016; Fehr & Gelfand, 2012; Morgenroth et al., 2015). Through this path, leader-expressed forgiveness encourages more positive social exchanges, not only between the leader and team members, but also between members, thus promoting a team forgiveness climate that fosters team helping behaviors and contributes to team performance.

Through the *cognitive* path, team members who work for a forgiving leader develop the belief that the team is psychologically safe (Edmondson & Bransby, 2023), which in turn leads them to be more creative and thus fosters team performance. This two-paths model includes three boundary conditions (Figure 1): the strength of the leader-expressed forgiveness (Dalal et al., 2015), the strength of team forgiveness climate, and the strength of psychological safety (Perrigino et al., 2021). By “strength” we mean the extent to which the leader consistently expresses forgiveness across team members, and how consistent among team members the perceptions are about the team climate. Considering the reasons elaborated below, such strengths *enhance* the effects of leader-expressed forgiveness on team performance through the two parallel paths.

[Figure 1 about here]

We carried out two studies. The first, a field multi-source study, tested the full hypothesized model. The second was a vignette-based experiment designed to establish causal inferences for the moderated relationship between leader-expressed forgiveness and the two first parallel mediators (i.e., team psychological safety and forgiveness climate). Our paper makes several contributions. First, we show that forgiving leaders trigger prosocial and cognitive effects on teams, thus fostering team performance. Our research is thus a step forward in positioning leader forgiveness not just as a humanizing force that breaks or prevents a destructive cycle of action-reaction, but also as impactful in promoting team performance through several mechanisms, including team forgiveness climate. Second, although empirical evidence about team forgiveness is almost nonexistent (see Brady et al., 2023), we empirically support scholarly theory (e.g., Bies et al., 2016; Bright & Exline, 2012; Fehr & Gelfand, 2012) that forgiveness emerges as a team phenomenon, with consequences for team functioning and performance. Third, as an important direction for future research lies in investigating boundary conditions of the effects of forgiveness (Fehr & Gelfand, 2020), we empirically show that leaders are more effective when they express their forgiveness consistently across all team members.

Theory and Hypotheses

A Prosocial Transformation with Behavioral Expressions

Although most researchers agree that forgiveness is an *intraindividual* process involving a *prosocial* change, they differ in *what* (i.e., thoughts, emotions, motivations, or behaviors toward the offenders) such a change involves (Brady et al., 2023). Whereas some researchers (e.g., Bies et al., 2016) focus primarily on the *intrapersonal* change, placing less weight on its interpersonal and behavioral manifestations, others (e.g., Rusbult et al., 2005) highlight the importance of its

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interpersonal and behavioral dimensions as well. For reasons explored below, this is the approach adopted in our paper: forgiving is choosing deliberately to release negative emotions, inhibit the desire for revenge, and develop positive cognitions, emotions, and behaviors toward the offender (Aquino et al., 2003).

In work teams where the victim and the offender have a common past and a possible common future, offenses are consequential, and the inability to address and resolve them at the *behavioral* level may have negative consequences not only for the victim and the offender but also for other team members and the team's functioning. In those contexts of mutual dependence (Van Lange & Balliet, 2015), "there is much to be gained by adopting an *interpersonal* conceptualization of forgiveness" (Rusbult et al., 2005, p. 185; italics in the original). This *interpersonal* conceptualization is also valid for studying leader's forgiveness. Leadership is inherently a relational process (Uhl-Bien, 2006), and what matters most for the impact of a leader on team members is what the leader expresses to (and is perceived by) them and not simply what he/she feels and believes. The ongoing leader-member interactions make it implausible that what happens in the leader's mind and heart stays there (the same happens for the interactions between team members). In interacting with team members, a leader *conveys* (intentionally or unintentionally, both verbally and non-verbally) his/her cognitions, affects, and motivations associated with his/her *inner* forgiveness disposition, and those expressions provide information for team members, who react accordingly (Van Kleef, 2009). Moreover, *not practicing* forgiveness in work teams is a practice that communicates unforgiveness (Watzlawick et al., 2011) and drives attitudinal, emotional, and behavioral reactions in others. For these reasons, and consistent with researchers who study *leader-expressed* humility (Owens et al., 2013; Rego et al., 2017, 2019), we approach leader forgiveness as *leader-expressed* forgiveness,

i.e., as the leader's forgiving behavioral manifestations expressed toward team members. We posit that leader-expressed forgiveness is associated with team performance through the prosocial (upper mediation in Figure 1) and cognitive (lower) paths discussed next. However, we acknowledge that the prosocial path involves cognitions about the intrateam relationships, and the cognitive path unfolds in an interpersonal context and affects social exchanges.

The Prosocial Path

Before discussing the association between leader-expressed forgiveness and team forgiveness climate, we clarify how forgiveness emerges as a team phenomenon (e.g., Bright & Exline, 2012; Fehr & Gelfand, 2012). Forgiveness expressed by a victim toward a specific offender may be affected by cognitions, feelings, and behaviors experienced by team members other than the victim and the offender. Through socioemotional contagion and empathic concern (Chartrand & Lakin, 2013) a member may suffer when seeing others being offended, and how he/she (un)forgives the offender is not independent of how the direct victims interpret the offense and make attributions toward the offender. A team member may help an offended coworker cognitively reframe an offense made by a third-party offender, thus leading the victim to react in ways the victim had not initially thought of. By observing forgiving behaviors in the team, team members develop sensemaking processes that enable them to make more benevolent attributions to other members' behaviors. These positive attributions lead team members to consider that within the team it is safer to forgive. Such attributions make team members more likely to forgive others when transgressions are made (Fehr & Gelfand, 2012; Rusbult et al., 2005). The interdependence and embeddedness within the team, combined with the socioemotional contagion and social-information processing common in teams, make it more likely that this sensemaking process becomes a team property. Overall, through socioemotional contagion

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(Chartrand & Lakin, 2013), direct and indirect reciprocity (Baker, 2012), and social-information processing (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978), forgiveness becomes a shared property of the team and sustains a climate of team forgiveness (Fehr & Gelfand, 2012).

Forgiveness also emerges as a team phenomenon because leaders are *de facto* “architects” of forgiveness team climate (Fehr & Gelfand, 2012). First, as a role model, a forgiving leader fosters a team forgiveness climate in three ways (Morgenroth et al., 2015). He/she acts as a *behavioral model*, leading team members to emulate his/her forgiving stance; *represents the possible*, making team members aware that it is possible and safe to forgive; and is *inspirational*, animating team members to become more like the role model. Second, team members’ perceptions and interpretations of values and norms of their team environment are affected by salient and relevant information gathered from leaders (Loi et al., 2012; Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978; Schunk & Usher, 2019). Considering the leader-members power imbalance and the valuable resources (including socioemotional ones) that team members can receive from their leaders, learning from the leader’s forgiving behaviors also has functional value (i.e., it leads to desirable outcomes) for team members (Schunk & Usher, 2019; Wood & Bandura, 1989). Third, because of other processes (as discussed above) that nurture forgiveness as a team phenomenon, team members develop cognitions, emotions, and behaviors that emulate the forgiving stance conveyed by the leader and other team members. Hence:

Hypothesis 1: Leader-expressed forgiveness relates positively to team forgiveness climate.

Team forgiveness climate *spills over* and fosters team helping behaviors (Grant, 2007; Karremans et al., 2005): voluntary behaviors that team members collectively adopt to help others address work-related problems (Wang et al., 2022). Forgiveness climates are empathy triggers that facilitate perspective-taking and empathic concern (Fehr & Gelfand, 2012), thus leading

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team members to help those in need (Ministero et al., 2018). Within a forgiving climate, it is more likely that the offender helps the victim by showing repentance and gratitude for the received forgiveness from the victim. Helping the offender may also be how a victim demonstrates that he/she forgives the offender (Thai et al., 2023). The offender is likely to reciprocate, not only toward the victim but also toward other team members (Baker, 2012). These direct and indirect reciprocating acts are more likely in a team characterized by a strong forgiveness climate because a prosocial norm develops within the team and team members feel that forgiving and helping others does not cause opportunistic responses from the offender (McNulty, 2019; Rusbult et al., 2005). Therefore, a team forgiveness climate facilitates high-quality connections and reciprocal behaviors (Baker, 2012; Stephens et al., 2012) that lead team members to help others. The process is recursive: these helping behaviors facilitate high-quality connections and a team forgiveness climate, thus giving rise to an upward prosocial spiral. Hence:

Hypothesis 2: Team forgiveness climate is positively associated with team helping behaviors.

Helping behaviors affect team performance in several ways (Ehrhart et al., 2006; Podsakoff et al., 2014). They increase the productivity of each member by demonstrating best practices at work, making corrections, learning from mistakes, and solving problems. Less experienced individuals benefit from more experienced ones. Helping behaviors also make the team more united in achieving the team's goals (Wang et al., 2022), more able to use each member's capabilities efficiently, and more committed to success (Grossman et al., 2022). Moreover, as a form of social exchange (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005), individuals who receive

help reciprocate by helping not just those who helped them but also others (Wang et al., 2022). Consequently, the effects of team helping behaviors on team performance are enhanced. Hence:

Hypothesis 3: Team helping behaviors are positively associated with team performance.

The arguments presented above suggest that forgiving leaders encourage a team forgiveness climate. This climate leads team members to adopt a helpful orientation toward others, thereby contributing to team performance. Hence:

Hypothesis 4: The relationship between leader-expressed forgiveness and team performance is mediated through, serially, team forgiveness climate and team helping behaviors.

We next discuss the cognitive path. We start by clarifying the difference between team psychological safety and a team forgiveness climate.

The Cognitive Path

Team psychological safety (i.e., the shared belief that it is safe for team members to take interpersonal risks; Edmondson & Bransby, 2023) shares some similarities with team forgiveness climate, in that the two focus on how team members react to potentially conflict-inducing behavior. However, there are key differences between them, the most important being the motives underlying the constructive response to the potentially harmful event (Fehr & Gelfand, 2012). Whereas the motive in a psychologically safe climate is to withhold judgment so that members can feel free to speak up, the motive underlying a forgiveness climate is to respond to offenses with benevolence. The differences and similarities between the two constructs open the question of how they influence each other. Although Goodstein and Aquino (2010) suggest that psychological safety facilitates forgiveness, other research (e.g., Guchait et al., 2019) proposes that a forgiveness climate makes employees feel psychologically safer. Thus, reciprocal

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relationships between them are likely: (a) team members feel psychologically safer if their mistakes and errors are forgiven, and (b) they are more likely to forgive instead of fearing being exploited by offenders if they feel psychologically safe. Thus, our model does not substantiate any relationship between the two climates; rather, we propose that forgiving leaders foster both. Having discussed how leader-expressed forgiveness fosters a forgiveness climate (H1), we next discuss the relationship between leader-expressed forgiveness and team psychological safety.

Meta-analytic evidence shows that leadership is the strongest predictor of team psychological safety (Edmondson & Bransby, 2023; Frazier et al., 2017). There are reasons to believe that leader-expressed forgiveness is also influential because the pro-sociality manifested by a forgiving leader sends team members the message that the team environment is psychologically safe. A forgiving leader demonstrates respect (i.e., validates the team members' worth and meets important human needs; Rogers & Ashforth, 2017) and tolerance for the team members' imperfections and failures while expressing confidence in team members' repentance and regeneration. Such a leader communicates that team members are not defined by their failures, mistakes, and imperfections alone, but also by their strengths and dedication to learn and improve (Domínguez-Escrig et al., 2022). In such a relational atmosphere, team members feel that it is safe to take risks and develop the sense that they may self-present in a more open and honest way, share personal insights, take responsibility for their failures without fear, and learn from them (Domínguez-Escrig et al., 2022; Thompson & Korsgaard, 2019). Differently, an unforgiving leader has little tolerance for failures – which is interpreted by team members in ways that induce them to conceal their genuine ideas, motives, and contributions, and make them more fearful of taking risks and owning mistakes. Hence:

Hypothesis 5: Leader-expressed forgiveness is positively associated with team psychological safety.

Team psychological safety is enhanced when a forgiving leader fosters team creativity, defined as “the production of novel and useful ideas concerning products, services, processes and procedures” by the collective of employees in the context of team objectives (Shin & Zhou, 2007, p. 1710). Creativity is a risky endeavor, and if team members feel psychologically unsafe, they adopt a defensive orientation for fear of being criticized or punished for taking risks that result in unsuccessful outcomes (Kundi & Shahid, 2023). When they encounter new ideas and information that disprove their prior knowledge and ideas, they experience anxiety that will hinder their motivation to use these new ideas and information to propose creative solutions (Kark & Carmeli, 2009). In psychologically safe teams, on the other hand, individuals overcome their anxiety and make creative use of new ideas and information. They share knowledge and ideas openly, nurturing other team members’ cognitive efforts to find creative solutions (Kundi & Shahid, 2023; Sung & Choi, 2019). Team members ask for help from others to obtain input aimed at testing and improving their own ideas and suggestions. They voice their concerns regarding others’ creative ideas because they believe that their voices and concerns will be respected and interpreted constructively rather than as personal attacks (Hu et al., 2018). Hence:

Hypothesis 6: Team psychological safety is positively related to team creativity.

Team creativity is an important team resource and a desirable core competence that promotes team overall performance (Gilson et al., 2005; Sung & Choi, 2012). Team creativity helps the team remain flexible and adaptively handle evolving competition, markets, and technological requirements. A creative team is better able to adapt and put forward creative solutions to meet performance improvement needs (Sung & Choi, 2012). Such a team is more

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likely to identify problems and opportunities, to consider them from different perspectives, and to find innovative solutions to those problems and opportunities. A creative team is better able to respond to changing customer needs, devise creative ways to satisfy customers, and attract new ones (Gilson et al., 2005; Martinaityte & Sacramento, 2013). Hence:

Hypothesis 7: Team creativity is positively related to team performance.

The arguments presented above suggest that creativity emerging from a psychologically safe climate that is promoted by a forgiving leader ultimately leads to better team performance. Hence:

Hypothesis 8: The relationship between leader-expressed forgiveness and team performance is mediated through, serially, team psychological safety and team creativity.

Considering the two serial mediations, the relationship between leader-expressed forgiveness and team performance is mediated by two parallel paths. Hence:

Hypothesis 9: The relationship between leader-expressed forgiveness and team performance is mediated by two parallel paths: by (a) fostering a team-forgiveness climate that promotes team helping behaviors, and by (b) fostering team psychological safety that promotes team creativity, forgiving leaders boost team performance.

We next discuss why such an indirect effect is conditional. We first expect the relationship between leader-expressed forgiveness and both team forgiveness climate and psychological safety to be more positive when leader-expressed forgiveness is stronger: the consistent expressions of (un)forgiveness by the leader are interpreted by team members as representing a strong leader's (un)forgiving personality, and they react accordingly.

The Strength of Leader-Expressed Forgiveness and Team Climate as Moderators

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A strong leader's personality reduces the variability in the leader's behavior across situations and team members (Dalal et al., 2015), thereby insulating the leader's behavior from the impact of the situation. Therefore, a leader who expresses his/her forgiveness consistently rather than inconsistently across team members has a strong rather than weak forgiving personality, and team members make sense of that expressed (in)consistency accordingly. Consistently expressed forgiveness induces team members to attribute such expressions of forgiveness to the leader's true forgiving self rather than to external factors (Dalal et al., 2015; Kraus et al., 2011). Therefore, whereas a high level of forgiveness expressed consistently across team members suggests that the leader is genuinely forgiving, an inconsistent level may signal to team members that the leader is adopting impression management tactics to *appear* as a forgiving leader or respond to situational demands (Dalal et al., 2015). Consistently expressed forgiveness (whether it be high or low) thus provides team members with more robust information about the leader's *true* forgiving disposition. This strength enhances the relationship between leader-expressed forgiveness and both team forgiveness climate and team psychological safety. Moreover, at the measurement level, a strong leader-expressed forgiveness indicates that the mean score (e.g., the average of leader-expressed forgiveness within the team) is a more reliable measure of the leader's personality. From these arguments, we posit that the relationship between leader-expressed forgiveness and both team forgiveness climate and team psychological safety is moderated by the strength of leader-expressed forgiveness. Hence:

Hypotheses 10 and 11: The relationship between leader-expressed forgiveness and (H10) team forgiveness climate and (H11) team psychological safety is more (less) positive when leader-expressed forgiveness is stronger (weaker).

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We next discuss why the relationship between: (a) team forgiveness climate and team helping behaviors, and (b) team psychological safety and team creativity is more positive when, respectively, the strength of team forgiveness climate and the strength of team psychological safety are greater¹. While team forgiveness climate and psychological safety represent *shared* perceptions among team members, research on team climate (Perrigino et al., 2021) also shows that some degree of variability (represented in the “climate strength” construct) may be found within teams. Such variability arises from members having different experiences within the team, and from interpreting the same experiences through different lenses (Perrigino et al., 2021). Lower variability (i.e., greater consistency) represents a stronger climate. Climate strength theory suggests that a strong (weak) climate reinforces (attenuates) the climate-outcomes relationship (Schneider et al., 2013). At the measurement level, a strong climate indicates that the mean score (i.e., the average of team forgiveness climate) is a more reliable measure of team climate. Conceptually, a strong climate equips team members with more precise and consistent information about the team (Lee & Dalal, 2016; Meyer et al., 2010; Schneider et al., 2013). Team forgiveness climate and psychological safety are facets of team climate, and the stronger the climate, the stronger the relationship between: (1) team forgiveness climate and team helping behaviors, and (2) team psychological safety and team creativity. Hence:

Hypothesis 12: The relationship between team forgiveness climate and team helping behaviors is stronger (weaker) when the team forgiveness climate is stronger (weaker).

Hypothesis 13: The relationship between team psychological safety and team creativity is stronger (weaker) when the team psychological safety is stronger (weaker).

¹ As team leadership is a component of team climate (Rego et al., 2017), the next arguments also support the moderating effect of the strength of leader-expressed forgiveness for the relationship between leader-expressed forgiveness and both team forgiveness climate and team psychological safety.

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These arguments and those supporting H4, H8, and H9 suggest that the two indirect paths associating leader-expressed forgiveness with team performance are conditional on the strength of leader-expressed forgiveness and the two climates. Hence:

Hypothesis 14:

(H14a) The relationship between leader-expressed forgiveness and team performance through, serially, team forgiveness climate and helping behaviors is conditional on, respectively, the strength of leader-expressed forgiveness and the strength of team forgiveness climate, the relationship being more positive when the two climates are stronger.

(H14b) The relationship between leader-expressed forgiveness and team performance through, serially, team psychological safety and creativity is conditional on, respectively, the strength of leader-expressed forgiveness and the strength of team psychological safety, the relationship being more positive when the two climates are stronger.

Study 1 Method

Sample and Procedures

The sample of Study 1 comprises 227 mid-level and top managers (58% men, $M_{age} = 39.79$ years, $SD: 7.05$, 97.8% had an undergraduate degree or higher) working for 107 organizations from several sectors (e.g., wine production, banking, hospitality, information systems, healthcare, postal services). These managers performed roles as diverse as commercial manager, financial manager, CTO, and project manager. They were participants in a leadership development program in a European business school. The program involved a 360° feedback exercise (before starting the program) created by a research team led by the first author, in which participants (i.e., managers) invited observers to rate them on several variables (6-point scales),

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including the focal variables of this study. The program started with a preliminary short session in which only operational guidelines were provided (no explanation was given about the importance and meaning of the variables included in the survey). Participants were encouraged to include as many raters as possible (since they knew them well) and instructed to consider raters who would be able to respond frankly.

Data from the 227 leaders, and their subordinates ($n = 1073$) and supervisors ($n = 227$) are included. Only managers for whom at least two subordinates had participated were considered (mean number of subordinates per leader: 4.73, SD : 2.26). To deal with common method bias (CMB), different raters were used to measure different variables, which is an “effective remedy to the effects of CMB” (Podsakoff et al., 2024, p. 18). Leader-expressed forgiveness was measured with data from a subsample (#1) of subordinates within the team (SS#1). Several researchers (e.g. Hoyt & McCullough, 2005; McElroy-Heltzel et al., 2019) have shown concerns about biases associated with self-reported forgiveness. Therefore, considering the ongoing and frequent leader-member interactions that may involve conflicts and misunderstandings, which may give rise to resentment vs. forgiveness, subordinates are favored as observers of how leaders forgive (or not). The first parallel mediators (i.e., team forgiveness climate and psychological safety) were measured with data from the SS#2 of subordinates. The second parallel mediators (i.e., helping behaviors and creativity) were measured with data from the targeted leaders. Team performance was measured with data from the supervisor of the targeted leaders. Leader’s self-reported forgiveness, emotional self-control, humility, and non-calculative motivation to lead, and ethical leadership (SS#1) were included for control.

Measures

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Leader-expressed forgiveness was measured with four items ($\alpha = .82$). Three items were adapted from van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011; sample item: “Our team leader tends to maintain a hard attitude towards people who have offended him/her at work”). A fourth item, with a positive sense (“When people wrong him/her, his/her approach is to forgive”), was included to increase the measure’s validity (Brady et al., 2023). *Leader self-reported forgiveness* ($\alpha = .60$), included for control, was measured through the same four items after being adapted. *Team forgiveness climate* ($\alpha = .85$) was measured through the same four items after adaptation to the team level (e.g., “Overall, team members maintain a hard attitude towards people who have offended them at work”). *Team psychological safety* was measured with five items ($\alpha = .70$) from Edmondson (1999; e.g., “Members of this team are able to bring up problems and tough issues”). *Team helping behaviors* were reported by the team leaders through three items ($\alpha = .63$; .72 if all leaders, $n = 371$, participating in the leadership development program are included). See Cho and Kim (2015) and Henson (2001) for why, when considering cut-off values for α , “one size does not fit all”, and values lower than .70 may be acceptable. The three items were adapted from Ehrhart (2004; e.g., “Team members help others who have heavy workloads”). *Team creativity* was also reported by team leaders through four items ($\alpha = .85$), adapted to the team level, from Janssen and Huang (2008; e.g., “Team members come up with new and practical ideas to improve performance”). *Team performance* was rated by the supervisor of the targeted leader through three items ($\alpha = .91$) from Schaubroeck et al. (2007; e.g., “This team has performed its job well”).

Several controls (beyond self-reported forgiveness) were included. *Gender* of the leader was included because women tend to be more communal (Badura et al., 2018) and more forgiving than men (Miller et al., 2008). Through social learning, such a communality may

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translate into a stronger team forgiveness climate and more helping behaviors. *Leader self-reported emotional self-control* (three items from Wong and Law, 2002; e.g., “I can always calm down quickly when I am very angry.”; $\alpha = .83$) was included because self-regulation is necessary to avoid retaliating against interpersonal transgressions (Brady et al., 2023), and low self-regulated leaders may create a sense of fear within the team that weakens team psychological safety (Lin et al., 2025; Liu et al., 2017; Rego et al., 2025). *Leader-expressed humility*, as measured with data from subordinates (SS#1), was controlled for because humble leaders accept the imperfections of the human condition and thus are more likely to forgive (Kets de Vries, 2014), and they facilitate team forgiveness climate emergence (Fehr & Gelfand, 2012) as well as team psychological safety (Kelemen et al., 2023; Rego et al., 2021). *Leader-expressed humility* was measured through the nine items ($\alpha = .91$) from Owens et al. (2013; e.g., “Our team leader admits it when he/she doesn’t know how to do something”). *Leader non-calculative motivation to lead* (three items from Chan and Drasgow, 2001; e.g., “The leader is willing to lead others even if there are no special rewards or benefits with that role”; $\alpha = .82$) was included because, like forgiveness, it represents a prosocial orientation (Chan & Drasgow, 2001) that may boost leaders’ forgiveness and model (prosocial) team members behaviors that foster team forgiveness climate and helping behaviors (Fehr & Gelfand, 2012; Frazier & Tupper, 2018; Wang et al., 2021). *Ethical leadership* (three items from De Hoogh and Den Hartog, 2008; e.g., “Team leader makes sure that his/her actions are always ethical”; $\alpha = .89$), was included because this variable facilitates trustful relationships within the team and, thus, team’s forgiveness (Fehr & Gelfand, 2012, 2020), team helping behaviors (Kim & Vandenberghe, 2020), and team psychological safety (Frazier et al., 2017). To measure the three *strength* variables, we calculated the standard

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deviation (*SD*) of individual scores within each team (LeBreton & Senter, 2008). Then, the *SD* score was reversed so that higher scores represent greater consistency/strength.

Aggregating data

The mean r_{wg} (uniform distribution) values are .66 (non-calculative motivation to lead), .83 (ethical leadership), .79 (humility), .77 (leader-expressed forgiveness), .80 (forgiveness climate), and .81 (psychological safety) – all representing strong agreement with the exception of the first one (.66; which is moderate; LeBreton & Senter, 2008). ICC(1) values are .18, .20, .19, .23, .19, and .20, respectively for leader's non-calculative motivation to lead, ethical leadership, leader-expressed humility, leader-expressed forgiveness, forgiveness climate, and psychological safety – all representing medium-large effect. ICC(2) values are .51, .54, .52, .58, .53, and .54, also respectively. Although ICC(2) values are below the cutoff of 0.60, they do not prevent aggregation if aggregation is theoretically justified and r_{wg} is high.

Discriminant validity

Confirmatory factor analysis (maximum likelihood method) first tested if leader-expressed and leader self-reported forgiveness represent different constructs. The two-factor model fits the data reasonably well ($\chi^2_{(19)} = 52.34$; RMSEA: .088; SRMR: .06; GFI: .94; CFI and IFI: .90) and better than the single-factor model (RMSEA: .15; SRMR: .11; GFI: .87; CFI and IFI: .70; $\Delta\chi^2_{(1)} = 69.13$; $p < .01$). We then tested an 11-factor model comprising the six main variables of the hypothesized model plus five controls (self-reported emotional self-control and forgiveness, leader non-calculative motivation to lead, ethical leadership, and leader-expressed humility). Fit indices ($\chi^2_{(610)} = 871.55$; RMSEA: .04; SRMR: .06; GFI: .84; CFI: .93; IFI: .94) are better than those of alternative models: (a) the five controls merged (RMSEA: .08; SRMR: .09; GFI: .70; CFI and IFI: .76; $\Delta\chi^2_{(34)} = 726.29$; $p < .01$); (b) leader-expressed forgiveness and forgiveness

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climate merged (RMSEA: .06; SRMR: .08; GFI: .79; CFI and IFI: .88; $\Delta\chi^2_{(10)} = 232.83$; $p < .01$); (c) forgiveness climate and psychological safety merged (RMSEA: .05; SRMR: .06; GFI: .83; CFI and IFI: .92; $\Delta\chi^2_{(10)} = 61.95$; $p < .01$); (d) helping behaviors and creativity merged (RMSEA: .05; SRMR: .06; GFI: .83; CFI: .92; IFI: .93; $\Delta\chi^2_{(10)} = 48.59$; $p < .01$); (e) helping behaviors, creativity, and performance merged (RMSEA: .05; SRMR: .06; GFI: .83; CFI: .92; IFI: .93; $\Delta\chi^2_{(10)} = 48.59$; $p < .01$); and (f) a single factor model (RMSEA: .13; SRMR: .14; GFI: .51; CFI and IFI: .37; $\Delta\chi^2_{(55)} = 2265.99$; $p < .01$). The 11-factor model was then compared with a 12-factor model, in which a common latent factor was added to the 11-factor model (Podsakoff et al., 2024). The fit indices of the two models are similar and the average path coefficient from the common factor to all indicators is .15. The square of this value (.023) suggests that our data were not affected significantly by CMB, as the calculated variance is only 2.3%.

Study 1 Results

Table 1 presents means, standard deviations, and correlations. The correlation between leader-expressed forgiveness and leader's self-reported forgiveness is modest. The two variables correlate positively with team forgiveness climate, although the correlation is stronger for leader-expressed forgiveness. Leader-expressed (but not self-reported) forgiveness relates positively with team psychological safety. This evidence corroborates that leader-expressed forgiveness and self-reported forgiveness represent different constructs. Note also that self-reported forgiveness is lower ($t_{(226)} = 3.17$, $p < .01$) than leader-expressed forgiveness, a point we discuss in the overall discussion. Before proceeding, we clarify our approach toward controls. First, as shown in Table 1, leader self-reported forgiveness, leader-expressed humility, leader non-calculative motivation to lead, and ethical leadership correlate with leader-expressed forgiveness and at least one of the mediating variables. This evidence suggests that it makes sense to include

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them as controls (Spector, 2021). We also keep leader emotional self-control for control because of (a) the theoretical reasons discussed above and (b) its positive correlation with leader-self-reported forgiveness and, marginally ($r = .12, p = .07$), team forgiveness climate. Leader gender was also kept as a control because of (a) the theoretical reasons discussed above and (b) its correlation with leader emotional self-control and, marginally, team forgiveness climate ($r = .11, p = .10$), team helping behaviors ($r = -.12, p = .07$), and team creativity ($r = -.12, p = .08$). Second, we tested our hypothesized model with and without those controls (both individually and together). The effects are very similar for the different conditions (e.g., the total indirect effect is .08 vs. 0.9 when the controls are vs. are not included). We next present the findings with controls.

[Table 1 about here]

We first tested the mediated model without the moderators (PROCESS macro, model #82; Hayes, 2017). Bias-corrected bootstrap regression analyses (5000 samples, Table 2) show that leader-expressed forgiveness predicts team forgiveness climate (H1 supported), team forgiveness climate predicts team helping behaviors (H2 supported), which in turn predict team performance (H3 supported). Leader-expressed forgiveness predicts team psychological safety (H5 supported), team psychological safety predicts team creativity (H6 supported), which in turn predicts performance (H7 supported). Although the direct effect of leader-expressed forgiveness on team performance is not significant (effect: $-.09$, SE: $.09$; 95% CI: $-.26$ to $.08$, $p = .28$), the total indirect effect is (effect: $.08$, SE: $.04$; 95% CI: $.01$ to $.16$). The indirect effects for the prosocial path (effect: $.01$, SE: $.004$; 95% CI: $.001$ to $.02$) and the cognitive path (effect: $.01$, SE: $.005$; 95% CI: $.002$ to $.02$) are significant (H4, H8, and H9 supported), although weak, a possible explanation being that moderators are not included.

[Table 2 about here]

To calculate the conditional indirect effects, we first tested how leader-expressed forgiveness predicts team helping behaviors through forgiveness climate, and how that mediating effect is conditional on the strength of leader-expressed forgiveness and of team forgiveness climate (template #21). Leader-expressed forgiveness (effect: .18, SE: .08; $p < .05$; 95% CI: .02 to .33), the strength of that variable (effect: .31, SE: .12; $p < .05$; 95% CI: .07 to .55), and the interaction between the two (effect: .50, SE: .14; $p < .01$; 95% CI: .23 to .78) predict team forgiveness climate ($\Delta R^2 = .05$, $F = 12.91$, $p < .01$). The conditional effects are: (a) *low strength* – effect: .01, SE: .09; $p = .95$; 95% CI: -.18 to .19; (b) *moderate* – effect: .19, SE: .08; $p < .05$; 95% CI: .04 to .35; (c) *high* – effect: .36, SE: .09; $p < .01$; 95% CI: .18 to .54. To clarify the interaction pattern, we created three levels (mean ± 1 SD) of the strength of leader-expressed forgiveness and tested the effect of leader-expressed forgiveness on forgiveness climate for each level. Figure 2a corroborates that the relationship between leader-expressed forgiveness and team forgiveness increases as the strength of leader-expressed forgiveness increases, and it is significantly positive only when strength is moderate or high (H10 supported).

[Figure 2 about here]

Both team forgiveness climate (effect: .15, SE: .06; $p < .05$; 95% CI: .03 to .27) and the interaction between this climate and the respective strength (effect: .30, SE: .14; $p < .05$; 95% CI: .03 to .57) predict team helping behaviors ($\Delta R^2 = .02$, $F = 4.91$, $p < .05$). The conditional effects are: (a) *low strength* – effect: .06, SE: .06; $p = .34$; 95% CI: -.07 to .19; (b) *moderate* – effect: .15, SE: .06; $p < .05$; 95% CI: .03 to .26; (c) *high* – effect: .25, SE: .08; $p < .01$; 95% CI: .09 to .41. Figure 2b corroborates that the relationship between forgiveness climate and helping behaviors increases as the strength of forgiveness climate increases and is significantly positive

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only when that strength is moderate or high (H12 supported). Whereas the direct effect of leader-expressed forgiveness on helping behaviors is not significant (effect: .04, SE: .07; $p = .59$; 95% CI: -.10 to .18), the indirect effects are significant when the strength of leader-expressed forgiveness and the strength of team forgiveness are moderate or high (Table 3).

[Table 3 about here]

The same procedures were used to test how leader-expressed forgiveness predicts team creativity through team psychological safety, and how that mediating effect is conditional on the strength of leader-expressed forgiveness and team psychological safety. Leader-expressed forgiveness (effect: .20, SE: .07; $p < .01$; 95% CI: .06 to .34), the strength of that variable (effect: .42, SE: .11; $p < .01$; 95% CI: .20 to .64), and the interaction between the former and the latter (effect: .50, SE: .13; $p < .01$; 95% CI: .25 to .76) predict psychological safety ($\Delta R^2 = .05$, $F = 15.36$, $p < .01$). The conditional effects are: (a) *low strength* – effect: .03, SE: .09; $p = .75$; 95% CI: -.14 to .20; (b) *moderate* – effect: .21, SE: .07; $p < .01$; 95% CI: .07 to .35; (c) *high* – effect: .38, SE: .08; $p < .01$; 95% CI: .22 to .55. Therefore, the relationship between leader-expressed forgiveness and psychological safety increases as the strength of leader-expressed forgiveness increases, and it is positive only when that strength is moderate or high (a pattern similar to the one presented in Figures 2a and 2b). Therefore, both H11 and H14a are supported. The findings do not support the conditional effect of team psychological safety on team creativity. The interaction between team psychological safety and the strength of this variable does not predict team creativity (effect: -.23, SE: .20; $p = .24$; 95% CI: -.63 to .16; $\Delta R^2 = .001$, $F = 1.39$, $p = .24$). Thus, neither H13 nor H14b are supported.

Post-hoc analysis

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Our data do not support the effect of leader-expressed forgiveness on forgiveness climate through psychological safety. The data also do not support considering leader-expressed forgiveness as predicting psychological safety via forgiveness climate. Therefore, although a mutual influence between psychological safety and forgiveness climate is likely, it makes sense to consider that the statistical relationship between the two *also* comes from a common antecedent. As a forgiveness climate may make team members less anxious about producing creative solutions, we tested the effect of a forgiveness climate on team performance through creativity by controlling for psychological safety. Team forgiveness climate does not predict creativity (effect: .01, SE: .07, $p = .92$; 95% CI: -.13 to .19), whereas psychological safety does (effect: .15, SE: .07, $p < .05$; 95% CI: .02 to .28). As psychological safety may motivate team members to help others (Singh et al., 2013), we tested the effect of psychological safety on team performance through helping behaviors by controlling for forgiveness climate. Psychological safety does not predict helping behaviors (effect: .10, SE: .06, $p = .12$; 95% CI: -.03 to .22) but forgiveness climate does (effect: .13, SE: .06, $p < .05$; 95% CI: .01 to .26). Thus, our model represents the data better than those alternative explanations do.

Study 1 Discussion

Study 1 shows that leaders who express a high level of forgiveness are associated with better team performance through two parallel serial paths. These paths are conditional on the strength of leader-expressed forgiveness and team forgiveness climate, but not on the strength of team psychological safety. We develop the discussion of this evidence in the “Overall discussion” section below. Here, we focus on two limitations of our study. First, leader-expressed forgiveness and team forgiveness climate were measured with only four items, which may limit the content validity of those measures. The measure of psychological safety (five items

instead of seven, as suggested by Edmondson, 1999) suffers from the same limitation. Second, and more importantly, although our multi-source procedure reduced the risks of CMB, our method does not support causality, and other causal paths are possible (e.g., in psychologically safe and forgiving teams, leaders may feel more motivated to express their forgiveness). To address these limitations, we conducted a vignette-based experiment (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014) with a 2 (control *vs.* high leader forgiveness) x 2 (low *vs.* high consistency) design. It was designed to test the conditional effect of leader-expressed forgiveness on both team forgiveness climate and psychological safety.

Study 2 Method

Participants and Procedures

Study 2 included 350 individuals (54.6% women, $M_{\text{age}} = 30.47$, $SD = 10.96$, 0.3% had 12 schooling years or fewer, 72.6% an undergraduate degree, and 17.1% a Master's degree or a PhD) participating in several master's and executive training programs, nested in 101 teams. Most of the participants (73.7%) had work experience ($M = 11.00$ years, $SD = 10.59$). The number of teams (built randomly) was maximized within a constraint: the team should have at least three members ($M = 3.47$, $SD: .63$). Teams were randomly assigned to one of four conditions (online Appendix): (1) control condition x low consistency ($n = 28$ teams); (2) control condition x high consistency ($n = 26$); (3) high leader-expressed forgiveness x low consistency ($n = 23$); and (4) high leader-expressed forgiveness x high consistency ($n = 24$). After presenting team members with a short description of a fictitious leader (Chris, a gender-neutral name), they were asked to read the scenario independently. Then, they collectively discussed for ten minutes how it would be to work with Chris for the next years. Next, all participants completed the team forgiveness and psychological safety scales independently. No significant difference was found

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between the participants in the four conditions in terms of age, work experience, education, or percentage of women. However, the number of teams whose members all had work experience ($n = 58$) was somewhat overrepresented in the two forgiveness conditions ($\chi^2_{(3)} = 8.24, p < .05$).

Manipulations and measures

Manipulations

Participants were asked to read the vignette carefully and imagine themselves working with Chris. To prevent demand effects (Lonati et al., 2018), any clues about the study's objective were excluded. Transactional leadership was used in the control condition (see, e.g., van Dierendonck et al., 2014, and Rego et al., 2019). This procedure is empirically more conservative than if we had adopted a scenario in which leader-expressed forgiveness was explicitly low. To manipulate leader-expressed forgiveness we described the leader through items adapted from those used in Study 1 and Brown (2003). Participants in the control condition were told that Chris takes actions to prevent low performance, takes corrective actions when needed, and rewards good performance. To manipulate consistency of leader behavior, in the low consistency condition, after describing the leader style, we added the following: "On the whole, Chris behaves this way. However, Chris' behavior is not consistent across team members". In the high consistency condition, the leader was described as being "very consistent when interacting with team members, regardless of the team member with whom Chris interacts at work." Following the manipulations, we asked members of each team to engage in a ten-minute discussion and reflect on what it would be like to work in the team led by Chris.

Measures

After the discussion each member independently assessed team forgiveness climate and psychological safety (6-point scale). Specifically, each member was asked to imagine how he/she

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would characterize the interactions between the members of their team as led by Chris.

Forgiveness climate ($\alpha = .95$) was measured through six items adapted to the team level (three with a positive/forgiving valence, the other three with a negative one; Brady et al., 2023). Four items were the same as used in Study 1. The other two were adapted from Brown (2003: e.g., “When someone hurts other team members’ feelings, team members tend to get over it quickly”). Psychological safety ($\alpha = .85$) was assessed through seven items from Edmondson (1999).

Manipulation checks

At the end of the study, participants were asked about the extent to which they thought Chris was (1) a forgiving leader (1: “I would characterize Chris as a forgiving leader”; 7: “...unforgiving ...”), and consistent across team members (1: “Chris behaves inconsistently across team members”; 7: “(... consistently ...)”). As expected, teams in the leader-expressed forgiveness condition reported that Chris was more forgiving ($M = 6.19$, $SD = .86$) compared to teams in the control condition ($M = 2.48$, $SD = 1.10$; $t(99) = 19.06$, $p < .01$; 95% CI: 3.33 to 4.10). Teams in the high- versus low-consistency condition reported that Chris was more consistent ($M = 5.99$, $SD = .84$ vs. $M = 2.63$, $SD = 1.20$; $t(99) = 16.38$, $p < .01$; 95% CI: 2.96 to 3.77). We conclude that manipulations were effective.

Aggregating data

ICC(1) values are .62, and .66, respectively, for team forgiveness climate and psychological safety, representing large effects (LeBreton & Senter, 2008). ICC(2) values are also respectively .85, and .87 (i.e., higher than the cutoff of 0.60). The means of r_{wg} values are .78 and .85 respectively – all being strong (LeBreton & Senter, 2008).

Study 2 Results

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Table 4 presents the means, standard deviations and correlations. As hypothesized, leader forgiveness correlates positively with team forgiveness climate and team psychological safety. Variance analysis confirms that team forgiveness climate is greater for the high leader-expressed forgiveness vs. the control condition (4.50 vs. 2.82, $t_{(99)} = 11.24$, $p < .01$; H1 supported). Team psychological safety is greater for the high leader-expressed forgiveness vs. the control condition (4.34 vs. 3.12, $t_{(99)} = 8.68$, $p < .01$; H5 supported).

[Table 4 about here]

To test the moderating effect of the strength of leader-expressed forgiveness, the PROCESS macro (model #1) was used. Considering that the number of teams whose members all had work experience was not distributed evenly across the four conditions, we created a dummy variable for distinguishing teams whose members all had work experience ($n = 58$ teams) from those in which there were members without work experience. We also controlled for mean work experience within the team. The leader-expressed forgiveness (effect: 1.69; SE: .14; $p < .01$; 95% CI: 1.42 to 1.96), the strength of that variable (effect: .62; SE: .13; $p < .01$; 95% CI: .36 to .88), and the interaction between the two (effect: .54; SE: .27; $p < .05$; 95% CI: .01 to 1.08; R^2 : .66; ΔR^2 : .02) predict team forgiveness climate. The conditional effects of leader-expressed forgiveness on team forgiveness climate are: (a) *low consistency* – effect: 1.42; SE: .20; $p < .01$; 95% CI: 1.04 to 1.81; (b) *high* – effect: 1.96; SE: .19; $p < .01$; 95% CI: 1.59 to 2.34. The leader-expressed forgiveness (effect: 1.19; SE: .13; $p < .01$; 95% CI: .94 to 1.44), the strength of leader-expressed forgiveness (effect: .70; SE: .12; $p < .01$; 95% CI: .46 to .94), and the interaction between the two variables (effect: .59; SE: .24; $p < .05$; 95% CI: .11 to 1.08; R^2 : .60; ΔR^2 : .03) also predict team psychological safety. The conditional effects of leader-expressed forgiveness on team psychological safety are: (a) *low consistency* – effect: .90; SE: .18; $p < .01$; 95% CI: .55

to 1.25; (b) *high* – effect: 1.49; SE: .17; $p < .01$; 95% CI: 1.15 to 1.83. A similar pattern emerges when controls are not included, and when only teams whose members all had work experience ($n = 58$) are considered. The interaction effects (Figures 3a and 3b) support H10 and H11.

[Figure 3 about here]

Study 2 Discussion

Our findings corroborate that leader-expressed forgiveness fosters team forgiveness climate and psychological safety, this effect being conditional on the strength of leader-expressed forgiveness. Combining the two studies provides consistent and concurrent support for the first part of our theoretical model. Another finding, although not central to our research, is worthy of mention: i.e., the effect of the consistency of leader-expressed forgiveness on the two team climates. This finding cannot be explained by the explicit, and somewhat simplistic way in which the consistency of leader behavior was manipulated, in that the same result was found for Study 1. It is thus likely that the (in)consistency with which the leader expresses forgiveness across team members affects the team's sense of justice, trust, and respect – and these perceptions influence team forgiveness climate and psychological safety. Future studies may explore such an effect on other leadership behaviors and team responses.

Overall Discussion

Forgiveness in organizations has been empirically studied mainly as an outcome, while its antecedents and mechanisms have been almost overlooked (Brady et al., 2023). Empirical studies of forgiveness in organizations have been conducted mainly at the individual level. The critical review of Brady et al. (2023) mentions one paper (Radulovic et al., 2019) that manipulated the *organizational* forgiveness climate as a moderator, but the construct was operationalized at the individual level. Fehr and Gelfand (2012, pp. 664-665) argue that “[a]

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myopic focus on forgiveness at the individual level risks an oversimplification of the processes through which forgiveness and other prosocial offense responses emerge, particularly in organizational settings where the fundamentally multilevel nature of employee behavior is a central concern.” Our research deals with these two limitations by undertaking a team-level analysis and exploring the outcomes and mechanisms of leader-expressed forgiveness and team forgiveness climate. We advance that leaders who express their forgiveness toward team members boost team performance through two parallel, serial paths. Our study is a valuable step forward in positioning leader-expressed forgiveness not just as a humanizing force but as impactful in fostering a more pragmatic outcome: team performance.

Our research also supports the consideration of boundary conditions that moderate how leader-expressed forgiveness operates. The two paths we have mentioned operate more (less) positively when the leader expresses his/her forgiveness (in)consistently toward team members. Therefore, to foster team performance, it is not enough that the leader expresses a high level of forgiveness – it is also necessary that the leader expresses forgiveness consistently across all team members. Our empirical pattern is consistent with the theory of personality strength (Dalal et al., 2015), thus offering further support for that theory, which is in an understudied domain: leader forgiveness. Future studies may therefore consider not only the average amount of leader-expressed behaviors with the team, but also the consistency of those expressed behaviors across team members. Another possible research avenue could be assessing consistency, not just across team members, but also across situations (e.g., the domains in which team members commit mistakes; the social *versus* nonsocial nature of the error; the failure severity).

The fact that our two studies reveal the strength of leader forgiveness to be, *per se*, relevant for predicting team outcomes also encourages researchers to continue exploring the main effects

of personality strength, as well as its antecedents (see, e.g., Rego et al., 2021). The conditional effect of the strength of the team forgiveness climate on the relationship between team forgiveness climate and team helping behaviors is also consistent with the literature on climate strength (Perrigino et al., 2021). Considering the positive relationship between the strength of leader-expressed forgiveness and the strength of forgiveness climate, as observed in Study 1 (Table 1), leaders who express a *strongly high* forgiving personality may end up fostering a *strongly high* team forgiving “personality,” thus influencing team helping behaviors and team performance as a consequence.

Our findings of Study 1 do not support the strength of team psychological safety as moderating the relationship between team psychological safety and creativity. A possible explanation is that creativity may benefit from team diversity (Sung & Choi, 2019; van Knippenberg & Hoeser, 2017), and that a strong (i.e., low variability) team psychological safety is associated with low team diversity. Despite this finding, overall our empirical pattern suggests the value of considering forgiving leaders as a generative (or even healing) force that stimulates team members to adopt both a forgiving and a prosocial orientation, and to feel psychologically safer to self-present more candidly toward the team and the leader. Consequently, team members adopt more helping behaviors and are more creative, thereby contributing to team performance.

Finally, Study 1 suggests that the relationship between self-reported forgiveness and leader-expressed forgiveness is modest, and only leader-expressed forgiveness predicts the two team climates. A possible explanation is that self-reports of forgiveness are biased. The finding that self-reported forgiveness is lower than expressed forgiveness may mean that some leaders consider forgiveness to be a weakness or undesirable characteristic (Bies et al., 2016). If this explanation is correct, those leaders risk being ineffective, as our findings suggest that teams

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react positively toward forgiving leaders and are more effective. Future studies may continue to explore this issue. The finding that leader-expressed forgiveness, but not leader-self-reported forgiveness, predicts the two team climates suggests that, at least for studying the impact of leaders on teams, leader-expressed forgiveness is a more reliable measure. This also makes sense in that forgiveness is high in both observability and evaluativeness (Beer & Vazire, 2017; Vazire & Carlson, 2011). *Observability* means being easily discernible by observers. *Evaluativeness* means being value-laden and thus more prone to social desirability, self-serving, self-deception, and ego-protective biases (Pommier et al., 2020; Zimmerman et al., 2010).

Nevertheless, two points are worth considering in future studies. First, the extent to which expressed forgiveness is a valid measure may depend on the situation and the relational context of the actors in interaction. For example, because of the power imbalance in leader-member relationships, subordinates may *express (fake) forgiveness* toward the leader regardless of their disposition to forgive. Therefore, future studies may also (a) consider individuals' internal and external factors that may lead them to adopt forgiving behaviors that are *misaligned* with their forgiving disposition, and (b) investigate the outcomes of that misalignment for themselves and others with whom they interact. Second, our findings do not imply that self-reported forgiveness is always an invalid measure. Studies aimed at investigating the leader's *inner* disposition to forgive are assessed more accurately via self-reports (Beer & Vazire, 2017; Connelly & McAbee, 2024). Such *inner* disposition may be a valid predictor, not of team members' reactions, but of the leader's (inner) emotions and cognitions.

Limitations and Future Studies

Our research has several limitations. First, although our experiment supports that leader-expressed forgiveness *causes* the two team climates, we did not explore causality for the other

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mediators. More than one causality nexus is plausible (e.g., in teams where helping behavior is common, team members may be more willing to forgive each other). Future studies may adopt a longitudinal or experimental design to better understand these effects. Second, the number of respondents in several teams of Study 1 is small. Moreover, though short scales reduce the burden of time, their limited content validity may have affected the overall validity of that study. Study 2 minimizes this limitation, but only for team forgiveness climate and psychological safety. Thus, future studies should include at least three members per team to measure each variable and adopt measures that have broader content validity (e.g., Kamat et al., 2006) and that measure several dimensions (e.g., Thompson et al., 2005) of leader-expressed forgiveness. Third, future studies may include other dependent variables, such as team thriving and an objective measure of team performance. Other mediators (e.g., team trust, trust in the supervisor, perceived leader support, and leader-member exchange) may also be investigated.

Fourth, the reasons why the strength of team forgiveness climate did not emerge as a boundary condition may also be investigated. Fifth, because social exchange and socio-cognitive effects may be affected by the level of team task interdependence, future studies could include this variable as a moderator. Leaders' fairness may also operate as a moderator (Fehr & Gelfand, 2020) in that team members may react negatively toward leaders who, though forgiving a team member for his/her faults, create a sense of injustice among other members. Sixth, forgiving leaders may adopt an unmitigated communion approach (Finkel & Rusbult, 2008), which could increase their vulnerability to further exploitation by subordinates, mainly by those subordinates with some attributes and in some conditions (McNulty, 2019). Future studies may, therefore, explore boundary conditions that make leader-expressed forgiveness problematic. Seventh,

considering that culture matters in how forgiveness is experienced, expressed, and interpreted (Sandage et al., 2019), future studies might include teams from other cultures.

Conclusion

Scholars (e.g., Brady et al., 2023; Fehr & Gelfand, 2012, 2020) have advocated hiring leaders who favor forgiveness over revenge, cultivating a forgiving orientation among leaders after they enter positions of power, and fostering a culture of team/organization forgiveness. Kets de Vries (2014) defended that leaders who create such a culture generate many advantages, including those that affect the bottom line. Our findings support this perspective. We hope that our study will be helpful for other researchers (as well as practitioners) eager to better understand how leader forgiveness can positively influence their teams. We acknowledge that many leaders “struggle to forgive” (Brady et al., 2023, p. 291) because of their *unforgiving* disposition and their deep-seated implicit theories about the (presumed) undesirability of forgiveness in leaders (Bies et al., 2016). Some organizational cultures and business environments are also reluctant to recognize forgiveness as a strength. However, forgiveness is developable (Brady et al., 2023; Tirrell, 2022), and our research suggests that leaders, teams, and organizations may benefit from interventions aimed at turning forgiveness into a desirable and virtuous approach toward inevitable failures, mistakes, and conflicts in the workplace. Unfortunately, by ignoring the saying that “not forgiving is like drinking rat poison and then waiting for the rat to die” (Kets de Vries, 2022, p. 18) many leaders end up encouraging team members to adopt a similar toxic approach and thus damage teams’ social fabric and performance. We therefore hope that our research contributes to making more and more leaders aware of the advantages, for themselves and their teams, of adopting a forgiving approach to their interactions with their teams.

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Table 1

Means, Standard deviation and Correlations – Study 1

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
1. Leader gender ^a	-	-	-														
2. Leader's emotional self-control (self-reported)	4.43	.86	.20**	(.83)													
3. Leader's non-calculative motivation to lead (SS#1) ^b	4.54	.90	.00	-.02	(.82)												
4. Ethical leadership (SS#1)	5.01	.66	-.06	-.04	.57**	(.89)											
5. Leader-expressed humility (SS#1) ^b	4.80	.68	.05	.02	.52**	.72**	(.91)										
6. Leader's self-reported forgiveness	4.35	.80	.05	.36**	.07	-.01	.12	(.60)									
7. Leader-expressed forgiveness (SS#1) ^b	4.56	.76	.07	.09	.54**	.54**	.57**	.21**	(.82)								
8. Strength of leader-expressed forgiveness	1.56	.37	-.09	-.05	.06	.15*	.15*	.01	.19**	-							
9. Team forgiveness climate (SS#2) ^b	4.63	.71	.11	.12	.09	.10	.20**	.19**	.26**	.20**	(.85)						
10. Strength of team forgiveness climate	1.07	.32	-.03	-.04	.00	.04	.05	.04	.23**	.30**	.21**	-					
11. Team psychological safety (SS#2) ^b	4.64	.68	.04	-.03	.24**	.24**	.28**	-.04	.35**	.30**	.56**	.14*	(.70)				
12. Strength of team psychological safety	1.16	.31	.02	-.02	.20**	.26**	.28**	.10	.22**	.34**	.05	.16*	.20**	-			
13. Team helping behaviors (reported by the team leader)	4.68	.61	-.12	.08	.01	.08	.11	.03	.12	.09	.18**	.14*	.13	.13	(.63) ^c		
14. Team creativity (reported by the team leader)	4.58	.66	-.12	.08	-.10	.00	.06	.15*	.05	.17*	.16*	.05	.14*	.09	.35**	(.85)	
15. Team performance (as reported by the supervisor of the team leader)	4.76	.74	.07	-.05	.05	.14*	.08	.03	.06	.12	.14*	.03	.22**	.17*	.21**	.22**	(.91)

Note. *N* = 227 leaders/teams. Reliabilities are on the diagonal in parentheses.

^a Leader gender was dummy-coded (0 = women, 1 = men; no participants selected another option).

^a SS#1(#2) subsample #1(#2) of subordinates.

^c .72 if all leaders, *n* = 371, participating in the leadership development program are included.

**p* ≤ .05. ** *p* ≤ .01 (two-tailed)

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Table 2

Bootstrap Regression Analysis: Testing the Full Mediating Model – Study 1

Variable	Team Forgiveness Climate			Team Helping Behaviors			Team Psychological Safety			Team Creativity			Team Performance		
	B (SE)	95% CI	F	B (SE)	95% CI	F	B (SE)	95% CI	F	B (SE)	95% CI	F	B (SE)	95% CI	F
		[LL, UL]	(R ²)		[LL, UL]	(R ²)		[LL, UL]	(R ²)		[LL, UL]	(R ²)		[LL, UL]	(R ²)
			3.81** (.11)			2.29* (.08)			4.85** (.13)			2.81** (.09)			3.25** (.14)
Leader gender ^a	.10 (.10)	[-.09, .29]		-.20 (.08)*	[-.37, -.04]		.03 (.09)	[-.14, .21]		-.20 (.09)*	[-.38, -.02]		.23 (.10)*	[.03, .42]	
Leader's emotional self-control (self-reported)	.03 (.06)	[-.08, .15]		.07 (.05)	[-.03, .17]		-.04 (.05)	[-.15, .07]		.05 (.05)	[-.06, .15]		-.09 (.06)	[-.21, .03]	
Leader's non-calculative motivation to lead (SS#1) ^b	-.06 (.07)	[-.19, .07]		-.06 (.06)	[-.18, .05]		.03 (.06)	[-.09, .15]		-.15 (.06)*	[-.27, -.03]		.00 (.07)	[-.14, .14]	
Ethical leadership (SS#1) ^b	-.08 (.11)	[-.29, .14]		-.02 (.09)	[-.20, .17]		.00 (.10)	[-.20, .20]		-.02 (.10)	[-.22, .18]		.25 (.11)*	[.03, .47]	
Leader-expressed humility (SS#1) ^b	.15 (.10)	[-.06, .35]		.09 (.09)	[-.09, .27]		.10 (.10)	[-.09, .29]		.12 (.10)	[-.07, .31]		-.12 (.11)	[-.33, .09]	
Leader's self-reported forgiveness	.10 (.06)	[-.02, .23]		-.05 (.06)	[-.15, .06]		-.01 (.06)	[-.13, .11]		.10 (.06)	[-.02, .22]		.05 (.07)	[-.08, .18]	
Leader-expressed forgiveness (SS#1) ^b	.22 (.08)**	[.06, .38]		.08 (.07)	[-.06, .22]		.25 (.08)**	[.10, .40]		.03 (.08)	[-.12, .18]		-.09 (.09)	[-.26, .08]	
Team forgiveness climate (SS#2) ^b	-	-		.14 (.06)*	[.02, .25]		-	-		-	-		-.004 (.08)	[-.17, .16]	
Team psych. safety (SS#2) ^b	-	-		-	-		-	-		.15 (.07)*	[.02, .28]		.20 (.08)*	[.03, .37]	
Team helping behaviors (reported by the targeted leader)	-	-		-	-		-	-		-	-		.19 (.09)*	[.02, .37]	
Team creativity (reported by the targeted leader)	-	-		-	-		-	-		-	-		.19 (.08)*	[.03, .35]	

Note. N = 227 leaders/teams. CI = confidence interval; LL = lower limit; UL = upper limit.

^a Leader gender was dummy-coded (0 = women, 1 = men; no participants selected another option).

^b SS#1(#2) subsample #1(#2) of subordinates.

* $p \leq .05$. ** $p \leq .01$ (two-tailed)

LEADER-EXPRESSED FORGIVENESS AND TEAM PERFORMANCE

Table 3

Bootstrap Regression Analysis: The Relationship Between Leader-Expressed Forgiveness and Team Helping Behaviors through Team Forgiveness Climate as Moderated by the Strength of Leader-Expressed Forgiveness and the Strength of Team Forgiveness Climate – Study 1

Strength Of Leader-Expressed Forgiveness	Strength Of Team Forgiveness Climate	Effect (SE)	95% CI [LL, UL]
Low	Low	.00 (.01)	[-.03, .02]
Low	Middle	.001 (.02)	[-.04, .03]
Low	High	.001 (.03)	[-.06, .05]
Middle	Low	.01 (.01)	[-.02, .04]
Middle	Middle	.03 (.02)	[.003, .06]
Middle	High	.05 (.02)	[.01, .10]
High	Low	.02 (.03)	[-.03, 0.7]
High	Middle	.05 (.02)	[.01, .10]
High	High	.09 (.03)	[.03, .17]
<i>Index of moderated mediation</i>		.15 (.08)	[.02, .33]

Note. $N = 227$ leaders/teams. CI = confidence interval; LL = lower limit; UL = upper limit

Table 4*Means, Standard Deviation and Correlations – Study 2*

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4
1. Main effect (0 = control condition; 1 = high leader forgiveness condition)	-	-	-			
2. Moderating effect (0 = low consistency; 1 = high consistency)	-	-	.03	-		
3. Team forgiveness climate	3.60	1.12	.75**	.30**	(.95)	
4. Team psychological safety	3.69	.93	.66**	.40**	.85**	(.85)

Note. *N* = 101 leaders/teams. Reliabilities are on the diagonal in parentheses.

** $p \leq .01$ (two-tailed)