

## **Holding Anxiety in the Midst of Chaos: A Differentiated Leadership Perspective**

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In this paper I take the perspective that leadership is an emotional process, rather than a cognitive phenomenon (Friedman, 2007), that emerges, or fails to emerge, as a consequence of the ongoing communicative interaction of people relating to each other (Streatfield, 2001). This perspective is not meant to negate other perspectives but is an attempt to disclose aspects of leadership glossed over or missed by other perspectives. The notion that leadership is an emotional process is consistent with the thinking of Short (1991): "Leadership is not something anyone does alone. No one leads . . . unless others follow. Together everyone creates a 'leadership system.' Everyone is interdependent" (p. viii). Thus, leadership can be seen as the *dance* between people who are continuously shaping and being shaped by each other (Shaw, 2002). As such, this perspective represents a shift from leadership being framed in terms of the individual in isolation from others (e.g. trait theory) to leadership being understood as an interactive relationship between individuals. In Friedman's words, "relationships are not simply the product of the personalities involved, but are constantly evolving structures that take shape from the adaptation of each member to the adaptations others make to them in response" (p. 199). This implies that "learning to lead does not mean learning methods to change yourself to fit a leadership role. Rather it means learning how to bring more of who you truly are" (Short, 1991, p. viii). Thus, leadership is more about clarity of self than it is about technique or data. This shift in perspective is grounded in the Bowen family systems theory concepts of "the emotional system" in which the nuclear family rather than the individual is conceived as the basic unit of emotional functioning (Gilbert, 1992) and "differentiation of self" (Kerr and Bowen, 1988). Using these concepts and his experience as rabbi, organizational consultant, and family therapist, Friedman (1985) developed the notion of *differentiated leadership* as applied to parents and presidents and everyone in between. It is this concept of leadership that is the focus of this paper.

### *Regressive Thinking Patterns*

In the midst of change there is often the perception of a threat and the subsequent response of anxiety (Kerr and Bowen, 1988); thus, the greater the change, the greater the uncertainty and, consequently, the greater the anxiety. It is in times of high anxiety that groups tend to get "stuck." In other words, the conversational processes of such groups are "characterized by habitual, highly repetitive patterns" in which the interactions "are lifeless, depressing and compulsive" thus losing "their potential for transformation" (Stacey, 2003, p. 79). Consequently, stuck groups tend toward regressive behaviors, that is, behaviors emanating from the reptilian part of the human brain and inhibit the group from moving forward. Simply put, "anxiety impairs the ability to think" (Gilbert, 1992, p. 36). Regressive thinking patterns tend to be

1. polarized and totalistic,
2. reactive rather than principle based,
3. reductionistic,
4. externally rather than internally focused,
5. oriented toward crisis rather than opportunity,
6. overly serious rather than playful, and
7. given to groupthink (Friedman, 2007).

Friedman identifies four other key indicators of regressive functioning: interfering in the relationships of others, unceasingly trying to convert others to one's own point of view, being unable to relate to people who do not agree with one, and a narrowing of one's repertoire of responses. The presence of these indicators of regressive thinking patterns provoke the following questions:

1. What factors are contributing to the high anxiety within the group?
2. Which regressive thinking patterns are dominating the group?
3. Who within the group is most likely able to break free of these patterns?

It is the answer to the third question that is the key to moving the group forward.

### *Differentiation*

According to Friedman (2007), for an anxious, stuck group to become unstuck requires the emergence of a well-differentiated individual to step forward and initiate the

leadership process by taking the lead and thus becoming the leader regardless of title or position within the group. This involves "becoming a nonanxious part of the system, and refusing to be homogenized into its one-dimensional fusion" (1985, p. 173). To do this a person must be willing and able to take and hold a clear and decisive non-reactive position while maintaining contact with others in the emotional system. In other words, they must be connected to but separate from the emotional context of the relationship system. Kerr and Bowen (1988) maintain that the well-differentiated person, one who stands firm versus opposing others, is self-determined rather than influenced by the anxious prodding from others, and doesn't attempt to influence or change others but rather simply states this is who they are and what they believe, can have a constructive effect on others, and, as such, initiate the process of differentiated leadership. Friedman identifies six characteristics indicative of a well-differentiated person who initiates the leadership process. These include:

1. having clarity about one's own life principles, vision and goals,
2. being able to remain calm in the presence of others' anxiety and reactivity,
3. being separate while being connected,
4. maintaining a non-anxious and sometimes challenging presence,
5. managing one's own reactivity to the automatic reactivity of others, and
6. taking non-reactive stands at the risk of displeasing others.

In addition to these six characteristics the well-differentiated person must remain open to influence and to being wrong, and demonstrate the willingness and ability to learn and self-correct (Short, 1991) and to explore the following questions:

1. What triggers one's own anxiety?
2. What behavioral patterns are indicative of one's own anxiety?
3. What is the origin or source of one's own reactivity?

### *Anxiety*

Given that the key to generating the differentiated leadership process involves someone maintaining a nonanxious presence in the presence of others' anxiety, it is important to understand how the term anxiety is used in Bowen family systems theory. Kerr and Bowen (1988) define *acute anxiety* as a response to real event specific threats

that occur over a short period of time and to which people generally adapt with little difficulty. They define *chronic anxiety* as a type of emotional reactivity in which there is a response to imagined threats that occur over long periods of time and are difficult for people to adapt to. In other words, "acute anxiety is fed by fear of what is; chronic anxiety is fed by fear of what might be" (p. 113). To be well-differentiated, one must be able to separate themselves from the chronic anxiety within the emotional system in which they operate. Friedman (2007) indicates that chronically anxious individuals who exhibit emotional immaturity tend to (a) display an intense quickness to interfere in other's self-expression, (b) overreact to any perceived hurt, (c) take all disagreement too seriously, and (d) brand opposition with negative labels. He goes on to say that they expect all other group members to (a) discourage dissent, (b) place more importance on feelings than on ideas, (c) value peace over forward movement, and (d) maintain comfort over novelty. Groups plagued by chronic anxiety demonstrate five distinct behaviors:

1. *Reactivity*: the vicious cycle of intense reactions of each member to events and to one another.
2. *Herd*: a process through which the forces of togetherness triumph over the forces for individuality and move everyone to adapt to the least mature members.
3. *Blame displacement*: an emotional state in which members focus on forces that have victimized them rather than taking responsibility for their own being and destiny.
4. *A quick-fix mentality*: a low threshold for pain that constantly seeks symptom relief rather than fundamental change.
5. *Lack of well-differentiated leadership*: a failure of nerve that both stems from and contributes to the first four. (pp. 53-54)

Short (1991) adds that due to the undifferentiated fusion\* found in highly anxious groups: More effort is placed on managing the image and perceptions than the problems. Behavior is almost totally prescribed by roles. Persons remain hidden behind their roles.

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\* Undifferentiated or emotional fusion occurs when two or more individuals become emotionally interlinked into one emotional reactive system (Gilbert, 1992).

Often, how the problems are solved *becomes* the problem.

The eternal triangle of victim, perpetrator, and rescuer is alive and thriving.

Dependency is, of course, high. People need others to make it right. Initiative is dead. Self-expression and empowerment are non-existent. (p. 9)

Consequently, poorly differentiated leaders caught in the emotional intensity of anxious and stuck systems tend to become indecisive and often try to placate rather than challenge the group, or they become exhausted as a result of their efforts to reduce the anxiety through ineffective means and end up either going through the motions, burning out, or resigning (Friedman). As a result an effective leadership process fails to emerge and the group remains stuck. Again, awareness as to the extent anxiety is present within a group begins with the exploration of the following questions:

1. What degree of emotional fusion exists within the group?
2. What poorly differentiated behaviors are inhibiting the group from moving forward?
3. What must one do to separate from the anxiety of the group while still maintaining connected to the group?

The responses to each of these questions will increase one's chances of becoming more differentiated from the group's anxiety and more able to assist the group in moving forward, thus initiating the leadership process.

### *Emotional Relationship Patterns*

The drive to reduce anxiety is quite a natural human response.

Since anxiety undermines a feeling of emotional well-being, people automatically act in ways designed to reduce anxiety. The greater the emotional interdependence of a relationship, therefore, the more easily people are threatened, the more anxiety they experience, and the more energy is invested in actions aimed at reducing that anxiety. (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 74)

The goal of *differentiated leadership* is to reduce anxiety through the nonanxious presence of a well-differentiated leader regardless of formal title. However, highly anxious systems lacking well-differentiated leadership processes develop ineffective relational patterns in response to the anxiety within the system often created by constant

change. Gilbert (1992) outlines five such patterns (*conflict, distance, cutoff, overfunctioning/underfunctioning* and *triangling*) used to reduce anxiety, but which fail to address the basic problem of the emotional processes at play. These patterns exacerbate the problem in that the focus becomes on diagnosing people instead of the relationships (Friedman, 1985). Gilbert maintains that those who fall prey to the *conflict pattern* when anxiety is high tend to be overly critical and blaming of others, focus outwardly rather than inwardly, project their issues on others, and "fight rather than switch" (p. 47). This is true of individuals, groups and organizations. Signs of the *distancing pattern* include workaholism, substance abuse, tendency toward noncommunication when emotionally reactive, and an inability to relate to one or more members of one's own nuclear or family of origin. The *cutoff pattern* is an extreme form of the distancing pattern and "develops as an attempt to adapt to intense chronic and acute anxiety in the system" (p. 61). Gilbert goes on to say that "because the emotional systems of cut off people tend to be smaller, the relationships they do have are more intense" (p. 62). According to Friedman (2007) a universal principle of emotional relationship patterns is that "individuals who are cut off from their families generally do not heal until they have been reconnected" (p. 8). He adds that such patterns often extend into workplace relationships and thus sabotage the efforts of well-differentiated individuals to establish effective relational patterns.

The *overfunctioning/underfunctioning pattern* occurs as a dance in which one person overfunctions by taking on the responsibilities of the other and the other person underfunctions by abdicating their responsibilities (Friedman, 2007). This pattern exists only when both partners play their part. It is a pattern about the emotional immaturity of both parties. It is common in parent/child relationships, spousal relationships, as well as manager/employee relationships at all levels. "One person does not withdraw because the other pursues anymore than the other pursues because one withdraws"(Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 61). In other words, both are responsible and necessary for the pattern to exist. Signs of overfunctioning include:

- advice-giving

- doing things for others that they could do for themselves

- worrying about other people

feeling responsible for others; knowing what is best for them  
talking more than listening  
having goals for others that they don't have for themselves  
experiencing periodic, sudden "burnout." (Gilbert, 1992, p. 67)

Signs of underfunctioning include:

asking for advice when what is needed is to think things out independently  
getting others to help when help really isn't needed  
acting irresponsibly  
listening more than talking  
floating without goals much of the time  
setting goals but not following through with them  
becoming frequently mentally or physically ill  
tending to become addicted to substances. (pp. 67-68)

The fifth of the relational patterns is the *emotional triangling pattern*. Triangles are considered by Kerr and Bowen (1988) to be the essential building blocks of any relational system. As such, emotional triangles are a natural part of every relational system. Because some level of chronic anxiety is present in all relationships and no one is able to remain totally differentiated one hundred percent of the time, the two-person relationship is inherently unstable. "This instability increases because of a lack of differentiation of the partners, the degree of chronic anxiety in the surrounding emotional atmosphere, and the absence of well-defined leadership" (Friedman, 2007, p. 209). The function of triangling is to dissipate the stress between the two-person relationship by involving a third person or issue into the relationship. Signs of triangling include:

talking against others rather than to them  
gossiping or talking about others who are not present  
having an affair  
taking a morbid interest in other people's problems  
thinking more about anyone else than the other or oneself (Gilbert, 1992, p. 75).

*Triangulation Process*

The process of differentiation is basically the process of detriangling. This requires one to "be in adequate emotional contact with the other two and able to remain emotionally separate from them" (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 145). Thus, the goal is not to get out of the triangle, which is what the distancing and cutoff patterns attempt to do, but rather to manage one's own emotions, anxiety and behaviors within the context of the triangle. As Kerr and Bowen indicate, "the tension in a two-person relationship will resolve *automatically* when contained within a three-person system, one of whom is emotionally detached" (p. 145) and stays in contact with the other two. In order to effectively manage one's self in triangles, one needs to communicate calmly and openly with others in the triangle while not taking on the anxiety of the others, thus maintaining a nonanxious presence (Gilbert, 1992). As such, one needs to relent from engaging in ineffective relational patterns of one's past. "The more differentiated a self, the more a person can be an individual while in *emotional contact with the group*" (Kerr and Bowen, p. 94), which is what one needs to do to be effectively engaged in the leadership process particularly if one is the leader. Because "triangles in personal families can perpetuate triangles in work systems" (Friedman, 1985, p. 212), the most important triangle for people to examine is the one between themselves and their two parents or caregivers. It is through examining family-of-origin relationships that one gains insight into current triangling patterns one is engaged in at work as well as other significant relationships.

It is important to recognize that differentiation is a process not a goal, a direction rather than a state of being; "it is a lifetime project with no one ever getting more than seventy percent there (Friedman, 2007, p. 183). It is an emotional process requiring clear-headedness and a nonanxious presence in the midst of others' anxiety. Poorly differentiated people will tend to sabotage any effort or attempt toward differentiation. This occurs at work as well as at home and in the community. Thus, to avoid being thrown off course by the resistance, Friedman suggests that those who wish to lead must learn to stay in touch with the reactive group without taking their issues so seriously. This means being clear about one's purpose and taking responsibility for one's own emotional being. This means being grounded in one's own sense of self rather than focused on others. This means "recognizing how profoundly anxiety and emotional reactivity influence one's own thoughts, feelings, and actions and the thoughts, feelings, and actions of others" (Kerr and

Bowen, 1988, p. 337). As such, the process of differentiation involves increasing one's own level of emotional maturity. Given that most people create the living present on reconstructions of the past (Stacey, 2003) and that most people's emotional maturity level changes little since leaving their childhood home, Gilbert (1992) maintains that

it is most useful to understand the emotional system that exists among the members of one's extended family, by relating to it and by teaching oneself to get out of the emotional patterns reverberating in it. One gains understanding of the self to the degree that one understands the family system that one grew up in. (p. 120)

This means gaining an awareness of the emotional relationship patterns and sources of anxiety from one's earliest relationships, which includes not only one's family-of-origin but also extended family, church, school and peer group relationships of early childhood, and how they carry over to and influence current relationships. To be well-differentiated means not being emotionally organized by one's past (Short, 1991). This awareness is fundamental to leader-development as well as self-development. According to Short (1998) the ability to develop an awareness of the source of one's reactivity is "the most empowering interpersonal skill" (p. 125) for leaders at all levels and in all contexts. When we leave our childhood home we replicate "some version of the family relationship patterns with others" (Kerr and Bowen, p. 97). Thus, first and foremost, differentiation is about "becoming a better version of oneself in one's family-of-origin relationships" (Gilbert, p. 125). Being well-differentiated then allows one to be a more effective leader in other contexts particularly during times of high anxiety. As a result, differentiation becomes an important leader-development process in that others typically can't rise above the maturity level of their leader (Friedman). The better differentiated the leader the more likely others will demonstrate a higher level of maturity. Friedman suggests that by modifying the emotional processes the well-differentiated leader increases the maturity level of the group. He goes on to suggest that for leaders to be successful they must focus on their own integrity and the nature of their presence rather than on motivating or changing others. As such, leader-development is first and foremost self-development.

### *Interpersonal Skills*

The transition from an undifferentiated state to a differentiated state is made possible through the use of four interpersonal skills and is a lifelong process of balancing "the reciprocal external and internal processes of self-definition and self-regulation" (Friedman, 2007, p. 183). The first skill is the ability to *separate inside from outside*, that is, "to observe the internal states that drive your response to the outside" (Short, 1998, p. 25). To do this one must be able to make clear distinctions between what is outside and what is inside. These are important distinctions to be able to make as "sensory inputs can trigger reactions in the intellectual, feeling, and emotional systems simultaneously. Feeling and emotional responses can even occur without conscious awareness of the stimulus that triggers them" (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 60) making it extremely difficult to separate inside from outside. As described by Miller and Miller (1997) the outside consists of external data: sensory inputs, context (time, place, social setting) and output from equipment and print material. The inside is composed of one's thoughts (beliefs, interpretations, expectations, judgments), feelings and wants (desires, intentions, goals). To successfully separate inside from outside, it is necessary to be aware of and clear about one's own internal states and to own them as just that and not as facts about others. Not only is it important to be able to distinguish the inside from the outside, it is also important to be able to distinguish the internal components from each other. As Friedman notes, "dialogue is only possible when we can learn to distinguish feelings from opinions" (p. 133). Given that dialogue is an important group communication process, the ability to separate inside from outside is critical to the differentiated leadership process. With awareness of one's own feelings comes responsibility for them and thus the ability to process them with greater facility. From this "comes the calm necessary to think one's way through a crisis" (Gilbert, 1992, p. 138). Kerr and Bowen contend that the characteristic best describing "the differences in levels of differentiation between people is *the degree to which they are able to distinguish between the feeling process and the intellectual process*" (p. 97).

The second skill needed for the transition from an undifferentiated state to a differentiated state is the ability to *separate self from other*. This relates to the struggle between the forces of individuality and togetherness that exist in every relationship and, as Friedman (2007) contends, "is a far more basic issue for compatibility [*sic*] in

relationships than any other (social science) difference" (p. 172). The *individuality force* moves one toward "building a self, with its beliefs, goals, and boundaries that are distinct from those of other people" (Gilbert, 1992, p. 13). It is concerned with the non-negotiable boundaries of personal relationships. The *togetherness force* moves one toward others, "for attachment, for affiliation, and for approval" (p. 13). With the increase in anxiety the togetherness pressure increases, as such people "are more intent on getting others to do things their way" (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 122) and "the less constructive their responses to others tend to be" (p. 124). It is the togetherness force that works against the differentiated leadership process in that it resists the leader's attempts to be a well-differentiated individual (Friedman). The more one can manage the individuality and togetherness forces the easier it is to separate self from other. To do so means communicating one's internal state and inquiring as to the other's internal state (Short, 1991). It requires suspending judgments about the other's internal state, soliciting and listening to the other's description of their internal state, and describing one's internal state to the other as information about oneself rather than about the other. Paradoxically, "if one wants to work on a relationship [togetherness], one must work on oneself. If one wants to work on individuality, it is best done in relationship to others" (Gilbert, 1992, p. 169).

The third skill required to make the transition to differentiation is the ability to *separate one's projections of others from others*. Short (1991) points out that people tend to attribute characteristics and internal states to others based on prior experience with someone else. For example, issues with one's boss may have more to do with authority figures and power issues from one's early life than with the current situation. Leaders, regardless of context, can expect to be the objects of others' projections. Hence, they must not only be able to separate their own projections of others from others, but separate other's projections of them. To facilitate this process, Short identifies three practices for separating one's projections of others from others: (a) use emotional intensity as a cue, (b) identify what triggered the anxious feelings, and (c) trace the reaction back to the original experience.

The final skill involves the capacity to *separate one's self from the past*. This means being able to disassociate from the emotional relational patterns formed in one's

early life that are no longer relevant. It also means interacting with others from a here-and-now perspective rather than on historical interactions with them. Understanding how one's past influences the present allows for full experience of the here-and-now. To separate self from the past Short (1991) again recommends using intensity as a cue. "If  $2+2=10$ , you'd better trace it out" (p. 38). He also suggests (a) understanding how early experiences are influencing the here-and-now, (b) investigating family of origin and early relationships, and (d) owning one's internal states associated with one's early experiences. Short emphasizes owning the experiences rather than explaining or rationalizing them away. It is through the separation of self from the past that one becomes able to attend in the here-and-now to what is going on within self, between self and one other, and among self and the group (Short, 1998).

### *Conclusion*

Short (1998) suggests that the goal of differentiation is not to change but to become aware of relational patterns and the anxiety that drives self, others and groups. The goal is to become aware of one's here-and-now experience so that one has the capacity to be one's own self while still belonging to, or being able to relate to, a larger group. When applied to leadership, differentiation allows for people to step forward and use "the nature of their presence that is the source of their real strength" (Friedman, 2007, p. 231), thus promoting the autonomy, independence and individuality necessary for keeping a group functioning well together. As Friedman concludes, "in order to imagine the unimaginable, people must be able to separate themselves from surrounding emotional processes before they can even begin to see (or hear) things differently" (p. 31). This takes a well-differentiated person, leader, to initiate the process. Once done, the stuck system starts to come unstuck.

While the principles and concepts of differentiation can be taught, differentiated leadership itself cannot. However, it can be learned through action (Gilbert, 1992). According to Short (1998), the primary action that leads to differentiated leadership is observation, that is, observation of self in the context of nuclear family, extended family-of-origin and in friendship and workplace relationships. The goal is not to change one's behavior, but rather to learn about one's self in the context of others. In other words, it is

about understanding of the dynamics of relationships and the role one plays in them rather than being about psychoanalyzing one's self or others. Though change is not the goal, it will occur through observation, questioning, and the resultant learning. The following questions arise from the notions and concepts of differentiation discussed above and serve as a starting point for reflection and exploration and thus a basis for learning and action related to the development of differentiated leadership:

1. What was the ebb and flow of your internal state: thoughts, feelings, and wants in your day-to-day life, your here-and-now experience of living?
2. What is the nature of your *presence* at work, at home, in your family-of-origin?
3. When/where in your life do you experience the greatest emotional intensity and subsequent reactivity?
4. In what ways are you emotionally organized by your past?
5. What do you need to do to become a better version of yourself in your family-of-origin?

These questions provide a framework for making observations of one's own emotional patterns and behaviors. The focus of these questions is on one's self not on others. It is through observing one's own emotional patterns and behaviors in the context of others that leads to enhancing one's ability to become more differentiated. Differentiation is always about self and always an ongoing process. The differentiated leadership process is a journey not a destination.

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