

# The Inner Core of Leadership

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Some leaders seem cold and disconnected from those around them. Others are too close and dependent on their associates. Take the case of Rob, who is, I think, typical of many leaders trying to create change in their organizations. Rob was the CEO of an organization facing significant strategic, market, and operational issues. He decided that the company needed to make a major adjustment to its strategy. This meant that some parts of the organization, which had been central under the old strategy, would now have a different role.

Rob tried to explain the logic behind the changes, but the anxiety created in others by his new vision made him uncomfortable. He had a lot of difficulty listening openly to the fears and concerns of people in the organization. In addition, so many of these fears and concerns seemed unreasonable to him that he was able to dismiss them: "It's just resistance to change," he said. "People will get over it once they see that the changes are good for everyone." He became more and more distant and difficult to communicate with. He had less and less time for meetings. He was away more. He was difficult to reach. He even stopped returning phone calls from his vice presidents. He seemed cold and angry. Since he was unaware of the impact of this behavior, his organization filled with negative rumors and rapidly decreasing morale that he knew nothing about!

At the other extreme is Rhonda, who was also trying to implement some major changes in her organization. When anyone became upset or anxious, Rhonda would quickly back off and look for ways to calm things down. It didn't seem to matter what the issue was, or how important it was to Rhonda and her organization: Rhonda would put her priority in the background to deal with the other person's needs. Nothing much changed.

## The Belonging–Individuality Paradox

Both of these examples reflect deep-seated dilemmas we face as human beings. We want two things that seem to be mutually exclusive. On one hand we value our individuality, our ability to be self-defined, to find and walk our own path. On the other hand we value belonging, having others who care about us both for the intimacy and for the sense of community. Looked at from the flip side, we fear the isolation and loneliness that too much separation from others could bring, but at the same time we fear demands for conformity and feeling stifled by others' expectations that can come from close relationships. This contradiction, the paradox of individuality versus belonging, is a core challenge every leader faces.

### Individuality versus belonging is the core challenge.

Think of your relationships with others as a continuum. At one extreme is too much closeness—where the individual gets lost in others' needs and lives. Like Rhonda, such people have no sense of their own boundaries, their emotions and desires are just reactions to what others say and do. This is a state of *fusion*. At the other extreme is too much separation, where individuals have no awareness of others. Like Rob, they have no sense of what others think, feel,

or want and no curiosity or caring about them. Their actions take only their own needs into account, not those of others. This is a state of *disconnection*.

### **Fusion—Demanding Others Manage Your Anxiety**

People are in a fused relationship when their thoughts and feelings are in reaction to other people's thoughts and feelings. How they feel depends on what others say or do. The more fused leaders become with their followers, the more their awareness and experience is determined by those followers. Rhonda, for example, is fused with her staff—when one gets upset, she gets anxious; she grows more tentative in her actions and looks for ways to calm the employee. At that moment, the employee's needs seem to take precedence over her own but really what is happening, whether Rhonda is aware of it or not, is that she wants to get rid of her *own* anxiety and feel better.

Managers who are fused with their employees give them messages, implicit or explicit, about how they should behave for the manager to feel OK. In Rhonda's case, notice that it doesn't matter what the staff member is upset about. Perceiving someone who is upset, her anxiety quickly follows. She doesn't want to feel her own anxiety so she demands that others express only certain thoughts and feelings and not others. A leader who falls into this trap no longer knows what is going on in the followers or what impact the leader's behavior is having on them. If Rhonda wasn't fused with her subordinates, when one got upset she would notice it but not react to it. Her experience in that moment would not be determined by the other person. She would not take on responsibility for the employee's feelings. But because she is fused, she believes that her employees are responsible for her feelings and that she is responsible for theirs. So she will try to ensure that *they* feel things *she* can tolerate. One way to do this is to let them know what things are OK to express and what things they had better keep to themselves. The other thing she can do is to try to change herself so that they will have a different, nicer, or better experience. Either approach creates ineffective leadership, but the latter means that there really is no leadership at all.

Outstanding teams and organizations require leaders who have a vision of the team or organization at its best and are willing to push hard to accomplish it. This sometimes means stepping on toes, maybe even a knock down drag out fight. The best leaders I've seen are not people who constantly fret about ensuring everyone agrees with them. Not at all. They just want to know exactly where people stand and why so that they understand the situation and aren't causing unnecessary problems. Leaders need to be able to hear the misery they are causing people as they force them to change and not lose their own vision because of it. Leaders can't be fused with the people they lead or they will cave in to other people's emotions or avoid hearing altogether. To be hard-nosed leaders, however, some people go to the opposite extreme—disconnection.

### **Disconnection—A Different Kind of Reactivity**

Instead of fuzzy boundaries, the person who acts disconnected has boundaries that are too rigid, not allowing anything to pass in or out. Disconnection appears to be quite prevalent among senior managers in organizations and looks different from fusion in that the person is not likely to be emotionally hijacked and is not demanding that people express only certain

kinds of experience. Rather, the disconnected manager shows little interest in subordinates' experience. A leader like Rob gives the appearance that other people's experience is irrelevant to the business at hand. Such leaders tend to show no curiosity about the impact of their ideas or actions. They don't inquire into other people's thoughts, feelings, and wants. They're aware of each employee as an object, a role, or a means to an end but have no curiosity about what goes on inside of anyone else.

A disconnected response is as unconscious as a fused one. Leaders who are disconnected from their colleagues don't make demands on others to act in ways that make them feel OK. Instead, they enter and exit situations to control their anxiety. They avoid situations, interaction and people that might cause them to not feel OK.

In Western organizations disconnection tends to look more professional than fusion. I have even found some people equate disconnection with professionalism, contending that professional managers keep their distance and don't allow themselves to care about employees. This might work, even be effective, in bureaucratic systems but it is deadly in empowered organizations, where cooperation and partnership are required. There is already a tendency for subordinates to keep authorities in the dark about the effect they are having and about the stories people are making up about them. When the authorities are operating out of a disconnected state, the combination ensures that they will have little chance to give the kind of leadership outstanding organizations require. Disconnection is a kind of professionalism that organizations cannot afford.

### **Differentiation—Resolving the Paradox**

My research and consulting indicates that effective leadership requires balancing these extremes in a place that Murray Bowen called *self-differentiation*. When leaders are differentiated they are both separate from and connected to their followers. They have clear boundaries about their own thoughts and feelings separate from those of others. At the same time they are curious about others and care about what is going on in them. They are able to stay in connection with followers while not losing themselves. Leaders who are able to be self-differentiated can be clear about performance expectations and stay true to their vision while listening to and seeking to understand the fears and objections of the people who will have to carry out that vision. They are willing to listen until they understand and can demonstrate that understanding, but not have their agenda emotionally hijacked by others. Because of this they do not get anxious when other people express their fears and questions. They welcome it.

Self-differentiation is finding a place where belonging and individuality are not mutually exclusive, where a leader is both separate from the followers and connected to them at the same time. There are at least five elements to differentiated leadership (see box next page).

Differentiation is about having clear boundaries, about knowing the difference between the data you have and the stories you make up with it. It's about being separate from and connected to the people you work with at the same time. Differentiation is about being true to yourself and true to the relationship you have with others. It is about putting equal emphasis on "my" needs and "our" needs, whether "our" is two people, a group, or an organization. Differentiation means being totally aware of what your truth is—knowing what your thoughts and feelings are and what is really motivating your actions.

## Belonging and individuality are not mutually exclusive.

Obviously this is a lot easier said than done. As one of my friends says, differentiation is a razor wire balancing act that you never get completely right. Learning to be differentiated is a lifelong journey. It is a life path, “a way of being.” Almost everyone is able to be differentiated in some interactions. The less emotional baggage you have toward someone the easier it is to be differentiated with them. And everyone has relationships that involve a great deal of trouble in maintaining differentiation. Leaders need to be able to observe themselves, step back from interactions that push their buttons, and see what is really going on in themselves.

For example, to be able to exercise the kind of leadership his organization needed from him, Rob had to recognize his disconnection, to realize that he was avoiding people because interaction made him feel bad. In our work together Rob saw that his disconnection was causing more discomfort to the people he valued than the change in strategy he was pursuing. As Rob came to understand the logic of self-differentiation, of being separate and connected at the same time, he began a process of learning how to stay firm with his principles, values, and vision and not take on responsibility for the experiences people created from that. At the same time he realized he needed to hear what fantasies were being created so he could influence them, make them more realistic, stop wildly inaccurate speculations, and ensure that key people knew they were, in his perception, key people. This was not easy, but it was essential – and as he recognized how essential it was, he found the inner strength to keep his anxiety from stopping him from listening. And things changed a great deal. And Rob became the kind of leader that people want to follow.

### Five Elements of Differentiated Leadership

#### **Self-Awareness**

A differentiated leader knows, first of all, what her experience is. She is aware of the choices she has and the choices she is making. Awareness is the basis of differentiation.

#### **Clear Boundaries**

A leader is acting in a differentiated way when he is clear about his scope of authority, how much authority he is willing to delegate to others, what decisions he has made and expects to be implemented and what decisions he is making and seeks others' input. He acts in a differentiated way when he makes his position about this clear to others.

#### **Curiosity About Others' Experience**

A differentiated leader openly seeks to understand the experience others are having and listens dispassionately and openly to them. She wants to know the impact she is having on others - not necessarily to change her mind but so she will know what is really going on.

#### **Descriptive of Own Experience**

A differentiated leader can describe his experience to others simply and descriptively, fully aware that it is only one experience and no more valid or invalid than anyone else's experience.

#### **Self-Directed**

A differentiated leader's actions are not motivated primarily by anxiety or other reactive emotions. She allows herself to be informed by emotion, to understand the message the feeling is sending her, but not to be overwhelmed or controlled by emotion or unconscious motivations.