



Resilient Leadership

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

Step-Down Transformers

The image of an electrical transformer can be an extremely helpful tool in thinking about moderating the levels of anxiety and reactivity within an organization, and how to go about calming the work system to produce a more harmonious and efficient climate for productive work. Emotional process swirls around every organization, as surely as electrical energy makes the power grid hum. In the electrical grid, transformers allow an alternating voltage to be stepped up or stepped down, depending on the need of the system at each point in the transmission process. In a work situation, however, the need is for step-down transformers, since high levels of anxiety inevitably produce reactive functioning that impedes clear thinking.

RE-CAP

A leader's ability to function as a step-down transformer of the anxiety resident within the system is crucial for the healthy functioning of the entire organization.

Every person in the organization can be a step-up or step-down transformer, but none are as important or as influential as the leader.

The Role of the Leader

Every single person within an organization has the potential of being a step-up or a step-down transformer of the emotional energy within the system. But the higher up the organizational hierarchy a person is, the greater will that person's influence be on the entire system. Whether a leader is a step-up or a step-down transformer of the anxiety resident within the system has enormous impact on others' functioning. This is true for every level of leadership within any organization.

In his masterful book, Leadership on the Line, Harvard's Ron Heifetz speaks of the need for a leader on occasion to "turn up the heat" within an organization as part of an effort to drive for

adaptive change. This should always be a very thoughtful, strategic move, and ought not to be confused with leaders who are step-up transformers and who, without realizing it, communicate their own anxiety and reactivity to others in the organization.

The notion of being a "less anxious presence" does not suggest that leaders are worry-free and never anxious. That is an unrealistic and unattainable burden to place on any leader. But it does suggest the importance of the leader being *relatively less anxious* than others in the organization. A substantial body of research into emotional intelligence has demonstrated that emotions are contagious, and Resilient Leadership applies this insight by stressing

Each of us carries into life from our family history certain levels of innate anxiety and reactivity

Resilient Leadership

the importance of leaders managing their own reactive responses within any situation where emotional intensity is escalating the overall anxiety level in the organization.

Tips for Leaders

Each of us carries into life from our family history certain levels of innate anxiety and reactivity. One's current family situation is always relevant to the emotional state that a leader carries into the workplace. But these factors are not deterministic, and Resilient Leadership identifies a number of skillful means that leaders can use to manage their own reactivity:

- Stay focused on long-term goals.
- Keep the system (and yourself) loose through humor.
- Listen to your body; practice deep breathing, prayer or meditation as a way of calming your body-mind.
- Cultivate a personal support system outside of work.
- Focus on maintaining your functioning in a "normal" manner, and don't let an anxiety-producing situation become the axis around which your world revolves.
- Watch any tendency in yourself to withdraw (cut-off) or to become overly entangled emotionally (fused).
- Stay responsible for your own functioning, and let others be responsible for theirs.

Coaching the System

Good leaders know how to maximize the potential of those in their organization. Traditional management approaches often suggest boosting productivity through a variety of skill training initiatives, such as conflict management or team building. Resilient Leadership envisions the role of the leader quite differently. Without disparaging the value of a leader developing a workforce skilled in various competencies, Resilient Leadership insists that a more fundamental responsibility of the leader is to keep a primary focus on his or her own functioning.

Recognizing how crucial it is to be a step-down transformer, a Resilient Leader will also want to coach others in the organization on the importance of managing their own anxiety, being non-reactive when stressed, and communicating to their co-workers a non-anxious calm, even under fire. When a leader is actively pursuing this goal for him/herself, efforts to coach others will be not only more credible but more effective as well.

At yet another level, shrewd leaders will want to recognize and promote into higher leadership roles those who already demonstrate a less reactive way of operating. On-the-job coaching will certainly help many workers to operate from a less-anxious posture, but certain individuals arrive in the workforce already knowing how to be a step-down transformer as a result of their family history. These individuals hold greater potential as effective leaders and should be particularly valued by the organization.

