

Anxious Church Anxious People

How to Lead Change in
an Age of Anxiety



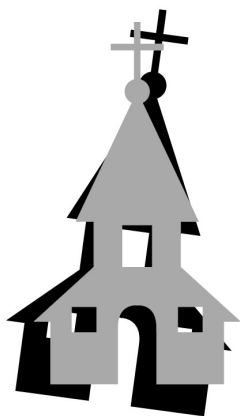
JACK SHITAMA

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JACK SHITAMA

Charis Works

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Introduction



If you are a church leader, clergy or lay, this book is for you. If you have a vision for the local church but can't get it done, look no further than this book. If you have tried various initiatives only to be met with resistance and anxiety, then you will recognize the examples that I offer. If you lead a congregation that has experienced a decades-long decline, then you know that their anxiety is focused on dwindling attendance, financial resources and relevance.

What I share is based on Edwin Friedman's seminal book, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue*. I first encountered it in 1991 while in seminary. It immediately changed my approach as a leader. It has enabled me to lead change in a variety of settings over the last 26 years.

I started teaching this to other leaders in 2002. I found that people had a hard time understanding the main concepts. People said when they tried to read *Generation to Generation* that it was "dense." It is. The concepts are deep. They apply to families, churches and organizations, but how they work is not easily grasped. I wrote this book to make Friedman's approach to leadership more accessible and practical. I explain the concepts in ways that people without a psychology degree can understand, by using examples to help you think about how the principles work in the real world.

When you complete this book, you will understand the process that keeps churches anxious and stuck, how leadership through self-differentiation gets churches unstuck and how you can develop as one who can lead through self-differentiation.

We start off with an examination of the “age of anxiety.” Then I lay out the four core concepts that will persist throughout this book about leadership through self-differentiation and the characteristics of an anxious church. This provides the context to teach you how to recognize and deal with the kind of anxiety that makes effective, lasting change nearly impossible.

The good news is that leading change, even in an anxious church, IS possible. The key is learning how to manage your own anxiety. This is not a quick fix. My own experience is that it is a life’s work. But it is worth the effort. If you are up for it, you are likely to find that not only will you become a person who can lead change, you will be a better family member and better able to cope with stress. Not a bad deal.

If you’re willing to make that journey, then let’s get started.

You can access a FREE Companion Course to go deeper into the material presented in this book at:

www.christian-leaders.com/anxiouschurchbook.

Chapter 1

An Age of Anxiety



An Anxious Society

The key to leading change is the ability to be a non-anxious presence. This is even more important in the church, where tradition and change are often at odds. This is especially true in an age of anxiety.

I don't mean anxiety in the clinical sense. I mean the inability to deal with uncertainty and the desire to control inputs and outcomes that is driven by a fear of failure. In Matthew 6, Jesus says, "Do not worry." The Greek word for "worry" in the text is best translated as "anxiety." And Jesus equates anxiety as a sign of little faith. The most troubling thing that I see in churches is Christians who say they trust in God, yet who fear the future. Rather than acting as the leaven of hope in an anxious culture, we Christians have allowed the age of anxiety to overtake the church.

I have been a camp director for 18 years. Since the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, I have seen parents and grandparents become more anxious about sending their kids to overnight camp. We don't allow cell phones, and the kids don't have time to call home. So, for six days and five nights, parents have to trust us to care for their kids. This is hard to do for many parents who are used to constant communication with their kids. We've had parents

tell us they would keep their teenage children home from camp unless we changed our “no cell phone” policy, and others have even contacted us to make sure we were aware of the weather in the area. Even though their children were being cared for, it was too hard for many parents to let go of that control.

In *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix*, Edwin Friedman contends there are two indicators of what he calls a chronically anxious society: we choose safety over adventure, and we blame others for our problems.

We Choose Safety over Adventure

Safety, of course, is not a bad thing. We’ve had some great advances in the last several decades. Seat belt use, anti-lock brakes and air bags have made car travel significantly safer. Helmet use has reduced injuries from bicycling, skateboarding, skiing and water skiing. Computerization has made the commercial airplane one of the safest forms of travel. The age-adjusted death rate in America dropped 15.98% in the first decade of this century, mainly due to public health prevention efforts like vaccinations, auto safety, tobacco education, disease prevention and maternal/infant health improvement. Safety is a good thing, but it’s important to not let the desire for safety morph into being overly fearful.

We have become a society that is afraid of everything. How does this affect leaders? We end up with leaders who want to play it safe. We have created a society where we punish those who take risks. Our anxiety and our desire for safety make us afraid to fail and afraid of the consequences should we take a leap of faith. Seth Godin once wrote that anxiety is experiencing failure in advance.¹ When we are a people who are constantly experiencing failure before it happens, we seldom take the kinds of risks that will move us forward or find solutions to our biggest problems.

We Blame Others for Our Problems

In an age of anxiety, we not only seek safety over adventure, but we also have a hard time taking responsibility for our situation. Rather than choosing how we will respond to the challenges in life, we blame others. Here are some examples. I will try to make everybody angry.

- We blame China or Mexico, or the American companies that move factories overseas, for our country's economic problems
- We blame terrorists for making us feel unsafe
- We blame the police for making us feel unsafe
- We blame the proliferation of guns for making us feel unsafe
- We blame government intrusion on the ability to arm ourselves for making us feel unsafe
- We blame big government for intruding in our lives
- We blame the lack of government intervention for keeping us economically oppressed
- We blame our elected officials for not getting anything done
- We blame the school system when our kids don't learn
- We blame parents when our students don't learn
- We blame liberals for promoting moral decay
- We blame conservatives for sustaining a white-dominated culture

Need I go on?

We are living in a country of victims where people are looking for someone to blame for their situation. I realize not

everybody is this way, but the political rhetoric today resonates more with those who feel victimized than with people willing to take responsibility for their own condition.

What can we do about this? We can take responsibility for our own position by working toward self-differentiation. Self-differentiation is central to the family systems approach to leadership, as explained in Edwin Friedman's book *Generation to Generation*. It is defined as taking responsibility for one's own goals and values amidst surrounding togetherness pressures.² We'll unpack this in greater detail throughout this book, as well as how best to apply it to church leadership. For now, it's important to understand that family systems theory teaches that the most significant factor in how someone fares under hostile conditions is their own response. Self-differentiation is the key to that response. This book will not only help you to understand what self-differentiation is, but it will also teach you how to apply it in your family, church or organization. It will help you to be an effective leader.

These days can feel like the conditions are hostile to try to raise a family or make an organization or church thrive. A job loss is a hostile condition. Racism and sexism are hostile conditions. Discrimination of any kind is a hostile condition. We may have no control over many of the causes or manifestations of these conditions, but we can control how we respond -- blaming is a manifestation of anxiety. Instead of taking responsibility for ourselves, we blame others. When we do that, we've made it nearly impossible for us to change our situation for the better. However, when we take responsibility for our own condition, we have a chance.

My father was born in Seattle, Washington, in 1921. He was 21 years old when President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, which authorized the Secretary of War to declare certain areas of the west coast of the United States as military zones. That order enabled the relocation of

about 120,000 persons of Japanese ancestry to internment camps in the interior west. Over 70,000 of the evacuees were American citizens, including my father and his four sisters.

My father and his family ended up at Minidoka Concentration Camp near Twin Falls, Idaho. He and other young men were sent out to surrounding potato farms to work on the harvest at below market labor rates. He managed an all-Nisei (second generation Japanese-American), 17-piece swing band. On weekends they would play at weddings and high school dances, where people hurled racial epithets, but enjoyed dancing to the music.

When the potato harvest ended and everyone went back to Minidoka, my father went to Salt Lake City. It's a bit of a mystery as to how this happened, but, needless to say, security was not great, because nobody came after him.

He found a New Deal program where he learned to weld. A man advised him to go east, where he would be safe from further internment. He went to Chicago and got a job with the Pullman Car Company, which was manufacturing tanks as part of the war effort. He was fired when it was discovered that he was Japanese-American.

Here's the point. My father had every right to blame FDR, and America in general, for his condition. He had nothing to do with Pearl Harbor and certainly did not deserve to be taken from his home to a camp in Idaho. But blame would have done him no good. It would make him a victim, but it would not fundamentally change his condition. Instead, he did what he could to survive. It did not involve seeking safety. It required adventure, risk and a willingness to fail. But, in his mind, this was far better than accepting things the way they were. When he had the opportunity to enlist in the U.S. Army, he did. He saw it as a way to prove his loyalty as an American, as well as a way to improve his life.

He used to tell us a story about his trip to Camp Blanding, Florida, for basic training. The bus he was on stopped somewhere in the Deep South. When he went to the restroom he encountered two signs: "White" and "Colored." He went toward the colored bathroom.

A white man stopped him and asked, "Where are you going?" He replied, "To the bathroom."

The man said, "You're not colored, you're white."

Everything he had experienced in the last several years told him he was not white. But this was the Jim Crow South, and the rules were different. My father used to finish this story by saying, "No matter how bad we had it, we never had it as bad as black people."

Which leads me to a more familiar example of taking responsibility for one's own condition, as well as being a self-differentiated leader: Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. He did not focus his attention on blaming white people. He certainly called out racism for what it was, but his message was one of love and hope. He led by sharing what he believed and asked others to join in. That is, he self-defined. He did not condemn his oppressors, but he showed the willingness to stay engaged through peaceful means.

Here are some of his self-defining statements:³

"I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character."

"I have decided to stick to love...Hate is too great a burden to bear."

"As my sufferings mounted I soon realized that there were two ways in which I could respond to my situation -- either to react with bitterness or seek to transform the suffering into a creative force. I decided to follow the latter course."

Note the tone of Dr. King's statements. Non-anxious, but passionate. Pointed, but not blaming. He was anything but a victim.

Back to the focus of this chapter. We live in an age of anxiety. Who will seek adventure over safety? Who is willing to take responsibility for themselves, instead of playing the victim? I believe the future of the church depends on people who can do this. It depends on people who can be self-differentiated in an anxious society and an anxious church.

Chapter 2

Leadership through Self-Differentiation



Self-differentiation is the key to leadership in any family, church or organization, especially one that is chronically anxious. Friedman calls this leadership through self-differentiation:

“The basic concept of leadership through self-differentiation is this. If a leader will take primary responsibility for 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. There may be initial resistance but, if the leader can stay in touch with the resisters, the body will usually go along.”¹

Leadership through self-differentiation is not about convincing others to agree with you. It is about who you are and what you believe. It is spending enough time in prayer and discernment to have a sense for where God wants you to lead. It's not even about being right; it's about what is best for the system, whether it's your family, your church, company or organization. And what's best for the system is for you to know who you are, what you believe and to express this in healthy ways. That's leadership. From this point forward, unless I note otherwise, when I say leadership, I mean leadership through self-differentiation.

There are two components to leadership: self-definition and emotional connection.

Vision is a big part of self-definition, as I'll cover in Chapter 5. However, self-definition is not just about the big picture. As a leader, it involves everything you do. Self-defining in a healthy way helps to reduce the overall anxiety in a system in a way that encourages others to self-define. As we'll see later in this chapter, in anxious systems self-defining will make things worse before they get better.

Self-defining is important because, as a leader, people look to you for direction. This is not just vision -- it's about every decision, every matter of substance. People want to know what you think. Perhaps an example will help.

Christmas will fall on a Sunday 14 times in the 21st century. The intervals between these occurrences are five, six or 11 years. Every time this happens, it raises the issue in many churches as to how to handle it. It's rather ironic, since it is Jesus' birthday, so going to church would make sense. Unless, of course, we acknowledge that Christmas is mostly a secular holiday, even for Christians. So imagine a conversation at a Worship Committee meeting. Whether you are the pastor, chairperson or member, you are a leader in the congregation. Leadership requires that you self-define. Here are some examples:

"I believe it's important to honor the sacred nature of the day and stick with our two regular services."

"I don't think it makes sense to have two services when attendance will be low in both. I think we should go with a combined service."

"I think we should cancel church altogether and let people spend time with their families. I feel that the Christmas Eve service is where we celebrate Christmas anyway."

Who's correct? That is a matter of opinion. And opinions matter. But, from a family systems perspective, the objective is not to determine who is right and who is wrong. It is to express what you believe, while giving others the freedom to express their own beliefs. To do this, one must maintain emotional connection. Friedman calls this "staying in touch."

Self-defining without emotional connection is not leadership; it is narcissism. If you just say what you believe but cut yourself off emotionally from the rest of the group, they will stop sharing their opinions. If you've ever worked for a leader like this, you understand. People fear speaking up. They will usually wait for the leader to express her opinion, then chime in with agreement. This is especially true in corporate situations where the leader also has power over the followers' employment status. In any system, a narcissistic leader will not promote self-definition among others, but will stifle it.

Emotional connection values others as persons, even if they disagree (or are disagreeable). It is showing care and concern for the other, apart from the issue at hand. It is NOT kowtowing to the will of others. It IS respecting that the other is a SELF and honoring that self, without letting them define you. I find it helpful to think of emotional connection in terms of pastoral care. This is not just the work of the pastor. As Christians, we are all called to care for others. Healthy emotional connection is caring without overfunctioning. It's connecting to others with care and concern without being defined by them.

A wise pastor once told me, "People don't care how much you know, until they know how much you care." Leadership combines self-definition with genuine care. They can be seen as two separate functions because one is focused on a common mission and the other focuses on the individual. They can be seen as related because you can't be effective with just one.

The Non-Anxious Presence

An effective leader is a non-anxious presence.

A non-anxious, non-presence is someone who is not anxious, but is also not emotionally connected, not emotionally present. It's easy to be non-anxious when you don't care or don't have an emotional stake. A non-anxious, non-presence can be someone who is narcissistic. They self-define, but they couldn't care less about others. Or they can be highly adaptive in the negative sense. They can't self-define, so they just go along with others to protect themselves from having to self-define.

An anxious presence is someone who can't help but let their anxiety spew into the system. They care too much. They are so emotionally connected that they overfunction anxiously in others' emotional space. They react in anxious ways when others self-define. It can be with anger, blaming or passive aggressive behavior, but they will find an outlet for their anxiety and it won't be healthy.

It's important to point out that most of us don't function naturally in well-differentiated ways. Murray Bowen, the pioneer in family systems theory, said that self-differentiation is on a continuum with 0% being the worst and 100% showing complete differentiation of self. Bowen believed most of us function on the poorly differentiated end of scale. He, along with Friedman, believed we can improve our ability to become more self-differentiated. In family systems theory, this is called doing your own work. It is about understanding the emotional processes in your own family of origin. It is about reworking the family relationships that are your greatest sources of anxiety. We'll cover this more fully in Chapter 4. But even if you do your own work, Bowen believed 70% to be the upper limit for most people. This means that even the most emotionally healthy among us are only behaving in self-differentiated ways about 70% of the time.

Most people tend to function more toward one direction or the other. Some can be pretty easygoing, but tend to avoid having to self-define. Others are anxious people because they care so much. In either case, they are functioning on the lower end of the differentiation continuum.

There are two important points to understanding a non-anxious presence. The first is that being a non-anxious presence doesn't mean you don't feel anxiety. A non-anxious presence means you contain your own anxiety while staying emotionally connected. It is recognizing the anxiety and then being intentional to express yourself in a non-anxious way. This is called self-regulation, which I will explain more fully in Chapter 8.

This leads to the second point. The higher the emotional stakes, the more anxiety you are likely to feel. If there is nothing emotionally at stake, it's easy to be non-anxious. So when an acquaintance at work tells you she has a serious illness, you can show care and concern and not be anxious. When it's your parent or child, it's a lot harder. I've found the emotional stakes to be highest for me in my own family. This is true for most people. Next is the ministry I lead. Any place you are a leader, you will have higher emotional stakes than where you are not. Third is my church. I attend a church where I used to be the pastor. I was invited back after we had been gone for a few years. I'm very careful not to interfere with the pastor and, as such, do not have a great amount of involvement in the church, outside of playing in the band. Church often ranks second for Christians for a number of reasons -- the church is where they work out their own salvation, they may be functioning as a leader and the church is a family system made up of family systems. This last point helps to understand why people so often displace anxiety from their own family of origin into the family system that is the church.

Here is an example of high emotional stakes:

My mother was born in Seattle, but lived in Hiroshima, Japan, from age 10 to 24, which included World War II. Though my older brother and sister had been to Japan, I had not. My mother decided she wanted to take her three children and their spouses on a personal pilgrimage. This would not only be my first visit to my country of heritage, it would be my first with my family. And, with my mom at age 93 and my father having passed away three years prior, it was now or never.

As it turned out, my daughter and her boyfriend happened to be doing some extended travel and their first leg went right through Japan at the same time as our visit. I asked her if she could join us for at least part of the time. She emailed me to let me know that she had changed their itinerary to include a one-week stopover in Japan so they could join us for a good part of our trip. I felt a bit of anxiety about this, because I realized I had not checked with my mom or my siblings.

One side note: When we were planning the trip, my brother invited my mom's two sisters, ages 91 and 89, respectively, to join us on our trip. One of the sisters called a few weeks later to say they'd love to join us. After the phone call, my mom said, "I don't want them to come with us. I just want to go with my children." Very self-defined.

Then she tried to triangle me. The definition of a triangle is that when two people get uncomfortable in their relationship, the focus is on the third (see the next chapter on triangles). In this case, my mom was uncomfortable with her sisters, so she focused on me. If I would have taken the bait, then all the discussion that should have taken place directly between my mom and her sisters would have gone through me. This not only would allow my mom to avoid having to deal with her sister, but I would end up feeling

the stress of the situation. Here's how the conversation went between my mom and me.

"Call my sisters and tell them I don't want them to come."

"I'm not calling them. They're your sisters."

"Then call your brother and tell him to uninvite my sisters."

"I'm not calling him. I'm fine with your sisters coming."

To her credit, my mom called her sister and extended the "uninvitation." They were fine with it.

Back to the trip.

My first challenge was to ask my mother if having my daughter along for part of the trip was OK. She said it was fine. When I reminded her that she had uninvited her sisters, she replied, "This is different. She's my granddaughter." Difference is in the eye of the beholder.

My next challenge was to check with my siblings. I emailed them to ask. My brother, the oldest, wrote back to say he was a little tossed up, but he would go with whatever mom wanted. My sister, the middle child, wrote back to say she, too, had mixed feelings. She noted that she loved my daughter and had recently spent some time with her when she was visiting the area where my daughter lives. But she had thought of the trip as being just my mom and her kids. She also didn't want the other grandchildren to feel left out. She asked if a few days would be reasonable compromise. I should point out that both of my siblings wrote using "I" statements, taking ownership of their own feelings. My own anxiety increased a notch.

Second side note: This email exchange took place while I was leading a retreat for church leaders with a heavy emphasis on family systems and leadership through self-differentiation. What kind of hypocrite would I be if I didn't handle this as a non-anxious presence? How could I self-de-

fine, yet stay connected? What should I do? Which emphasizes the points I am making. You WILL feel anxiety, and the higher the emotional stakes, the more anxiety you will feel. This is what surrounding togetherness pressures feel like. Even though my siblings self-defined, I was feeling the pressure internally. It was my problem, not theirs.

I did my best to self-define in this situation, but I also thought that what my siblings were thinking was not unreasonable. Being self-defined doesn't mean you don't listen. It just means you know what you want, believe, feel, and you are able to own it. So I chose to go with a compromise. My daughter would join us for three nights instead of six. I called my brother and we talked. He was OK. I emailed my sister knowing that she was out of pocket for a week and my daughter needed to solidify her plans. My sister eventually emailed back, saying she was fine with whatever we decided. She wrote, "Inclusion is best. Exclusion is not." As I reflected on this, I was proud of my family. We are not perfect. But we were able to handle this as non-anxious presences, controlling whatever anxiety we may feel, but expressing our feelings and staying connected.

Being a non-anxious presence is intentional. It requires being reflective enough that when you feel anxiety, you understand where it's coming from. This requires doing your own work.

Doing Your Own Work

If you want to become better differentiated, you must do your own work. There is no other way. This means you need to dig into your family of origin. Your family of origin is comprised of your nuclear and extended family. It's not just parents and siblings, but also grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins. If you can go back another generation or more, that's better. The further back you go, the more you will discover. Every family has its own set of unwritten

rules about how to do life. Whether it's raising children, handling money, dealing with conflict, spirituality, handling crises, ad infinitum -- there are certain ways to do it. It is like software or code that dictates how you respond to any given situation. And, absent of reflection or intentionality, you will react to each situation in the way that you are programmed.

A good example is how families handle holidays such as Christmas and Thanksgiving. Some families treat them as sacred, and everybody must be together. Others treat them as important, and everyone tries to get together, but if everyone's not there, it's no big deal. Some families don't even celebrate them. Some holidays are more important than others. In my wife's family, Christmas is a pretty big deal. Christmas is important in my family, but New Year's Day is my dad's birthday. So when he was alive, we most often spent Christmas with my in-laws and New Year's with my family.

The primary means for doing your own work is the genogram. A genogram is a family tree that also includes markings to illuminate the emotional dynamics present in the system. The final chapter of this book will describe how the genogram is used, along with other tools and resources, to help you understand how your family of origin influences your emotional functioning.

Doing your own work is especially important if you have a spouse. The software with which we have been programmed by our family of origin explains why couples have conflict. There are two different codes, and they aren't always compatible. A couple's life together depends on being able to recognize the software differences AND being able to work through them. The differences are most intense around money and raising children. But they crop up everywhere, down to whether the toilet paper hangs over or under the roll (the correct way is over, Google it). This doesn't mean

they have to choose one system's software over the other. In any given circumstance they can choose one, the other or another way altogether. The most important thing is that they recognize the differences and are intentional about what they decide, even in the midst of surrounding togetherness pressures.

The process of recognizing differences and working through them forces an awareness of your family's software. It also develops an ability to take an emotional stand with someone close to you who is not a part of your family of origin. This is a key to leadership through self-differentiation. To the extent you have difficulty doing this with a spouse, you will have difficulty doing this as a leader. It's also a clue that you have unresolved issues that have their roots in your own family.

Doing your own work means looking at your family of origin to crack the code. It's not just understanding the software, but also understanding from where it comes. Who were the dominant personalities? Where was the dysfunction? What patterns repeat from generation to generation? Do any skip a generation?

Why does this matter? It matters because your ability to function as a non-anxious presence everywhere is rooted in your own functioning in your family of origin. To the extent that you have difficulty self-differentiating, it comes from difficulty doing so in your family of origin. It's how you are programmed. This is not to blame anyone in the system. It's a reality. When you start to unpack it, you gain awareness of how you are programmed. Once you have the awareness, you can begin to rewrite the code.

When you are in an anxiety producing situation, a good question to ask is, "Where does this come from?" That is, where did you experience similar anxiety in your family of origin? What was the nature of the relationship? How can

you rework that relationship? The key understanding is that it is the residue from unworked out relationships that affect your ability to function as a non-anxious presence. An inability to self-differentiate in one or more relationships in your family of origin means that you have not worked it out. You have unresolved issues. You are likely to carry this into the other systems in which you function, making it harder to be a non-anxious presence. My own story illustrates this.

During childhood and as a young adult, I was rarely able to take an emotional stand with my mother. She was not dominating or cruel or even anxious. She was a strong personality. Whenever she said something, I complied. I had a normal enough childhood, so I didn't even recognize my adaptive behavior. How did this code work in my life? I was a conflict avoider. I did not know how to take an emotional stand, so I would stuff my emotions. Mostly, I learned to handle this, but every once in a while I would erupt like a volcano. As I looked back, I was just like my dad.

When I was 28, I heard the call to pastoral ministry. I did not grow up going to church, so I knew this would be hard for my mom to understand. But I also felt great conviction and peace about this. This gave me the resolve to tell her in a non-anxious way. After I called her, she responded with a steady stream of phone calls and letters where she kept asking me if I was sure about the decision. She mainly asked me about what I believed and whether I had considered the financial implications of the pastoral life. She didn't tell me I shouldn't do it, but it felt like intense surrounding togetherness pressure to me. Normally, I would have folded like a cheap lawn chair. But this was different. I felt compelled by God to move in this direction. My mom is a strong woman, but she's no match for God. So I was able to stay calm and firm. "Yes, this is what I feel called to do." I took an emotional stand. After a month, she called me to say that if I was sure about this, she and my dad would support my decision.

At the time, I wasn't actually doing my own work. It was a couple years later in seminary, when I first encountered family systems theory, that I started to realize that this was a turning point in my own emotional functioning. I was gaining a greater capacity to speak up for myself in a non-anxious way. The way I had functioned in the past was not my mom's fault. It was how I functioned in my own family of origin, especially in relation to my mother, and how I learned to respond. But by reworking how I was able to respond to my mom, I was better able to self-define in other situations in life.

Doing your own work, reworking relationships, is not about the others in your family of origin. It's about you. So you don't necessarily need another to be alive to rework the relationship. I know of one woman who realized that she had a lot of unresolved anger toward her deceased father. She wrote him a letter, then sat face to face with another person and role-played the interaction. She read the letter, imagining the other to be her father. The effect was clearly not on her father; it was on herself. Doing your own work is about what's inside of you. It's taking responsibility for who you are and how you function. It recognizes that there are other relationships that need reworking, but it doesn't blame the other.

How can you do this? For many, the most effective means is to see a counselor who has a background in the family systems approach and can help you do your own work. If that's not your thing, start by reading *Generation to Generation*. It's not an easy read, but it will help you dig deep into the details of how systems work, so you can better understand your family of origin and your own functioning in it. In either of these approaches, an essential element will be doing your own genogram. A genogram is like a family tree, but it focuses on the emotional nature of relationships within the system. There are many good resources in print and online

as to how to do a genogram. Be warned, this will require you to have as many conversations as possible with people in your family of origin and this can be anxiety producing in its own right. By doing this, you will be taking the first step toward reworking the unresolved relationships in your life. You can also attend workshops or take courses that will help you to do this. Consult the appendix for a list of resources. Many people have done their own work by taking the initiative to learn about family systems, to gain perspective about their family of origin from its own members and to rework the anxiety producing relationships in their lives. I am one of them.

The important thing is to do your own work. Nobody can do it for you. That's how you move forward.

It's Process NOT Content

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I find myself saying this often when working with church leaders, either individually or in groups. It is a family systems mantra that is critical to developing as a person and a leader.

Friedman describes it in a more oblique way: Nobody gets the problem they can handle. What is a problem for one family is no big deal to another. In one family, a kid can come home with all A's and a C on her report card, and she'll get grounded for the C. In another, she might come home with all C's and an A, and they are celebrating the success of an A. For the former, a C is a problem. For the latter, it's not. But the latter family will typically have something that IS a problem. For example, if the daughter doesn't make the varsity softball team in 10th grade, it might seem like the end of world.

In each problem situation, the process is similar, but the content is different. In these examples, the process is the anxiety and upset that occurs. The content is grades or sports. But the content could be anything. Nobody gets the problem they can handle, because it is our own reaction, our own software that makes it a problem in the first place.

A problem is different than a challenge. Life is about challenges, because life is hard. We often rise to the occasion and work our way through the challenge, which results in personal growth. A problem is a challenge that we are struggling to handle effectively. And that has more to do with us than the challenge. Maybe we feel ill-equipped and helpless. Are we really? Maybe we are angry at what has happened and act out in harmful ways. Does the acting out change things? Nobody gets the problem they can handle. Otherwise it wouldn't be a problem.

Back to process and content. A family systems view helps us to look at our interactions to understand what is going on in the system and with others. For example, in a church meeting, people can disagree in any number of ways. They can self-differentiate, using "I" statements in a non-anxious way. They can self-define, but not engage (narcissism). They can spew anxiety at everyone in sight. They can clam up and not take a stand at all, even if they disagree. Notice that I haven't named a topic or issue. That would be content, and content is irrelevant from a leadership standpoint. What's important is that the way people respond helps us to understand the processes at work in the system. And understanding these processes can help us to be most effective as a leader.

I've often been asked if self-differentiation means I don't want to listen to what others are saying. That couldn't be further from the truth. It's important to listen to what others say, because I might be wrong. If I am not listening, I am the one with the problem. But it's HOW they

are saying it (process) that's the issue more than WHAT they are saying (content). If I am self-differentiating and someone responds with lots of anxiety and blaming, then I am thinking two things. First, I am not the issue. She is displacing pain from another part of her life, and I happen to be the current target. Second, because I am not the issue and the content is just her excuse to vent, I am not likely to convince her to agree with me. We humans aren't easily swayed in our opinions. We are even more obstinate when our positions are not rational. My approach is more likely to be a non-anxious presence. To not get defensive, to not argue content, but to stay connected emotionally. How that's done will be explained in Chapter 8. For now, it's essential to understand the difference between process and content.

Someone else might make the same points in a self-defined, non-anxious way. We can have a conversation. Again, it's best for me to avoid being defensive and to continue to self-define. But I will engage in discussing the content, because the process that is occurring tells me that the other is expressing herself in a healthy way. I can work with that.

As we dig deeper into leadership through differentiation, learning to recognize process becomes a critical skill. It will help you become more aware of what is happening and enable you to develop a repertoire of responses that can move the system forward. Nowhere is understanding process more important than with emotional triangles. If self-differentiation is the key, then unlocking emotional triangles is the process that leads to a healthier, more effective family, church or organization. Let's look at that next.