

## LEADERSHIP: VIEWED THROUGH A FAMILY SYSTEMS LENS

by Lawrence Matthews

There are multiple perspectives from which one can try to understand the concept of "leadership." When viewed through a family systems lens, I understand leadership as 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 themselves.

As Edwin Friedman applied Bowen Family Systems Theory to leadership, he focused upon Bowen's core concept of **self-differentiation**. As he spoke and wrote about leadership through self-differentiation, "through" was always the determinative word. His emphasis was upon the direct relationship between the leadership function of a person and her or his self-differentiation. He maintained that when the "L" position is occupied by a leader 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.

When leadership is understood in this way, the crucial question becomes: how does one do it - - be it? To phrase the question differently, if leadership is about "being," what are the qualities of leaders engaged in the process of self-differentiation?

Friedman taught that there are at least four dimensions to leadership understood in this way: self-regulation, self-definition, connectedness and response to resistance. I label them "dimensions" because it seems to me that they are inextricably bound to one another. To examine them individually may be practically helpful, but in doing so we should not forget that each one is simply one dimension of a unified process being lived out by unique human beings. These are not "three tips for would-be leaders" or "three simple steps to more effective parenting or pastoring." Rather they are some of the more visible signs of the presence of the life-long process of growing "self" from the inside, as contrasted to the pseudo-self acquired from others.

(1) **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. I've never met a non-anxious person. In fact, the term is in direct contradiction to a basic tenet of Bowen Theory; the theory is about anxiety! It assumes that the basic human issue is anxiety. And

this is meant to include much more than the anxiety of which we are consciously aware. Anxiety, as used in family systems theory, 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.

One of the most significant contributions of family systems theory is its awareness of the multi-generational nature of much of our anxiety. Not only does our anxiety come with the territory of being human, it comes in unique ways as part of the territory of being human in our particular family systems. This can be a source of despair as we find ourselves living out the reactive patterns of past generations, but it can also be a source of growth and change as we consciously face and rework those patterns. Therapy and healing in a family systems model involve such reworking and the freedom discovered through this process enables one to better regulate reactivity in the present.

I have learned from my personal experience, my experience with parents I have coached and pastors and other leaders who participate in our workshops that the people who are able to become less anxious and less reactive are the ones who are involved in learning more about their own family of origin.

Michael Kerr writes: Learning enough about the multi-generational emotional history of one's family to change the way one thinks about the family and about oneself probably contributes more to the effort to 'grow up' than anything else a person can do. <sup>1</sup>

Bowen Theory offers practical help in this endeavor by providing a lens through which one is able to view relationship systems. The concept of the emotional triangle enables one to actually observe the emotional process which - - although always present and ultimately determinative - - is in most situations outside of conscious awareness. To "see" the impact of others upon oneself, the impact one has on others and the impact others have on each other equips leaders with a valuable resource for self-regulation. This is why understanding the theory is so essential, and why the ongoing Leadership In Ministry Workshops are the main focus of my present ministry. A person does not learn to think this way by reading a book or attending a seminar. Learning to "think process" and not focus only upon content is a multi-year process itself.

(2) **Self-definition.** Self-regulation is the internal dimension of this process;

self-definition is the external dimension. Here the focus shifts to the communication of self to other selves, and I include all the various forms communication can and will take. 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. I have come to understand this as one of my major tasks as a pastor. My responsibility 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.

To focus upon clarifying and communicating one's own ideas and goals is an invitation for others to do the same. When a parent takes a stand that clearly expresses his or her true thoughts and values, other family members are challenged to function differently. When a pastor is able to preach the sermon that clearly and non-reactively expresses what the pastor believes about the emotionally loaded issue facing the congregation, 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 pastor and other leaders are able to maintain that clarity of definition, the congregation stands its best chance of actually responding to the situation in faithfulness and obedience. It might even act redemptively.

Coercion is a basic ethical issue for leaders. It is my experience that leaders who are working at their own self-definition are better able to resist the temptation to will others into compliance with their ideas and goals. Whatever is meant by the phrase "the will of God," it does not mean that God violates the freedom and responsibility that is part and parcel of our God-created humanity. When willing others to "be" or "do" is the posture of a leader, trust in self-definition has been abandoned and a path of coercion that can only lead to a conflict of wills has been chosen.

(3) **Connectedness.** 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. It is 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.

(4) **Response to 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. 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. After I went public with my decision to retire from pastoral ministry, I encountered both forms of resistance from the same couple. On one occasion the husband angrily attacked me for thoughtlessly "forsaking the congregation," while at another time the wife tearfully told me that the congregation just could not get along without my wonderful leadership.

### **A Concluding Word of Caution:**

Experience has not changed my belief that when the leadership ("L") 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, because I am increasingly aware that such creative responses do not come easily or quickly, I am learning to add a word of caution. They may not even come at all. 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**.

1. Kerr, Michael E. & Bowen, Murray: Family Evaluation . W. W. Norton & Co., 1988, p. 309.

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