

Resilient Leadership

A New Way of... ▲ Seeing ▲ Thinking ▲ Leading

Balancing Fundamental Needs

Within the context of all relationships, individuals are driven to meet two fundamental needs: The need to be close (togetherness) and the need to be separate (individuality). How well we strike the right balance between these two needs ultimately determines the health and vitality of our relationships. Likewise, the health of any organization is related to how well its members achieve a proper balance between individuality and togetherness. Too much separateness can lead to parts of the organization operating as isolated “silos.” Too much togetherness can lead to “group think” and a diminished capacity for risk-taking and creative problem solving.

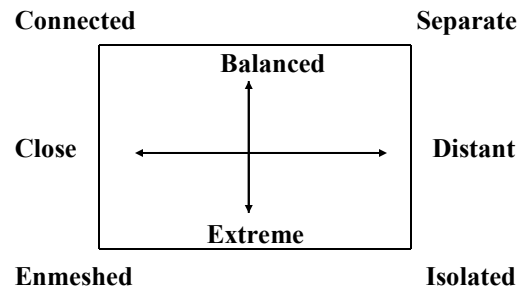
RE-CAP

Respect for a proper balance between being “close” and remaining “separate” is crucial for the functioning of any organism or organization.

How well the leader strikes a balance between the two fundamental forces of togetherness and individuality plays a decisive role in the health of the entire organization.

The Role of the Leader

Because of the position that the leader occupies within the relationship system of an organization, how well that leader strikes a balance between the two fundamental forces of togetherness and individuality will play a decisive role in the functioning of the entire organization. As the graphic illustrates, the ancient adage that “virtue is to be found in the middle” holds true here as well. Good organizational health—just like good personal health—is the result of finding the middle course between being close without becoming enmeshed, all the while staying separate without becoming isolated. Relationship systems tend to follow their leader in this regard, as in so many other aspects of organizational life.



By monitoring him/her self, a leader can develop greater awareness, not only of how s/he tends personally to manage the balance, but also how his or her way of operating influences the organization as a whole.

Know Yourself

Most of us are unaware of how much our culture has conditioned us to consider as “natural” a certain physical distance we keep when in conversation

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with a colleague, until we encounter someone from a culture with different “rules” about such things. Similarly, we inherit unawares from the families in which we are raised a great many unconscious “rules” about what constitutes a healthy balance along the closeness-distance axis.

Recognizing the presence of those “rules” within ourselves can offer significant insight into many aspects of how we function as leaders. Under stressful situations many families huddle together to the point of becoming enmeshed, so entangled in one another’s feelings that there is little room left for individual thinking or perspective-taking. Leaders who from their infancy have absorbed this way of operating will tend to “circle the wagons” when the organization is under siege rather than continuing to move westward. They unwittingly inhibit creative thinking and risk-taking by others in the organization. Those whose families under stress favored “cut-offs” will, when anxious, fall back on default settings that tend to isolation and withdrawal, rather than productive engagement.

Leaders cannot escape the influence they exert on those around them—indeed, on the entire organization they lead. But they can become more alert to their own ways of balancing the fundamental needs of individuality and togetherness, thus better equipping themselves to make needed adjustments when their organization is undergoing high-anxiety due to change or other situational stressors.

Tips for Leaders

In times of high anxiety, each of us tends to exaggerate innate tendencies towards fusion or cut-offs. Reactivity is always characterized by movement toward extreme positions. Resilient Leaders will want to monitor themselves and those they lead for signs that a healthy balance is being lost, and take corrective action as soon as possible.

- Stay connected to those who disagree with you, and especially those who act in an adversarial fashion. The wise advice about holding your friends close, but your enemies closer, is true!
- Be mindful of which direction you favor under stress (fusion or cut-offs), and develop proactive ways to counter those tendencies in yourself.
- Pay attention to when and how others in your organization tend toward one or the other extreme when anxious, and be quick to intervene (e.g., by drawing them out of themselves if they tend to isolate, or encouraging them to step back and take some time apart before fueling others’ anxieties if they tend to become enmeshed in the reactivity of the group).
- Recognize that it’s easy for anyone to remain calm by withdrawing from an anxious milieu. But that is a luxury leaders cannot afford. Stay connected as a calming presence, and others will follow your lead.

