

Movement Building Leadership: Avoiding the Failure of Nerve

Think Systemically

At the heart of Friedman's model (based on M. Bowen Family Systems Theory) is an "systems approach" to leadership. By applying a family systems theory to leadership, Friedman argues that leaders lead in a systemic environment in which the elements (i.e. individuals, their relationships, vision, causes, values, etc.) are all interrelated and interconnected. Friedman often uses "systemic examples" to clarify the nature of leadership (e.g. organic/living systems, the immune system, the brain-body connection, the evolutionary process, etc.).

To understand our role as leaders, Friedman argues that the **leader must think systemically, embracing the interconnectedness of the whole network of relationships in an organization** (institution/movement/church, etc.) In other words, the functioning of any member, including the leader, plays a significant role in the functioning of the other members of the organization.

Thus, when viewed through a systems lens, leadership is a functioning position that is present in all relational systems. From this perspective, how that position is filled - - how the "leader" is present in the system - - is the crucial issue. *A system will either benefit or suffer from the way the leader is present because the functioning of the leader (or leaders) affects the emotional processes inherent in all relational systems (see next point).*

Using a biblical/biological metaphor, Friedman says that "wherever the head goes, the body will follow." If the leader (i.e., head) of an organization clearly defines the direction the leader is going AND if the leader stays connected to the members of the organization, the members will follow the leader's direction. This cause-effect happening will be automatic.

Indeed, the leader "systemic power" affects the organization/movement at a far more fundamental level than what is often appreciated. *The leader's presence (i.e. poise, bearing, confidence, energy, etc.) leaves "a spirit, essence, affect" that permeates the organization.*

This has implications for **leadership development**. Often, leadership training puts the primary emphasis on others (disciples, employees, followers, team members) as objects to be motivated. The best leadership training, according to Friedman, begins and focuses on the systemic effects of the presence, or self, of the leader.

Acknowledge the Role of Emotional Processes within the System

Friedman's theory of leadership relies heavily on the cumulative effect of emotional processes--how emotionally mature people are, their emotional reaction to anxiety and one another, and how individuals/groups manage or self-regulated their emotions.

Because an organization is a living, interrelated system, leaders and followers are intimately connected through an emotional field they have created – with positive or negative effects on the health of the organization. According to Friedman, followers do not have to observe a leader directly, or even be in some direct “chain of command” hierarchy, in order to be affected, positively or negatively, by the leader’s positive or negative functioning..

The idea of the ‘emotional processes’ or of an ‘emotional field’ as central to the leadership environment never occurred to me. In my study of battlefield leadership at Gettysburg (see ifproperlyled.org), I’m surprised I never connected how the leaders’ non-anxious presence on the battlefield affected the emotional condition of the troops he commanded.

Realize that Emotional Processes (Relationship Systems) Tend Toward Imaginative Gridlock

Friedman argues that relationship systems often become “imaginatively gridlock”-- conceptually stuck. He writes:

When any relationship system is imaginatively gridlocked, it cannot get free simply through more thinking about the problem. Conceptually stuck systems cannot become unstuck simply by trying harder. For a fundamental reorientation to occur, that spirit of adventure which optimizes serendipity and which enables new perceptions beyond the control of our thinking processes must happen first. This is equally true regarding families, institutions, whole nations, and entire civilizations.

Friedman illustrates this point by describing the "quantum leap" forward that occurred around the year 1500 as enterprising leaders moved Western civilization out of "imaginative gridlock" through their self-differentiated leadership. Primarily telling the story of Renaissance explorers, he describes how adventurous leaders like Columbus broke the imaginative and emotional barriers of Western Civilization and led it to new ways of thinking.

To Friedman, imaginatively gridlocked relationship systems will not change on their own based purely on the new or additional learning they receive. “There must be a shift in the emotional processes of that institution. Imagination and indeed even curiosity are at root emotional, not cognitive, phenomena. 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.”

Friedman describes relational systems that are imaginatively gridlocked as characterized by three interlocking realities:

1. an unending treadmill of trying harder
2. a continual search for new answers to old questions rather than an effort to reframe the questions themselves, and

3. an either/or, black or white, all-or-nothing ways of thinking that leads to false dichotomies.

In one of my favorite paragraphs, Friedman concludes that:

The great lesson here is for all imaginatively gridlocked systems is that the acceptance and even cherishing of uncertainty is critical to keeping the human mind from voyaging into the delusion of omniscience. The willingness to encounter serendipity is the best antidote we have for the arrogance of thinking we know. Exposing oneself to chance is often the only way to provide the kind of mind-jarring experience of novelty that can make us realize that what we thought was reality was only the mirror of our minds.

One [blogger](#) I read recently suggested the following questions to encourage imaginative freedom:

- Are you imaginatively gridlocked? Are you stuck in patterns that you can't seem to get out of? Is your business, organization, or family growing and excelling?
- Is the pace of your life, organization, or family such that you can't get appropriate separation?
- Is your organization able to utilize the imaginative power of its leaders to bring their best to each new day?
- Are you willing to separate from your organization enough to see things clearly?

Columbus and the other explorers possessed, according to Friedman, a willingness to encounter the unexpected, to imagine the unimaginable. When they did so, they set Europe free from their emotionally-bounded mind-sets which had kept them in the dark ages for a thousand years. Using the Renaissance explorers as models, he argues that leaders of any social system must possess the following characteristics:

- a capacity to get outside the emotional climate of the day
- a willingness to be exposed, that is, vulnerable
- persistence in the face of resistance and downright rejection
- stamina in the face of sabotage along the way
- willingness to be called "headstrong" and "ruthless"

Friedman uses Columbus and the Renaissance explorers as examples of what he means by "well-differentiated leadership" and its ability to break the imaginative gridlock within organizations/movements. But before he does that, he also addresses "chronic anxiety" -- the second characteristic common to the emotional fields within which leaders must lead.

Realize that Emotional Processes (Relationship Systems) Tend Toward Chronic Anxiety

Friedman argues that relationship systems can tend toward chronic, systemic anxiety— in families, institutions, and society— and that anxiety not only hinders the development of the system but also operates at the same time to derail leadership. The presence of

chronic anxiety affects all systemic relationships, and all of life itself. Chronic anxiety is not what we think of as being overtly "anxious" about something. It is the "emotional and physical reactivity of all life" generated by individual and group reactions to disturbances in the balance of a relationship system.

As I mentioned in my previous post on the Audacity of Leadership, Friedman describes five elements of chronic anxiety as:

- **Reactive**—the vicious cycle of intense emotional reactions of each member to events and to one another
- **Herders**—a process thru which the forces for togetherness triumph over the forces for individuality and move everyone to adapt to the least mature members
- **Blame displacers**—an emotional state in which members focus on forces that have victimized them rather than taking responsibility for their own being and destiny
- **Quick-fixers**—members have a low-threshold for pain and thus constantly seek symptom relief rather than fundamental change.
- **Lacking well-differentiated leaders**—a failure of nerve in leaders that both stems from and contributes to the first four characteristics.

One can recognize “chronic anxiety” by the **absence of playfulness**, which reflects both intimacy and the ability to maintain distance. Without it, organizations lose perspective, everything becomes dire, the repertoire of responses to problems are thin.

Peter Steinke (*Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times*) adds the following results of anxiety in individuals and in communities:

Anxiety affects human functioning by tightening thinking or restraining behavior. Look at what anxiety does to repress a person:

- *decreases our capacity to learn*
- *replaces curiosity with a demand for certainty*
- *stiffens our position over against another's*
- *interrupts concentration*
- *floods the nervous system, so that we cannot hear what is said without distortion or cannot respond with clarity*
- *simplifies ways of thinking (yes/no; either/or)*
- *prompts a desire for a quick fix*
- *arouses feelings of helplessness and self-doubt*
- *leads to an array of defensive behaviors*
- *diminishes flexibility in response to life's challenges*
- *creates imaginative gridlock (not being able to think of alternatives, options, or new perspectives)*

Beware of False Solutions

Before Friedman unpacks his notion of “well-differentiated leadership” as path to freedom from this “imaginative gridlock and chronic anxiety,” he criticizes the common generally accepted solutions to such organizational/institutional dysfunction:

- data: that data and technique are more vital to leadership than the capacity to be decisive
- empathy: that feeling for others helps them mature or become more responsible

Data and Technique

Friedman warns first about data junkyards and data junkies:

By living in a society where data has become an idol, we end up with too many leaders who are not such in the true sense of the office. Rather we merely have women and men who have amassed a lot of knowledge. Such acquisitions do not provide what human beings need. Instead leaders primarily ought to have confidence of self, vision, and wisdom. Since data is ever-changing, a leader who relies on knowledge as a foundation for her/his qualifications to lead is ever chasing a moving "carrot." Therefore, their focus is not on the people whom they lead; it is on constantly proving their qualifications. The people who need them the most are left "dangling in the data dust."

He argues that today’s anxiety-driven dash for “truth” leads to reductionist thinking, the reification of models, and an overbearing seriousness, all of which rigidify rather than free the imaginative capacity. Leaders are often caught up in this dash for data and thus base their confidence on how much data they have acquired--which in reality dooms them to feeling inadequate. According to Friedman, leaders and the led begin then to confuse information with expertise, know-how with wisdom, change with almost anything new and complexity with profundity. As T.S. Eliot once wrote: "Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?"

Furthermore, data-focused leaders never move their people or their causes forward. Consumed with data, they have no room for "the natural instincts of curiosity and adventure." Unwittingly, data dependence destroys imagination, creativity and the spirit of adventure, thus contributing to - causing - stagnation.

The orientation to data and technique has the following effect upon leadership:

- it overwhelms leaders
- it confuses them with contradictory results
- it emphasizes weakness rather than strength
- it de-selfs them by ignoring the variable of individuation (self-differentiation) in themselves and others.

Empathy

The second common response to imaginative gridlock and chronic anxiety is empathy. In Friedman's opinion, empathy (to feel in) is symptomatic of the herding/togetherness force characteristic of societal anxiety and is not to be encouraged in leaders. One of the central leadership roles is *increasing the maturity level of the people in the organization*. Friedman sees this as a payoff between empathy and responsibility.

An empathic perspective says, "Let's help people by reducing the stressors in their lives." Friedman believes this is the least preferred way of improving organizations. To him, the real payoff was in making people stronger through challenging their growth and maturity.

What increases self-differentiation and emotional maturity, is not empathy, but challenge. A focus on empathy is an adaptation toward weakness.

Focusing on responsibility is emphasizing strength. Leaders who develop greater clarity about what is happening in a system will always be more productive in the long run than just having empathy for the hurting people in the system and trying to rescue them. People grow through challenge and not by simply being made to feel better about their plight.

"Ultimately," Friedman argues, "societies, families, and organizations are able to evolve out of a state of regression not because their leaders 'feel' for or 'understand' their followers, but because their leaders are able, by their well-defined presence, to regulate the systemic anxiety in the relationship system they are leading and to inhibit the invasiveness of those factions which would preempt its agenda. After that, they can afford to be empathic."

Lead through Self-differentiation

The solution to imaginative gridlock and chronic anxiety in the organization, according to Friedman, is the presence of well-differentiation in the leader(s). In other words, leadership through self-differentiation.

"Self-differentiation is a term used to describe one whose emotional process is no longer ultimately dependent on anything other than themselves. They are able to live and function on their own without undue anxiety or over-dependence on others. They are self-sufficient. Their sense of worth is not dependent on external relationships, circumstances or occurrences." (Self-differentiation: An Essential Attitude for Healthy Leadership, Thomas F. Fischer, Number 345)

This does not mean self-differentiated leaders don't give a hoot about people. It means their self-worth does not rely on the opinions of others.

Self-differentiation in the leader simply refers to the capacity of a leader to define his or her own life's goals and values apart from surrounding pressures, to say "I" when others are demanding "you" and "we". It includes the capacity to maintain a (relatively) non-anxious presence in the midst of anxious systems, to take maximum responsibility for one's own destiny and emotional being.

Friedman describes it so:

"The basic concept of leadership through self-differentiation is this: If a leader will take primary responsibility for his or her own position as "head" and work to define his or her own goals and self, while staying in touch with the rest of the organism, there is more than a reasonable chance that the body will follow. This emphasis on a leader's self-differentiation is not to be confused with independence or some kind of selfish individuality. On the contrary, we are talking here about the ability of a leader to be a self while remaining a part of the system."

Peter Steinke's description is particularly helpful:

"Self-differentiation in emotional processes refers to the amount of self available to an individual, such as an individual's overall maturity, level of functioning, and the degree of responsibility for self. It is the capacity to choose a course of direction and to stay the course when reactive people want to reroute you. It is the ability to stay focused on your own functioning while being aware of others. Self-differentiation is the ability to stand up and be counted in matters of principle and belief and yet remain with family and community. It is the ability in anxious circumstances to regulate one's own reactivity by thinking. Differentiation is to take a position in the midst of emotional forces and still remain in touch with others." Healthy Congregations, pg. 103.

Of all people, followers of Christ should have the most reason to be healthily self-differentiated. Christians believe that their self-worth is based upon God's redemptive, faithful, eternal grace expressed most fully through Jesus Christ. Christians understand that their worth has already been determined on the cross. They are, in Henri Nouwen's terms, the beloved of God. Their identity, significance, worth is rooted in the unconditional affirmation of the Father.

Therefore, Christian leaders can focus their attention on the mission (Matthew 28:19-20) and not become overly anxious about the approval and affection of other people. Christian leaders do not lead because they need to be needed. They lead in faithful obedience to God's call. They serve God among a beloved people. Their service of others is sympathetic and compassionate, but not "empathic".

According to Friedman, the # 1 issue in leadership today is a failure of nerve to define oneself more clearly. The leader's self-differentiation, not empathy, will encourage self-differentiation in others. A major sign of being better differentiated is when the leader can be present in the midst of emotional turmoil and actively relate to key people while

calmly maintaining a sense of the leader's own direction. When the leader is properly "self-possessed," he or she can affect the whole system of relationships and help break the grip of chronic anxiety in the organization.

How do leaders become well-differentiated?

Systems thinking provides three basic steps which a leader must take to be an effective leader. The first is to take responsibility for her position as the head of the system. The second is self-differentiation, the definition her own goals and self. The third step to effective leadership is for the leader is to stay connected with the rest of the system. If the leader accomplishes the third step, staying in touch, she will not alienate the system members. The difficulty arises in accomplishing the last two steps simultaneously.

Friedman sums up the basic idea of leadership through self-differentiation as follows:

If a leader will take primary responsibility for his or her own position as "head" and work to define his or her own goals and self, while staying in touch with the rest of the organism, there is a more than reasonable chance that the body will follow. There may be initial resistance but, if the leader can stay in touch with the resisters, the body will usually go along.

Lawrence Matthews suggests the following qualities of leaders engaged in the process of self-differentiation: self-definition or clarification, self-regulation, connectedness and response to resistance or conflict.

Separate for Self-definition or Clarification.

To define self is to give expression to the thoughts, values and goals one holds dear. It includes taking stands. To use biblical language, it is self-revelation. It has both an internal and external dimension. You work on what you believe and you let others know where you stand. My responsibility as a leader is to get clear about what I think and believe and communicate those thoughts and beliefs in words and actions - - not to get others straight about what they should think and believe. The well-differentiated leader is always working on self.

And to focus upon clarifying and communicating one's own ideas and goals is an invitation for others to do the same. When a pastor is able to preach the sermon or a leader takes a stand that clearly and non-reactively expresses what the pastor or leader believes about the emotionally loaded issue facing the congregation/institution, the people are invited and challenged to clarify and express their beliefs - - and some will.

And when the resistance of those who are most reactive surfaces - - as it most probably will - -if the leader and other leaders are able to maintain that clarity of definition, the organization stands its best chance of actually responding to the situation in faithfulness and obedience. It might even act redemptively.

The leader also clarifies his/her position based on the mission and vision. "Here I stand. I can do no other." The more specific, the more transparent, the more unambiguous these positions; the more helpful it will be to the group. It is not a personality issue. It is not a challenge to the unity of the group. It is a declaration of personal conviction.

Generally, these positions of conviction create some anxiety in the group being led. The leader stretches some of the system's relationships. In an unhealthy system there is much fear, confusion, disease, and angst. Some may approach the leader to dissuade him/her from that position.

Related to this issue is the leaders' temptation to "overfunction." Friedman argues that "when someone is overfunctioning in a system, someone else is underfunctioning." Such reciprocity is characteristic of emotional systems. Overfunctioning is also where a lot of leaders get their stress. When the leader overfunctions, he or she unintentionally brings about learn helplessness. In other words, when the leader try to get others to be more responsible, he or she is actually taking on more responsibility. And Friedman argues that leaders must make themselves less responsibility so that underfunctioners will take more responsibility. He suggests, "Don't delegate responsibility, delegate anxiety by being less responsible." Then, hopefully, the underfunctioning members of the system will begin to feel anxious and respond by take responsibility for themselves.

Practice Self-regulation.

Friedman often referred to this as "non-anxious presence." I prefer language that keeps us focused upon the difficult and challenging process of regulating one's own anxiety.

Anxiety, as used here, encompasses the total human response to the perception of threat, real or imagined. It comes with human life. It may belong to all protoplasm. And yet basic to the process of self-differentiation is the task of consciously working at regulating one's anxiety. This includes acknowledging the anxiety and intentionally regulating one's reactivity to it. It is hard, daily work. It is never done in the sense of being finished. But the leader engaged in self-differentiation accepts the challenge. She/ he knows that change in the emotional process is facilitated by focusing upon the modification of one's own behavior rather than the functioning of others.

Leaders have to work at disconnecting their "hot buttons." A non-reactive presence in a system has a calming influence on the emotional processes in the system. In one of Friedman's favorite metaphors, he argues that such leaders can break, like an electrical transformer, the transmission of anxiety throughout the system.

Stay Connected.

Self-differentiating leaders work at self-regulation and self-definition while maintaining connection to their relational systems. They realize that they cannot affect an emotional system of which they are not a part. The key is being well-differentiated AND in touch

with your followers. The central dilemma for leaders is how do we get close and maintain self?

It is thus important for newly arrived leaders to take the time to become connected to their new system. It is especially important to maintain this connectedness when resistance is encountered because of the leader's self-differentiating behavior. At such times a leader is tempted to either give up or cut off. But if the leader persists, does not withdraw or quit and remains connected and on course, a system stands the best chance of dealing creatively with challenge.

An effective leader stays in touch, initiating conversations and opening the door for continuous discussion on issues important to the group. While the leader may or may not agree with positions the group expresses, the leader stays engaged with the group regularly listening to their concerns.

Expect Resistance.

Friedman referred to a leader's ability to maintain a posture of non-reactive persistence - - staying on course in the face of resistance - - as "the key to the kingdom." Although leaders may seem surprised and disappointed by the reactivity of others to what they consider their creative self-differentiated leadership efforts, resistance is actually systemic in nature. It comes with the territory. Leaders must be prepared for resistance and be ready to keep plugging away.

Self-differentiated leadership disturbs the homeostasis, the "balance", of an emotional system. The resistance is the "kickback" of the systemic forces themselves to this "loss of balance" - - even if the original condition was one of "stuckness." In contrast to the "rearrangement of symptoms" that often passes for change, systemic change includes resistance to the unfamiliar and therefore uncomfortable readjustment that is necessary to move to a new state of balance.

The resistance will most probably be experienced by leaders in one or both of its two major expressions: sabotage and/or seduction. Resistance as sabotage is perhaps most easily recognizable. Although the sabotage can take many forms, it is usually expressed through acts of either active or passive attempts to block the change or attack the perceived would be "changers," usually the leadership.

Resistance as seduction, although less easily recognized as resistance, may be the more deadly and effective form. It may even be experienced as support for the leader, when in reality it is an invitation for the leader not to stay the course. Inevitably, self-differentiated leaders will face conflict and sabotage. Rarely, does a group member plan intentionally about how one can sink the pastor's ship. It just happens. A healthy leader will not ignore it or avoid it, but look for a healthy way to address it.

This is extremely difficult requiring significant grace and humility to intentionally position oneself where one will hear challenge and criticism. It requires ample patience to clarify one's vision over and over again. But the rewards of a healthy, faithful, effective ministry are well worth it.

Above all, beware of peace-mongering

Friedman coined the phrase "peace-monger" to describe the destruction caused by spineless and people-pleasing leaders in their communities. The leader's failure of nerve reflects the epidemic in today's culture that favors false harmony and good feelings over progress and integrity. His words about peace-mongering are biting:

"In any type of institution whatsoever, when a self-directed, imaginative, energetic, or creative member is being consistently frustrated and sabotaged rather than encouraged and supported, what will turn out to be true one hundred percent of the time, regardless of whether the disrupters are supervisors, subordinates, or peers, is that the person at the very top of that institution is a peace-monger. By that I mean a highly anxious risk-avoider, someone who is more concerned with good feelings than with progress, someone whose life revolves around the axis of consensus, a "middler," someone who is so incapable of taking well-defined stands that his "disability" seems to be genetic, someone who functions as if she had been filleted of her backbone, someone who treats conflict or anxiety like mustard gas—one whiff, on goes the emotional gas mask, and he flits. Such leaders are often "nice," if not charming."

A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix, pg. 13-14

Summary

In summary, when the leadership position is filled by a leader (or leaders) who is moving forward in his/her own process of self-differentiation, any system stands the best chance of dealing creatively with - - rather than simply reacting to - - change and challenge. However, the presence of self-differentiated leadership offers "the best chance" of such a possibility happening, but it is not a guarantee that the system will respond instead of react.

The payoff of leadership through self-differentiation may not be what we think such a supposedly more insightful understanding of leadership ought to deliver - - success of the endeavor and approval for the leader. This understanding of leadership focuses upon the leader and not upon the outcome of the leader's efforts. Viewed through the emotional process lens of family systems theory, "leadership" is not about "them" or "success" but about self - - self-regulation, self-definition, self-differentiation. The payoff is self.

Addendum:

Avoid Emotional Triangles

I haven't quite figured out Friedman's point about emotional triangles, so I'll add it here as an addendum. He argues that relational systems are composed of triangles. Triangles are the basic building blocks of any system of people. Since two people have difficulty maintaining a one-to-one relationship for any period of time, especially when faced with a problem, that human dyad will automatically look around for a third person to include in the anxious situation in some way. Leaders often invite triangulation (allow themselves to be triangle in), which allows them to become the focus of the unresolved issues of the two other sides of the triangle (two persons or one person and his problem, etc.)

According to Friedman, the stress and eventual burnout of leaders has less to do with hard work and more to do with becoming "emotionally triangled."

(this article--compiled without references/footnotes/etc....not to be published just notes copied from various sources)