

LEAD ON

LEADING IN ANXIOUS TIMES

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You wake up with a throbbing headache, a sore throat and limbs that feel unbearably heavy; your diagnosis is that you have a virus. Automatically, you begin to make a hundred micro adaptations to your day, and to every key decision on your plate marked: 'urgent'. Two questions arise: how do I recover? Who gave me the virus in the first place?

The problem in leadership is that when our teams catch a 'virus' that threatens to send our decision making into oblivion, we are unlikely to notice, at least until it's too late. The 'virus' we know as anxiety, not merely causes us to lose clarity in our own decision making, but its contagiousness and virulence causes whole teams to not merely plummet in the quality of their decision making but fall off a cliff edge.

The contagion of anxiety is a spectrum, impossible to eradicate entirely but always present. In its least it is the barest hint that the group is unsettled and its highest is full blown panic, spiraling blame and ultimately acrimonious resignations, sackings or dramatic exits.

ANXIETY IN A TEAM IS LIKE CATCHING THE FLU

What is anxiety and how is it contagious? There are many definitions, but my preferred is that it is a feeling of intense discomfort that comes from a real or perceived threat which leads one to believe that you cannot succeed or cope.

Post Genesis 3 we are fearful beings, highly attuned to identifying danger. So, when those around us sniff a threat in the air, like skittish sheep, our own sense of impending doom is triggered, and even a minimally cohesive group will pool their collective effort to work together to respond.

For that to happen an anxious group must agree about the threat, and they must be largely unanimous about the perceived level of danger they face. Such agreement creates what one might call an intense 'togetherness' that can be mobilised for great cooperation for either good or folly. It is this 'togetherness' that takes a small number of church members annoyed at a variety of disparate or even contradictory issues and unites them in a single voice that leads to a pastor's dismissal, or leads a team of usually clear headed and risk-taking individuals to form a leadership team that refuses to appoint a youth worker when the need is great and the finance available.

So what is the remedy? Especially in a time when most would agree that we live in a period of heightened anxiety, where leaders operate in an environment where every available path feels like one is walking on eggshells.

The frustrating thing about viruses is that no matter how bad you feel, the best solutions are always slow: take more rest, fluid and paracetamol. Managing organisational anxiety is similar.



Family Systems Theory, developed by Dr Murray Bowen based on his observations of clients in high states of anxiety, has a novel approach to teams that are struggling to function healthily.

Family Systems Theory argues that behaviour in teams stems from a complex interplay of relationships and requires those interplays to be identified in order to find a lasting solution. This is distinct from a more reductionist linear approach that we tend to use.

To support a team from a Family Systems Theory perspective is to assume that there is no quick fix but that a few well chosen, targeted actions will be effective to nurse your team back to health. Although a leader cannot simply pluck anxiety from the group like a splinter from a finger, they do have the power, by their response, to either increase the group's anxiety or ratchet it down. Let me briefly introduce you to three tools in the leader's medicine bag according to Family Systems Theory.

1. OBSERVE THE SYMPTOMS

Much like tiredness and headaches are symptoms that, if acted on early, could avert more serious ailments, the first leadership tool is observe the early signs of escalating anxiety within your team.

Anxious groups have a tendency to lose the ability to perceive nuances and instead see everything as either black or white. For example, it's when you notice that the collective mood of your team to the new employee is that their arrival is either the salvation of the entire organisation or their incompetence is nothing short of the death knell of the department.

The reality is that very few things are wholly good or wholly bad; even the most disappointing and disruptive turn of events provides opportunities that could yield future benefit. Anxious teams are quick to catastrophise

and that alarmist thinking can either be lowered or raised in intensity by the leader's actions.

Edwin Freedman applied Family Systems Theory from the counselling sphere to leadership decision making. One of his most notable phrases was: the most anxious person in the room is the most powerful person in the room. Freedman was articulating a tendency for teams to be most influenced by the decision that, in the short term, is the least uncomfortable.

So when a person in the decision making group makes clear that their distress can only be alleviated by doing or not doing a certain thing, the power typically shifts in favour of that individual. This is particularly true in Christian contexts where there is often an expectation that disagreement or disappointment, under any circumstance, is unacceptable. The result of this bias to placate the highly anxious, is that many Christian organisations drift into decline not because they have succumbed to theological error, but because they allowed their ability to make hard decisions atrophy.

2. REINTRODUCE PLAYFULNESS

The second symptom to notice is a loss of playfulness or humour in a group; this might seem an unusual symptom to look for but it is absolutely crucial. The concept of playfulness within an organisation is the idea that healthy groups enjoy being with each other and so smiles, laughter and appropriate banter are markers that a group is relaxed and therefore more likely to be less reactive and so perform better.

Playfulness and laughter are not the antithesis of focus and professionalism, rather teams that function in the highest stakes situations where failure has the highest potential for serious consequences are often those for whom humour in the face of adversity is essential; ask anyone in the armed forces or in the emergency services.



Loss of playfulness is hard to spot because anxious situations arise from an impending threat and seriousness is the most natural response of any group. However, the sophistication of human emotions means that we have a capacity to shed tears of grief at the passing of a loved one and yet in an instant gurgled with laughter at a shared amusing anecdote about the deceased. Black and white thinking assumes that solemn situations can only be approached with seriousness, when in fact laughter, playfulness and banter can relieve the buildup of stress and enable everyone concerned to summon additional strength to persevere.

3. MANAGE YOURSELF MORE THAN OTHERS

When struggling with a difficult team or personality we tend to assume the problem lies with others and so we attempt to change the problematic individuals. Family Systems Theory assumes that in a complex interconnected system, if you change one factor you will influence, even in a small way, the whole system. Therefore, the easiest person to change is yourself.

The unique power of leaders, like an electrical transformer, is the ability to increase or decrease the voltage or intensity of anxiety within a team. So a Family Systems Theory approach to organisational anxiety is primarily to manage their own reactivity.

There's no easy remedy here, just as when feeling under the weather one has to deliberately regulate one's effort. What this might look like is: when a leader is preparing to go into an anxious and reactive team meeting, they make space to acknowledge their own anxiety, identifying what real or perceived deficit within themselves leads them to doubt they can achieve a healthy outcome.

Once that key element has been identified, a healthy leader will then seek to apply the gospel to themselves. For example, a leader might remind themselves that through the indwelling of the Spirit, God goes with them into the meeting, helping and strengthening them (Ephesians 3:16). Similarly, a leader facing criticism might remind themselves that their value lies not on the approval of others but on the opinion of God himself, and the cross is a testament to His unfailing love for us (Romans 5:8).

Such intentional, prayerful preparation prior to engaging with an anxiety saturated gathering, means that a gospel refreshed leader can enter a den of lions without becoming one themselves; they can apologise without defensive self-justification, and most importantly, they can make hard but necessary

decisions that might provoke opposition; while at the same time lowering the collective anxiety of the whole group.

There is little that is revolutionary about this approach, it is as unglamorous as bed rest and fluids for a cold, but this Family Systems Theory approach adds a layer of perception to this otherwise unexotic remedy.

Within the framework of Family Systems Theory, if a leader who is a key element amidst a sea of other interconnected elements, changes their posture from being reactive to being more considered and balanced, all the elements will in some sense shift away from their reactive default, and the collective level of anxiety within the team will fall. The key is not to eradicate anxiety from a team: this is not possible, but rather lower it to a level that enables the group to make better decisions. It is this focus upon consistency in quality decision making that will be the chief determinant of the organisation's long-term health.

REFLECT ON THESE QUESTIONS

- Where have you experienced anxiety within a team or a group? What did that anxiety look like?
- Where have you observed the phenomenon of the most anxious person in the team being the most powerful? What was the result?
- What strategies could you put in place to be less reactive when going into highly anxious gatherings?

