

Leaders, anxiety, and change

Select excerpts from:

Derek W. Anderson and Jaco J. Hamman, *The Essence of Leadership: Maintaining Emotional Independence in Situations Requiring Change* (Routledge, 2024)

“A leader’s management of their own anxiety and the anxiety in a system has direct implications for their effectiveness in bringing change... As such, leadership is poorly defined as a cognitive-rational, economic, charismatic, democratic, data-based, or expert-driven “How to ...” skill. Rather, anxiety’s flow and management greatly determine the likelihood of systemic transformation.”

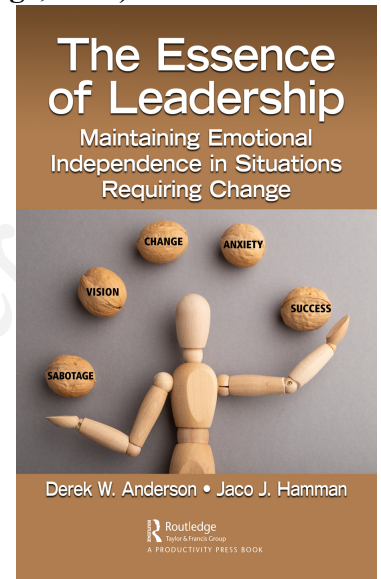
“Essential leadership holds a paradox: one must lead oneself before one can lead others. This is not a problem to be fixed, but rather a possibility to embrace.”

“Leadership is mastering an emotional and relational process within a system while seeking to bring change according to clearly defined goals and ethical principles. Leadership relies on the leader’s self as well as the leader’s ability to engage their system. Simply put, a leader is someone who invests in persons, communities, and processes to deliver an ethical and needed change.”

“Who then is the leader who can see the emotional process, remain less anxious, and initiate change while remaining responsive to systemic reactions? ... [Edwin] Friedman, a seasoned leadership consultant, identifies self-definition and self-differentiation as the first steps toward effective leadership.... Friedman defines self-differentiation as “the capacity ... to define [one’s] life’s goals and values apart from surrounding togetherness pressures; to say “I” when others are demanding “you” or “we.””

“A succinct definition of self-differentiation is the ability to feel when others want you to think and to think when others want you to feel... The differentiated leader can say: “This is who I am, what I believe, what I stand for, and what I will do or will not do in a given situation.”

“Self-differentiation is a challenge for all who do not accept the counterintuitive wisdom of the emotional process in contemporary corporate culture. In a corporate world where leadership revolves around titles and degrees, past positions and experience, data, egos, compensation, and prestige, self-differentiation rarely makes the list of leadership attributes.”



Measuring one's ability to manage anxiety

- A leader's unconscious reactivity to anxiety can be measured.
- "Imagine the life and leadership of a person who is principle-oriented and goal-directed, who self-directs their attention with confident assertiveness and self-regulation. And imagine the life and leadership of a person who needs to be loved by others and thus avoids conflict and keeps porous boundaries, who is vulnerable to the opinions of others or becomes rigid or rebellious when challenged. Under whose leadership would you rather serve? Which leader would you rather be?" (From: *The Essence of Leadership*)
- "Excellent leaders are not necessarily the ones scoring in the 85–95 range, though those leaders are very likely to be excellent. Rather, excellence in leadership is best understood as constantly doing the work needed to move higher on the scale, experiencing anxiety at a lower level than others in the system, and broadening one's repertoire to be responsive to a system in need of change." (From: *The Essence of Leadership*)

As you approach the scale:

- "Read through the scale once. Since more detail is provided for the higher levels, adjust accordingly as the level of differentiation declines.
- Imagine a leader you admire and plot them on the differentiation scale by looking carefully at the traits described. Repeat the exercise by taking a leader you view as ineffective and also plot them on the scale.
- Now you are familiar with two different levels of self-differentiation, take an honest assessment of your leadership. Plot yourself on the scale, mindful of any defensive reactivity the exercise awakens in you. Do not be surprised if you discover your level is lower than you anticipated.
- The self-differentiation scale is self-evident. A leader who is at level 50 fundamentally leads differently compared to a leader higher or lower on the scale. Remember, the scale is not determined by one's level of education, experience, or even accolades or compensation. A poorly differentiated leader... can reach high levels of office and be effective at some aspects of leadership. Leadership, however, demands much more than doing one or two things well." (From: *The Essence of Leadership*)

The QR code will take you to practical guidance as you empower your self-differentiation.

The scale was first drafted by Michael E. Kerr & Murray Bowen, Bowen, Murray, and Michael E. Kerr. *Family Evaluation*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1988: 97–107. Here it is in adapted and expanded from: <http://www.fullyhuman.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/Scale-of-differentiation-updated-2012-02-13.pdf>



	Murray Bowen's Self-differentiation Scale (revised)
100	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Hypothetical/ideal human?
85-95	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Very well differentiated. ▪ Principle-oriented and goal-directed. ▪ Inner-directed, internal locus of control, self-sufficient, self-regulating, assertive. ▪ Low anxiety; Less anxious; Not likely to be emotionally reactive. ▪ Not dogmatic or rigid in thinking & action. ▪ Realistic expectations of self & others (including limitations). ▪ Secure in silence and values time in solitude. ▪ Thought & action not affected by praise or criticism. ▪ Welcomes and values honest feedback. ▪ Tolerance of intense feelings; Has well-developed emotional skills and literacy. ▪ Not preoccupied with their place in the hierarchy. ▪ Well-developed spirituality (not necessarily religious); Inner peace; Solitude. ▪ Not overly responsible for others; No micro-managing. ▪ Free to enjoy relationships; Does not have a "need" for others; others do not feel used. ▪ Respects and values differences; Listens with an open mind and without reactivity. ▪ Embraces change; Can discard old beliefs in favor of new ones. ▪ Welcoming and warm, not non-adversarial or prone to engage in polarized debates. ▪ Adapts in stressful situations without developing stress but will avoid such situations where there is a choice. ▪ Excellent personal & professional boundaries. ▪ States often: "This is who I am, what I believe, what I stand for, and what I will do or will not do in a given situation." (Murray Bowen)
75	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Fairly well differentiated. ▪ Can be calm in troubled times.

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Moves between emotional closeness and independent goals. ▪ More authentic — does not seek approval. ▪ Less emotional reactivity and if triggered, recovers quickly. ▪ More choice between feelings and intellect. ▪ Good boundaries.
60	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Acts more based on reason and intellect than simply reacting to feelings. ▪ Considers and chooses actions rather than simply react to a feeling. ▪ Thinks for self rather than simply following the opinions of others. ▪ In relationships hesitates to say what he/she thinks. Can hide true thoughts/feelings/needs. ▪ Boundary keeping is improving.
50	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Somewhat differentiated. ▪ Principle-oriented and goal-directed at times. ▪ Oscillates between being inner-directed or reactive to external forces. ▪ If triggered or stressed, remains in that state for some time. ▪ At peace or anxious depending on the circumstances. ▪ Can be dogmatic and rigid in thought and action. ▪ Seek to project an unrealistic view of the self; Work at hiding limitations. ▪ Feels lonely at times and finds solitude challenging. ▪ Functioning and self-image, in anxious moments, are affected by praise or criticism. ▪ Does not generally seek or value honest feedback. ▪ Becomes rational when emotions become a burden. ▪ Poorly developed spirituality (not necessarily religious). ▪ Feels responsible for others. Tends to micro-manage in anxious moments. ▪ Is aware of their place in the hierarchy. ▪ Carries unrealistic expectations of others. ▪ Lacks time and space to enjoy relationships. ▪ “Needs” others at times, who can feel used. ▪ Anxious when listening to differences; Tries to convince others to adopt new thoughts. ▪ Knows change is inevitable, yet gets anxious when change arrives or is expected;

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	<p>Discards old beliefs in favor of new ones with some difficulty.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Becomes reactive when listening. ▪ Often antagonizes others when communicating; Can be adversarial and polarizing. ▪ Becomes anxious in stressful moments and emotionally distances, enmeshes, triangulates, or gets caught in conflict. ▪ Has poor personal boundaries. ▪ If triggered or stressed recovers less easily.
40	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Poorly differentiated. ▪ Portrays a lifelong pursuit of ideal closeness or relationships. ▪ Relationships tend to be based on mutual dependency, are transactional, or might be avoided altogether. ▪ Operates out of a pseudo-self/adapted inner child ▪ Low level of authenticity. ▪ Often seeks approval ▪ Preoccupied with creating a good impression. ▪ Feels good if affirmed, bad if criticized/disapproved of ▪ Self-image depends on positive feedback from others. ▪ Influenced by feelings ▪ Poor ability to choose actions rationally due to reactivity. ▪ Poor emotional skill/literacy. ▪ Poor or inconsistent boundaries. ▪ Seeks distractions from self.
30	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Spends a lot of energy on 'loving' or 'being loved.' ▪ Highly suggestible to views/opinions of others and adopts viewpoints of others. Poor boundaries. ▪ Prone to joining cults, sects, or adopting extremist or rigid black/white ideologies and philosophies; embrace conspiracy theories. ▪ Alternatively, consistently rebellious or rigid in beliefs and views. ▪ Successful at work only if praised by superiors.
0-25	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Very poorly differentiated.

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Most of the life energy goes into 'loving' or 'being loved' — most of the person's energy is consumed by reactivity in failing to get love and/or recognition. ▪ Lives in a feeling world; Can be sensitive to the point of becoming emotionally numb. ▪ High levels of chronic anxiety ▪ Difficult to find situations in which they can be truly comfortable. ▪ Strained relationships; Difficulty maintaining long-term relationships; Easily gives up on relationships; Can be vengeful. ▪ Emotionally needy and highly reactive to others; Co-dependent; No boundaries. ▪ Little energy left for goal-directed pursuits; Trying to achieve comfort is enough. ▪ Functioning is almost entirely governed by emotional reactions to the environment. ▪ Inability to differentiate between thoughts and feelings; Not aware of alternatives to what they feel. ▪ Rarely takes a bigger-picture view. ▪ Responses range from automatic compliance to extreme oppositional behavior. ▪ Very rarely, if ever, uses I-statements, such as: -"I believe...; I am...; I will do... I feel... I apologize..."
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