

The Edwin Friedman Model of Family Systems Thinking: Lessons for Organizational Leaders

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The purpose of this essay is to take the lifework of Edwin H. Friedman (1932-1996) and share with the reader key elements pertinent to organizational leaders. From Friedman, a practicing family therapist, leadership consultant, and ordained rabbi, I will share concepts and organize my discussion into three sections. In the first section, I will introduce some basic concepts and terminology from family systems thinking that provide a unique perspective on leadership B at home and at work. In section two, I will present my interpretation of Friedman's work on family systems thinking and its application to leadership. Finally, in section three I will suggest ways leaders can implement the model.

Friedman's innovative perspective on leadership is more about a way of thinking and being than about traditional leadership emphases on "technique" or "style." As such it has 24/7 applicability in the family, the workplace, and the community.

Family Systems Thinking

Family systems thinking focuses on the family as a unit rather than on individual members. Family systems thinking represents a leap forward from the old individual model of therapy, where the focus was on the symptomatic member of the family, to how people function in relational systems. A fundamental premise is that each person in a family plays a role in the functioning of the other persons in the family, the system. Likewise in an organization, the functioning of any member, including the leader, plays a significant role in the functioning of the other members of the organization.

Friedman emphasized the power of "presence" in the leader of a family or an organization. "Presence" is the trail of confidence, poise, bearing, calmness, focus, and energy one leaves wherever one goes - a spirit, essence, affective impact that permeates an organization. Presence has to do with emotional maturity, the willingness to take responsibility for one's own emotional being and destiny, *the* critical variable in one's success as a leader (Friedman, 1999, p.7).

An organization, like a family, is a living system composed of biological organisms made up of protoplasm. One's human beingness, protoplasmic basis, carries with it some inherent qualities. First of all *hierarchy* is inherent in protoplasm. From the cellular level to the organizational level, hierarchy is a natural phenomenon. Secondly, *resistance* is built into living systems. A living system will do all it can to keep itself in balance, to maintain homeostasis. When initiative is taken in a living system, it will be met with resistance - a basic survival tactic. The underlying dynamics in an organization will work to return to a state of equilibrium. Third, a leadership model based on the behavior of human protoplasm is by definition *cross cultural*.

Because an organization is a living system, leaders and followers are intimately connected through an emotional field they have created - with positive or negative effects on the health of the organization. Followers do not have to observe a leader directly, or even be in some direct "chain of command" hierarchy, in order to be affected, positively or negatively, by the leader's functioning (Friedman, 1996a, 1996b, 1999). Wherever the head goes, the body will follow (Friedman, 1985). If the leader (i.e., head) of an organization clearly defines the direction the leader is going AND if the leader stays connected to the members of the organization, the members will follow the leader's direction. This cause-effect happening will be automatic.

Conversely, a leader needs to be aware that change cannot be brought about in an organization without disturbing the homeostasis. Tremendous energy is needed to tip a system out of equilibrium. And, even if the system can be disturbed significantly to bring about change, what may unintentionally be triggered is that a symptom (e.g., personal problem, relationship strain, health of a member, dysfunctional behavior of a member) may simply relocate to a new location in the organization.

The Emotional Field Concept

An organization's members are interlocked in a system of swirling, emotional processes - an emotional field, much like a magnetic field. (Wheatley, 1999) The field theory model of leadership emphasizes the effect of a leader's differentiated presence on the emotional processes in the system, the extent that leaders express themselves to others and distinguish between themselves and the people around them.

Friedman (1996a, 1996b, 1999) had a special concern with emotional fields created by leaders that value togetherness over individuality, creativity, and/or imagination. He observed that when a self-directed, imaginative, energetic, or creative member (low in the organizational hierarchy) is being consistently frustrated and sabotaged rather than encouraged and supported, 100 percent of the time it will be true that, regardless of whether the disrupters are supervisors, subordinates, or peers, the person at the very top of that institution will be a peace-monger (1996b, pp. 35-36), a person who believes good feelings are more important than progress, and who goes to great lengths to avoid anxiety and conflict at all costs.

Three sets of polarities, forces that pull people in opposing directions, characterize an emotional field. These opposing forces are not problems to solve, but polarities to manage (Johnson, 1996).

The individuality-togetherness polarity. Persons are constantly pulled in the direction of maintaining their individuality or giving up a little of it to be harmonious group members. The pull toward the togetherness end of the continuum seems to be an automatic, instinctual emotional reaction. It is part and parcel of the phenomenon of the human condition. The pull toward togetherness is further strengthened whenever anxiety goes up in an organization. When anxiety is elevated in an organization, the organization's members huddle even closer together (a herding instinct). The central dilemma for leaders is how do they get close to others in the organization, yet maintain their individuality?

The pursuing-distancing polarity. Human beings have a biological need for both closeness and distance in interpersonal relationships. Every pursuer has a distancer inside and vice versa. When someone is pursuing in an emotional field system, someone else is distancing. In a healthy relationship, the two parties engage in a back-and-forth dance between the two roles. In an unhealthy relationship, one of the parties becomes stuck in a role. When relationships are thrown out of balance, when anxiety builds, the mechanisms of emotional pursuit and distance are used to rebalance the system. The pursuer-distancer dance becomes more intense when anxiety goes up.

What the pursuer needs to understand, and this is counterintuitive, is that another person cannot hear the pursuer if the person is moving away from the pursuer (Friedman, 1999). Distancers always win; distancers can always outdistance pursuers. Distancing by others may be partly a reaction to the pursuer's emotional intensity. Distancing may be resolved if pursuing can be stopped or calmed down. After a while, if the pursuer stops, the distancer may become the pursuer.

The overfunctioning-underfunctioning polarity. The third characteristic of emotional fields pertains to the overfunctioning-underfunctioning reciprocity. Overfunctioning means getting stuck with the responsibility for the problems of others. Overfunctioning in organizations can also mean taking on sole responsibility for the welfare and ownership of the organization. Overfunctioning toward others means underfunctioning toward oneself. Overfunctioning is a major source of stress for leaders. When someone is overfunctioning in a system, someone else is underfunctioning. Take-over, take-charge, high-control leaders are especially vulnerable to overfunctioning. What is unintentionally triggered is slipping into a vicious cycle of learned helplessness. The leader overfunctions and the followers compensate by downshifting to a learned helplessness form of existence. The leader typically responds by ratcheting up the overfunctioning, and the followers sink even lower into learned helplessness. A major implication of this phenomenon for leaders is recognizing that when they try to get others to be more responsible, they are actually taking on more responsibility. Their efforts, although well-intentioned, are doomed to be self-defeating. Overfunctioners tend to think they know best. Underfunctioners will be slow to claim their competence in the presence of overfunctioners. Overfunctioners cannot make others more responsible, but they can make themselves less responsible.

Triangles: Basic Building Blocks

Relational systems are composed of triangles. The triangle is the basic building block, the molecule, for any system of people - the smallest stable relationship system. Two people have difficulty maintaining a one-to-one relationship for any period of time. The human dyad is so unstable that when two people who are important to each other develop a problem, they automatically look around for a third person to include in the anxious situation in some way. This move serves to stabilize the relationship between the original twosome. The more differentiated they are, the longer they can go without distancing or bringing in a third party. Individuals become triangled when they become the focus of the unresolved issues of two others, or when they get caught in a position of being responsible for the relationship of two others or another and the person's symptom or problem. The stress, and eventual burnout, of leaders has less to do with hard work than with becoming emotionally triangled.

The Leadership Model

In the traditional change model, the fault always lies with the other person. "If (he, she, they, it) would change... THEN, and only then, I (or my conditions) will change for the better." The basic assumption is that one person can will another to change. Will conflict is a losing proposition. The leader may get compliance in the short-run, but this strategy will never pay off long term. There is a better way. The Friedman way has six components.

Differentiating Self

Bowen (1985), Friedman's mentor, viewed self-differentiation as having two dimensions. The first dimension involves being able to handle differences between thinking and feeling. Can people handle their emotions with their thinking prowess without getting caught up in the maelstrom of emotions that may be going on around them? The second dimension involves being able to balance intimacy and autonomy. Can people enjoy close contact with significant others in their lives without losing their independence? Friedman's approach to leadership places self - specifically defining and managing self - at the heart of the matter. How do people modify themselves to change anxiety in the system? To bring about change in an organization, someone must begin speaking for self and be differentiated. The lack of self-differentiation may have gotten the organization into a mess. The presence of self-differentiation is what can turn it around. If one person in an emotional system can be a little bit different over a sustained period of time, the whole system will eventually change (Wiseman & Papero, 2000).

The real problems in organizations reside within the emotional system. People need to think process. Think "self." Think about what they may have contributed to the problem. In a marriage, don't ask, 'How can I change this troublesome partner of mine?' Ask instead, 'What is my contribution to this relationship pattern?' In the workplace, quit wondering how to manage groups. Begin thinking how to manage self in groups. Stop trying to figure out how to manage conflict. Begin learning how to manage self in conflict situations.

Leadership is learning how to bring more of self to the workplace. Imagine all the members of an organization as dominoes laid out standing up on the floor in an intricate pattern. All of a sudden anxiety hits and one topples. The chain reaction starts. When the cascading reaches the leader domino, can it remain upright, differentiate itself so to speak, and thus stop being one of the system's emotional dominoes? (Friedman, 1990, pp. 175-178)

The trick in all of this is to step back from all the emotion AND still stay connected to the organization. The leader who practises self-differentiation for the first time should expect resistance and sabotage. These are systemic reactions to leadership initiative. Friedman (1996a, 1996b) contended that adjective descriptors can tell a lot about the degree a person is self-differentiated. He believed that the less mature members of an organization will use certain adjectives to describe the more mature members of the organization. For example, mature, self-differentiating members may perceive certain leadership behavior as "persistent", yet this same behavior might be described as compulsive by a less mature member.

Self-differentiation is a two-step process. The first step is knowing what one believes (an internal task) and the second step is defining oneself to others (an interpersonal task.) This is a lifelong process of striving to keep one's being in balance through the reciprocal internal and external processes of self-regulation and self-definition. This is a lifelong process, not a goal that can ever be achieved. According to Friedman (1996a, 1996b, 1999), no one ever gets more than 70 percent there (a number he grinningly pulled out of thin air).

Self-differentiation is about charting one's own way by means of one's own internal guidance system rather than perpetually eyeing the scope to see where others are. It's expressing self, but not at the expense of others. It's the capacity to take a stand in an intense emotional system. Saying 'I' when others are demanding "we." Taking stands and defining oneself is not the same as being autocratic (the latter involves an emotionally coercive effort to change others). A well-differentiated leader is someone who has

clarity about life's goals, and, therefore, someone who is less likely to become lost in the anxious, emotional processes swirling about. Someone who can be separate while still remaining connected, and, therefore, someone who can maintain a modifying, non-anxious, and sometimes challenging presence. These persons can manage their own reactivity to the automatic reactivity of others, and, therefore, they are able to take stands at the risk of displeasing. Self-differentiation is the ability to be in charge of self, even when others in the emotional field are actually trying to make a person be different from how the person really is. Skowron and Schmitt (2003) have revised their initial Differentiation of Self Inventory developed in 1998 (now referred to as DSI-R).

A central leadership role is increasing the maturity level of the people in the organization. Friedman (1996a, 1996b, 1999) couched this as a payoff between empathy and responsibility. An empathic perspective says, 'Let's help people by reducing the stressors in their lives.' Friedman's notion was that this was the least preferred way of improving organizations. To him, the real payoff was in making people stronger through challenging their growth and maturity. What increases self-differentiation, emotional maturity, is not empathy, but challenge. A focus on empathy is an adaptation toward weakness. Focusing on responsibility is emphasizing strength. The # 1 issue in leadership today is a failure of nerve to define oneself more clearly (Friedman, 1999). The leader's self-differentiation will encourage self-differentiation in others.

Staying Connected

While self-differentiation is the most important ability in this model, the second most important ability is the ability to continue a relationship with people who disagree with the leader. Self-differentiation carries with it a sense of emotional well-being. There is less sense of others being a threat even if they are angry with the leader. This greater comfort allows the leader to stay connected to the others because the leader does not need their acceptance, understanding, affirmation, praise, or agreement to feel okay. Sure, leaders would like to be liked, but they don't need to be liked.

The central dilemma in managing the individuality/togetherness forces for each person is how to keep the focus on one's own life and life direction, but still stay in open, clear communication with the other significant people in one's life. Friedman (1999) contended that many have this capacity to stay in touch, to stay connected. A fewer number of people have the capacity to be truly self-differentiated. And, fewer still have the capacity to do both - to stay in touch AND be self-differentiated.

Maintaining a Non-Anxious Presence

To the extent leaders and consultants can maintain a 'non-anxious presence' in a highly energized anxiety field, they can have the same effects on that field that transformers have in an electrical circuit. They reduce the negative energy in a field by the nature of their own presence and being, as well as by the field they, in effect, set up. This is not a matter of breaking a circuit; it requires staying in touch without getting zapped. Persons can remain non-anxious if they are not present. The trick is to be both non-anxious and present simultaneously.

Progress of this kind requires a different way of thinking about relationship systems. It goes against most leadership training that puts an emphasis on doing something or fixing things, and it puts a premium on leaders' capacities to differentiate themselves from surrounding emotional processes.

A major sign of being better differentiated is when the leader can be present in the midst of emotional turmoil and actively relate to key people while calmly maintaining a sense of the leader's own direction. Developing greater clarity about what is happening in a system will always be more productive in the long run than just having empathy for the hurting people in the system and trying to rescue them. People grow through challenge and not by simply being made to feel better about their plight.

Being Non-Reactive

Being non-reactive refers to the capacity to become a self with minimum reactivity to the positions or reactivity of others. It is self-regulation in the face of reactive sabotage - which is inevitable. It is the ability to regulate one's instincts rather than let them drive one automatically. Under conditions of chronic anxiety the capacity for self-regulation is eroded. Anxiety makes the reptilian brain kick in.

Three indicators (Friedman, 1995) serve as an early warning system of reptilian functioning - in the leader or in the followers.

§ Interfering in the relationships of others

§ Constantly trying to coerce others to one's point of view

§ Inability to relate to people with whom one disagrees

Reptilian functioning is true about all human beings some of the time. Because emotional reactivity is infectious, effective leadership requires self-discipline to watch the emotional process calmly and not become emotionally aroused.

Managing Triangles

The first law of an emotional triangle is that the leader can't change a relationship the leader is not a part of. From the A position one can't change the relationship between B and C. The leader can only control the leader's relationship to B and to C independently. (B and C do not have to be two people. B could be a person and C could be an issue.) When the leader tries to change the relationship between B and C, the leader becomes "triangled" in that relationship and often stabilizes the very situation the leader is trying to change (Friedman, 1985, p. 36).

The leader's first line of defence is to resist someone else's attempt to triangle the leader; not always possible, but at least the leader's radar screen is on. Once one is snared, the goal becomes not how to get out of the triangles, but rather how to manage one's self in and through them. While the leader may not be able to get out of triangles, the leader can maintain contact with all the parties involved and not take part in the drama.

From a preventative angle, triangles are basically about people's level of anxiety. Manage triangles to contribute to a calmer, less anxious, and safer environment for people. The more one can see the systems-of-triangles perspective, the less prone one will be to take sides, to take things personally, to take thoughtless positions, or to assign blame.

Persisting in the Face of Sabotage

"No good deed goes unpunished. As leaders work on managing and defining self, they will meet with resistance and the system will work to pull them back down. In systems or field theory, resistance is an automatic, mindless, natural response to a leader's initiative. It comes with the territory of differentiation and is part and parcel of the process of leadership. When leaders get feedback that they have become cold, insensitive, unempathic, headstrong, or selfish, it often means they are beginning to function in a more differentiated manner. The good news is that resistance – rather than being some obstacle that needs to be overcome – is really a systemic phenomenon that indicates the leader is successful!

The trick is how one musters up the stamina to nonreactively let others run their repertoire of sabotaging responses. A differentiating act, when the leader moves in an unexpected way within the organization, will probably elicit more anxiety. Differentiating self does not lead to praise from the group but to a negative reaction at first. Be prepared for pressure to pull the leader back to the way the leader used to be. The leader has to have a clear focus on where the leader is heading and not let self get distracted by reactivity to others.

Sabotage may come from pathogens in the organization. (Friedman, 1996a, 1996b, 1999)

Pathogens are

\$ Invasive by nature of other people's space

\$ Lack self-regulation

\$ Cannot learn from experience

\$ Have lots of stamina

Neither reasonableness, role modeling, nor imparting insight will work with this kind of virus in an organization. For viruses to run amok, there has to be complicity in the host organism. When a pathogen attacks the organism (organization), the healthy cells are observing and waiting to see what happens to their protection – to the organization's immune system – the leader. When the leader is well defined and clear, the pathogens don't replicate.

Implementing the Leadership Model

Friedman (1995) used four criteria to define successful leadership.

\$ Moving the organization toward its goals

\$ Maximizing the organization's functioning

\$ Growing (maturing) everyone in the organization

\$ Ensuring the health and survival of the organization and its leader

Keeping these in mind, assume one is the supervising administrator of a work unit. How does one apply this model? What are some key principles for "leading through presence"? Where is attention focused?

First of all work on being a "self" always remembering that a self is more attractive than a no-self. Let the group know where one stands on critical issues. The goal is to move the group members toward their own self-differentiation. As counter-intuitive as it may sound, one's best chance to do that is by focusing on self. A leader can handle the problem person in an organization by working on the leader's own functioning rather than by trying to fix or change the problem person.

Especially monitor periods of silence. When leaders don't speak up, they should check themselves to see if they might be "going along to get along." Be aware that one might be giving up some of self (Wiseman & Papero, 2000).

Effective leaders work on their own maturity because they believe the group members cannot become more mature than the group leader. They work on their functioning, not on fixing others. If there is some emotional turmoil swirling in the work unit, they recognize they are contributing in some fashion to the underlying emotional dynamics. They know if they can modify the part they are playing, others will do the same. The combination of self-differentiation and staying connected is the primary tool in implementing this model. Watch out for becoming so busy with personal priorities that contact is lost with selected staff members. Keep a special eye out for people who are farthest removed from one's physical proximity zone. The importance of relationships, staying connected, is critical to the implementation of this model.

Adapt to strength rather than weakness. Wide variations of maturity exist in organizations. The leader attuned to this model will be on guard against accommodating the least mature members of the organization, the people who are crying the loudest, the chronic whiners, the organizational terrorists. These can be the chronically angry, negative, and/or sullen personnel. These also can be people who introduce terms like "trust," "empathy," and "consensus." Their agenda is to have others adapt to them. If leaders are not careful, a lot of hand wringing can go into, "I wonder what so and so will think?" If leaders are not vigilant, the dependent persons in organizations can wind up calling the shots.

Adapting to strength means becoming aware that the ultimate payoff to the health of the organization comes from helping people mature (i.e., become more self-differentiated) rather than from trying to make their lives more comfortable. There are simply some people whose real need is to not have their needs fulfilled (Friedman, 1999). Increasing one's threshold for others' pain can help them mature. Sometimes the most truly "caring" response might be to allow people to experience sufficient pain that their responses have the maturing effect of making them more responsible.

Non-anxious presence is another behaviour to practice. Workplaces are emotional units and anxiety is highly contagious. Anxiety can lead to numerous organizational symptoms and general stuckness. Chronic anxiety overrides thinking. When emotion swirls out of control, people simply take sides. Playfulness and creativity disappear. A treadmill effect of perpetually trying harder is triggered. Here again, leaders focus on self. Leaders hold down the level of anxiety in the emotional system by, primarily, managing their own anxiety, and then, secondarily, by staying in meaningful contact with other key players in the situation. They do not tell other to "be calm." They simply bring their own calmness to the situation.

The best way to have a calming effect on an anxious group is to be curious about how group members think about the situation.

Asking questions is a great way to remain non-anxious and present (Friedman, 1985, p. 72). If, for example, one is trying to help

resolve a conflict between two people, every bone in one's body may be aching to give advice. Try to resist that temptation. It might make one feel better, but it also fosters dependency. Asking questions will get one out of the advice-giving mode. Ask questions designed to stimulate each person to differentiate self better (p. 72). The leader is not trying to get them to agree, but to define and be clearer about their positions.

The overfunctioning/underfunctioning cycle is triggered when leaders become overly anxious to see something done because they feel solely responsible for the ownership of the organization. The more the leader overfunctions, the less motivated the followers will be to display initiative. **Delegate anxiety rather than responsibility by reducing overfunctioning** (Friedman, 1999). Far easier said than done, but this stance is critical to underfunctioners taking their share of responsible ownership for the welfare of the organization. The leader may have to trade the stress of being the "lonely person at the top" for the stress of waiting for others to take initiative and assume partnership status. Underfunctioners will take more responsibility and do their job only if and when they begin to feel anxious about it being done.

The self-differentiating leader knows **things may get worse before they get better**. When someone differentiates in a system (e.g., reduces overfunctioning), the forces to put things back the way they were will intensify before they eventually subside. Differentiation will inevitably trigger sabotage from the least well differentiated. But the enlightened leader anticipates this systemic resistance and is emboldened with the stamina to persist and override the painful anxiety of self-doubt. The self-differentiating leader understands there is no way out of a chronically painful condition except by being willing to go through a temporarily more acute painful phase.

Another area of sensitivity where leaders can monitor their functioning is **triangles** – how to stay out of them whenever possible in the first place and how to manage them once ensnared. The primary prevention tool is to not talk about people who are not present. But that doesn't stop employee B from coming to the leader A to complain about employee C. The leader's goal is to not take on responsibility for the relationship between B and C. Stay in touch with B and C without getting hooked into their conflict. Take "I" positions; define how "I" will function.

But if B keeps trying to triangle the leader by talking about C, ask B how B dealt with C's behavior. The point of the question is to help B think about how B has been with C and B's (contributing) part in the process between them. Share one's personal experiences with people like C and how one's self was managed. Or sponsor a meeting between B and C where they can possibly improve their chances of hearing one another by talking through the leader.

Another approach would be to share the information with C in the presence of B (Friedman, 1985, p. 75). One may be thinking this is breaking a confidence. Remember the leader is a catalyst for the health of the organization. Both B and the leader know B should be going directly to C. The leader is sending a message that the entire organization is one's concern and "when the 'revealing' can be done in the presence of the informer, in a nonanxious manner, and the underlying process issues can be worked on immediately, then the teller of the tale is generally grateful" (p. 78). Detriangling is keeping the focus on the separate relationships one has with B and C and not on the issue between them.

The lack of well differentiated leadership is both a result and a cause of stuckness. When leaders are not well differentiated, relationships and "team building" win out over goal attainment. Togetherness becomes more important than individuality. Too much togetherness, combined with a leader who fails to speak for self, can generate an "anxiety snowball" where people find it difficult to think, feel, and act for themselves. The health and vitality of the organization suffer.

When all is said and done, self-differentiation is leadership. For the growth and maturity of the organization, leadership is a therapeutic modality (Friedman, 1985). The bottom line comes down to three fundamentals :

- *People change according to the functioning of those around them.*
- *If leaders can change their emotional functioning, while staying connected, the whole organization will improve its functioning in response to that change.*
- *Ultimate paradox: Leader's best chance of changing another is by working on self.*

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