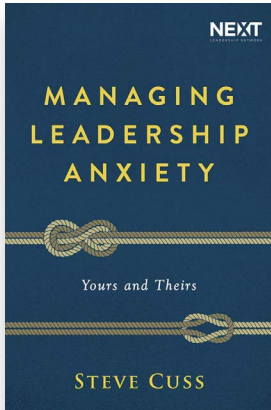


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# Managing Leadership Anxiety

## THE SUMMARY

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### Chapter 1: The Anxiety Gap

Have you ever gone into a meeting dreading the conversation you needed to have, so you played it out in your mind obsessively as if manic worry would help the meeting? Have you ever led a meeting and stepped on a land mine you didn't even know existed, and suddenly your well-intentioned leadership turned into hurt feelings and misunderstanding? Have you struggled to focus on the person in front of you because your mind was elsewhere? Have you brought a previous situation into the present? Have you felt shame over a mistake and wished you could have a do-over?

Any honest leader will answer yes to all these situations. They are the frequent experience for every leader, and I believe they are the cause for leader burnout. Burnout has less to do with workload and more to do with internal and external leadership anxiety. As surely as the sun rises every morning, so will a leader face a situation where she is anxious or annoyed at the person she is leading, or she wonders why she feels ashamed, or he gets tired of being stuck in the same pattern with his team, or he doesn't know what to do, yet he must do something.

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When we are under pressure, tired, anxious, or feeling threatened, our tendency is to depend on ourselves rather than on God. This is because our “self” is somewhat tangible whereas God is invisible and can feel intangible. I think this is why Jesus, Paul, and the authors of Scripture talk so much about denying self and the dangers of the flesh. The good news is that I don’t have to depend on myself any more. Jesus has now freed me from the tyranny of anxiety and freed me from having to cover what is happening under the surface. Thanks to grace, I am able to lead out of that depth rather than from a place of anxiety. This is no small thing and is an absolutely delightful side effect of doing this work.

Of course, none of us lead in a vacuum. Part of what makes leadership so fluid is the people we lead, who have their own boiling collective just under the surface like we do. Also, most of us lead more than one person at a time, so our team or family creates a dynamic or a “system” that we also encounter. Effective leadership involves not only self-awareness, but group-awareness and other-awareness—the ability to pay attention to the dynamic of human systems. No wonder leadership can be grueling. There is a lot going on!

If you can learn some family systems theory, you can lead in a different gear than you’re leading in now. You’ll not neglect content, but you’ll add the ability to pay attention to process, how people are relating, and perhaps most powerfully, how they are affecting your own anxiety. Who is quiet all the time? Who takes all the energy in the room? Who needs the last word? Who is passive-aggressive? Who always has a “meeting after the meeting”? Who acts different depending on who is in the room? Most powerfully, what or who is stuck in a predictable pattern?

These are all process issues that a leader can learn to navigate. Once you get the hang of it, you’ll find yourself becoming a sociologist of your own self and team. You’ll be paying attention to yourself, the system, and what is being said all at the same time. If you really catch on to this approach, you’ll help your team do the same. The healthiest teams are not the ones where only the leader is fully aware of these internal and external dynamics, they are the teams where the leader has equipped the entire team to be aware and to communicate freely with one another about them.

## **Chapter 2: Anxiety, Freedom, and How the Gospel Works**

Thomas Merton wrote, “Every one of us is shadowed by an illusory person: a false self. We are not very good at recognizing illusions, least of all the ones we cherish about ourselves that we are born with and which feed the roots of sin. For most of the people in the world, there is no greater subjective reality than this false self of theirs. A life devoted to the cult of this shadow is what is called life of sin.”

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Leadership anxiety is generated by this false self. Anxiety is a sign that the false self is demanding we nourish it instead of dying to it. The false self blocks us from receiving the gospel in all its power and beauty. It keeps us stuck in recurring patterns and does not bring about true freedom and life. James Finley was an apprentice of Thomas Merton and wrote much about the theology of false self. He wrote, "In our zeal to become the landlords of our own being, we cling to each achievement as a kind of verification of our self-proclaimed reality. We become the center and God somehow recedes to an invisible fringe."

When we are under pressure, feeling threatened or anxious, we depend on this false self rather than depending on God. If we can learn to notice when it is at play, name what we think we need that we do not actually need, and then die to it, we can be freed from its grip and opened to a deeper experience of grace. I am not talking about heaven and hell and the forgiveness of sins or a transaction with God in the past. I am talking about freedom and transformation moment by moment. I think this is one reason Jesus calls us to deny it daily. Sometimes we need to deny it hourly or moment by moment to encounter God's freedom. In this approach, anxiety becomes a gift rather than a curse because it serves as an early detection device that your false self is at work.

Why do I still sin when I have been set free from sin? Paul explains that it all comes down to where we offer our energy and time. Paul is implying that sin gains power over us the more we engage in it, but so does God. So it all comes down to where we give our energy and time. I think Paul's principle states: where we put our attention defines our spiritual growth. If we make a habit of offering ourselves to sin, then sin becomes our master—it gains power and control over our lives. If we habitually offer ourselves to God, his power takes over and frees us from sin's grip. Whatever we give ourselves to is what has our attention and devotion. I think this is why Paul said we can either be a slave to sin or a slave to God.

Freedom in God's kingdom has two facets: we are freed from and we are freed to. In modern Western society, freedom means autonomy. We dangerously believe freedom means, "I can do anything I want." Scripture authors never describe freedom this way, they describe it like this: "Something used to have hold of me, but a better power released me from it and now that better power has hold of me." We are never free floating, free to do whatever we want, free from control. We are, in fact, always connecting to someone or something. Freed from and freed to, and this freedom involves an ongoing battle.

You may have to battle to break free from some deeply entrenched habits and ways of thinking. Christ has set us free, and we are free indeed, but there is another law at work lurking in the shadows waiting to put me in bondage. In between those forces is my decision: what am I giving myself to today? Am I feeding false self or God? Am I walking down the path that leads to death or the path of life and freedom?

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As we learn to pay attention to anxiety, we use it as an early detection system that we are moving into bondage. Before we get too far down that path, we can stop, pray (Jesus died so I don't have to \_\_\_\_ anymore), remember where our identity is found, die to what we think we need in that moment that we don't really need, and experience freedom on the spot. It's easier written than done. We will still struggle, still fail, have a shadow, and give in to self. We will still be anxious, but none of that will have mastery over us anymore.

For me, the good news of the gospel is that my anxiety no longer has the last word. There is now another word after anxiety has spoken or failure has spoken, and that word is life. God speaks life and identity. Anxiety and failure speak death and condemnation. As you explore this for yourself, I would encourage you, as much as you are able, to be as kind to yourself as God is when you fail. Keep walking and keep fighting for freedom. It is well worth the effort.

## Chapter 3: Sources of Internal Anxiety

The first step in noticing anxiety is to list how it manifests in your body so you can begin intervention early. Anxiety generally starts with a racing mind, a spinning heart, or a tightening gut. For some, it can be all at once, but as you begin to gain power over anxiety, it will be critical to be able to notice where it begins. Take a moment to consider where, physiologically, your anxiety first shows up. A powerful way to de-escalate anxiety is to diagnose its source: to move from a general, "I can't stop thinking about this," or "My heart is racing," to a more specific, "The reason I am anxious is because Peter has me in a double bind and a triangle, and it is putting pressure on my people-pleasing idol." Another example would be, "Obsessively thinking about this upcoming difficult meeting will not help preempt the outcome. I believe the lie that worrying will help. Instead I'm going to stop, pray, and ask God to guide me."

It will take some practice to succinctly diagnose your anxiety, but once you've learned some of the sources and learned to pay attention to your own triggers, you'll be able to diagnose pretty quickly, sometimes even in the moment. Diagnosis de-escalates the power anxiety can have over you because the simple act of naming it reverses the power dynamic. It had you, but by naming it, sometimes out loud or in a prayer, you began to manage it. This is one way we die to self and experience God's resurrection power in our lives.

Some sources of internal anxiety that keep you distant and keep you paying too much attention to self are listed below. The list isn't exhaustive, and some sources will resonate more than others. My hope is that reading this list will help you generate some sources of your own.

### *Recovering from a mistake.*

A lifetime of leadership will involve a lifetime of mistakes. My friend Don Wilson said, "Leaders don't learn from experience, they learn from evaluated experience," which means that your ability to grow as a leader is connected to your capacity to examine your mistakes without condemnation and defensiveness. No one gets it right every time, but we can continue to step out vulnerably after making a public mistake if we're aware of our anxiety.

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## *The giants on your shoulders.*

Knowing and naming the giants on your shoulders can relieve you of feeding and giving energy to them. Sometimes the giants on your shoulders are literally living with you at home. I know a leader whose giant is a spouse. He comes home and vents about someone and his spouse sends various forms of the same message which is, "Don't let them get away with that!" So when he is in a leadership environment, he is not only attending to the conflict, he is also attending to the disappointment of his wife when he concedes or compromises. That is way too much pressure. Let the mentors shrivel away so you can attend to the real people in front of you rather than the imagined tyrants on your shoulders. If the imagined tyrants are actual tyrants, you can deal with them in their own time, but no need to add to your load by dealing with them when they aren't even in the room.

## *Blind spot knowledge and feeling exposed.*

The worst kind of knowledge is knowledge someone else has about you that you don't have about yourself, but as soon as they share it you know it is true. Blind spot knowledge. You suddenly feel exposed and at risk, yet at the same time, you know there is truth there and you're thrust into two choices. Either be open to this knowledge and move toward it, or deny it. The most common denial technique is to decide there is something wrong with the person who named it. Nobody likes to be given blind spot knowledge, but without it, we don't grow.

## *Judgment.*

Judgment limits the scope of our leadership because it shrinks the array of people we can lead. Judgment creates distance and also makes assumptions about a person that may not be true. We all hold a variety of judgments, even people who celebrate how non-judgmental they are. By naming the types of people we judge, we can move past that initial obstacle and lead a much broader range of people. Naming our judgment keeps us from dehumanizing real people in our head and helps us to be able to serve them. I encourage you to write an actual list of the types of people you judge. Don't name the people! Just list the characteristics of people you judge. You'd be surprised at how long that list is, how many people it encompasses, and how it limits your ability to lead them. You may also be surprised at how petty some of your judgments are.

## *Values violations.*

What are your deep values that get triggered when someone violates them? It isn't about compromising your values; it is about getting past your response to be able to connect with those people. Sometimes we're triggered not by a violation of values, but by someone who exhibits the same shadow we have. I get easily triggered by arrogant, self-righteous people. It is too much like looking in the mirror. Ouch. I can connect with those people by recognizing in them what I despise in myself and moving past it.

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## *Isolation and Exceptionalism.*

Whether your tendency is toward isolation (“No one understands”) or exceptionalism (“No one can do it like me”), the danger is the same and that is the need to feel like you are “the only one.” There is something deeply satisfying in believing the old song, “Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen; nobody knows but Jesus.” It is some version of “God and me are the only ones who get it,” except it is very rarely true.

## *Anger fantasies and the need for an enemy.*

Anger fantasies are insidious because they feel so good and are the natural way for your brain to make sense of your emotions. But they are dangerous because you are dehumanizing the person in your mind. You mentally strip her of her dimension and nuance in order to be the better person. This is self-righteousness at its deadliest, because you can indulge it without ever having to really engage the person.

## *Doubt (self-doubt and doubt in God.)*

This is also known as the imposter syndrome. It is the plaguing feeling that you don’t belong in this leadership role. You are ill-equipped, don’t know what you’re doing, and, worse yet, one day someone is going to expose you for the fraud that you are. Some people live double lives, hiding a significant moral issue, but for most leaders the imposter syndrome is the inner voice that says, “You are not enough; one day someone better will show up and everyone will wonder why you were here so long.”

Doubt without an outlet can generate massive anxiety. When a leader’s private life is significantly incongruent with her public life, the leader is in grave danger. If you struggle with imposter syndrome because you are hiding a destructive habit, or if you find your own faith slipping into an unknown future, I highly encourage you to find safe people to whom you can talk. Leaders don’t naturally see the people they are leading as the safe people they can share with, but if your culture is healthy, sharing with your people may be the best move. Tragically for too many leaders, the people they are leading are the least safe people to share this with, and that only adds to the grip. Who can you talk to? Take a moment to write some names down and take the risk of sharing your doubt.

Obviously, this is a fast pass at some sources of internal anxiety. Naming and knowing the sources is a vital step in reducing anxiety’s impact on your life.

## **Chapter 4: Idols, Vows, and the Stories We Tell Ourselves**

Having listed various sources of internal anxiety, now we go deeper by focusing on two significant sources: idols and childhood vows. What we live for when we’re not living for Jesus (idols) and what we believe to be true that is not always true (childhood vows) combine to form the stories we tell ourselves and can significantly derail leadership. When we are under pressure, exhausted, or feeling threatened, we revert to depending on the stories we tell ourselves rather than the story of God. I think one of the reasons God’s story is called the good news is because it is in direct competition with the stories we tell ourselves, which are so often bad news (or perhaps more precisely, they are

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good news for now, bad news long term). The reason to do the difficult and very personal work of dethroning idols and repenting of childhood vows is to experience the freedom that Jesus offers his followers. We depend on idols and vows as a false security to get us through pain and to keep a false self intact. Jesus said, "The truth will set you free" (John 8:32) and Paul said, "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free" (Gal. 5:1), so we do this difficult and personal work for a deeper experience of freedom.

The story you tell yourself is a subconscious, ever-present filter between the outside world and your brain making meaning of everything. The great challenge of it is that until you examine it, you don't even know it is there. But even now, if you pay careful attention, you will notice a filter in your head. As you are reading this, you may notice a filter telling you what you think about what you're reading. The voice is saying, "That's exactly right!" or "Wow, this author is overly sensitive" or "I still can't believe he thinks we shouldn't be like Jesus!" It acts as a mediator and interpreter between you and the world and its power is strengthened by your unawareness of it.

The story you tell yourself is often forged in pain and suspicion and can significantly limit your leadership scope. One way to notice it is when you take a singular truth and make it universally true. Something painful happened in your past and you then project that onto every future scenario that is similar. Another way to notice the story is to pay attention to "same species syndrome." Sometimes we project so strongly that we actually create the very reality we are trying to avoid. Leaders who are gifted communicators can be especially at risk for infecting reality with the stories they tell themselves.

This is one way our false self most obviously shows up. It interprets everything outside of our brain and places meaning on it and then infects everything we say and do. The story we tell ourselves infects reality and shapes what actually "is" and turns it into what we think God is on the other side of what we think. That is why we access so much power and freedom if we can move beyond the stories we tell ourselves. Idols are not immediately easy to identify in your life, but one sure way to begin is to pay attention to when you are anxious, feeling threatened, or needing something in order to be settled.

One way you know something is an idol is that you sacrifice time and power to get it. You can also spend some time looking at what you daydream about, what your nightmare scenario is, and what you repeatedly worry about. The common thread of an idol is "I need it to be okay," so when you find yourself anxious or deeply unsettled, it may be because you are not getting what you think you need to be okay.

A childhood vow is a promise you make to yourself as a child, either consciously or subconsciously, that informs the way you see and operate in the world. A childhood vow is often forged out of pain and neglect, but can sometimes be made in the chase of pleasure. The challenge of a childhood vow is that it becomes deeply entrenched into our false selves and keeps us bound to bad news instead

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of the good news of Jesus. Vows lock and narrow our future, they bind us to same species syndrome, and they keep us flailing and stuck in recurring patterns. Childhood vows are like childhood clothes. We needed them as kids and they fit well, but as we grew into adulthood, they became constricting and began to strangle us. A vow suffocates your future and increases your anxiety, because you are living out of that vow rather than by faith in God.

One of the signs of a vow is using a superlative like never or always. “I will never raise my kid the way my mother raised me,” or “I will never open my heart to someone and get crushed again.” Another way to uncover a vow is to notice when you use should, ought, or must. “I must protect my mother from my abusive father by distracting him when he drinks,” or “I should always do it perfectly because imperfection receives condemnation.” Of course, vows can be positive as well—not just moving away from pain but moving toward pleasure. Just because they are positive doesn’t mean they are any less dangerous.

If you want to explore identifying and shedding a childhood vow, you will begin by identifying as concretely and specifically as you’re able the vow or vows you believe and sift them against the good news of Jesus. You will write the vow out along with the contrasting good news of Jesus. There is something stark and powerful about looking at what you believe that isn’t true. Once you see it written, you then repent of the lie that vow caused you to believe and you embrace the good news of Jesus’ truth. Like many of these exercises, this will likely not be a one-and-done experience. You may experience an initial breakthrough of insight by looking at what you believed all these years.

The stories we tell ourselves, idols, and vows. They are intense and entrenched deep into our soul and they keep our false selves fed and animated. When Jesus and Paul invited us to die to self, this is what we’re dying to so we can experience the freeing resurrection power of Christ. When Paul warned the church in Galatia to not be bound again by the yoke of slavery, I think this is what he was talking about. Vows and idols are oppressive, but Christ is freeing. Our battle for freedom may be an ongoing battle, but definitely a worthwhile one.

## **Chapter 5: Sources of Relational Anxiety**

Anxiety isn’t as neatly categorized as the chapter headings infer, but some sources of anxiety come from external relationships rather than internal triggers. External sources can trigger internal anxiety. Naming sources is half the battle, because by naming them you flip the power dynamic. Rather than having you in their grip, you are now able to hold them and see them more objectively.

### *Cognitive dissonance.*

Cognitive dissonance is caused when someone’s words and actions do not match, or when someone’s words do not match reality. The disconnect between your understanding of reality and the other person’s behavior, or his explanation of reality, can put you into cognitive dissonance and generate anxiety. Cognitive dissonance is very difficult to notice in the moment, but if you find



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yourself at odds with reality, with someone's behavior, or with his or her perception of reality, it may be that you are in dissonance. At this point you would be wise to pause and reflect on your options. More often, however, you notice after the fact that you are in dissonance.

## *Mixed messages.*

Mixed messages are a specific form of cognitive dissonance. A mixed message is two conflicting messages arriving at the same time from someone. Passive-aggression is a mixed message; so is sarcasm. If you find yourself in the anxiety of interpreting mixed messages, choose the message you want to receive, ignore the other, and see what happens. The reason this works is twofold. One, it puts the anxiety where it belongs—back on the communicator of the mixed message. Mixed messages cause anxiety because we don't know the intent and meaning, so rather than worry about it, or worse yet, fill in the gaps in our own minds, put the burden of clarity where it belongs: with the original communicator. Two, almost all communication is more fluid than we think.

## *Double bind.*

A double bind is another type of cognitive dissonance in which you find yourself in a situation where no matter what you choose, you lose. It is almost always a two-option scenario, either real or imagined. I say imagined because one aspect of a double bind is the false assumption that there are only two options when in fact there may be more. But in the moment, you feel stuck between a rock and a hard place. Double binds are the source of much anxiety in leaders, especially when you don't recognize that you are in one. You spend much energy trying to win when you are set up to lose. Double binds are unique because they are sources of both relational or internal anxiety, depending on the bind.

The insidious nature of a double bind is the belief there are only two options when often there are more. It is the "locked in" feeling that generates so much anxiety. God offers an open-ended future, but a double bind convinces us that we are backed into a corner of doom. So, a double bind can be another way we live by self rather than faith. God often has a path outside the "two doomed options," and if you're able to pause and reflect on the options, you'll often find many more paths than you first thought. Often you will need the perspective of a trusted friend to help you see the other paths.

## *Paradox.*

A paradox is very similar to a double bind. It is simply an impossible situation where you are trying to do something that is impossible to do. The shortest paradox I know is the command, "Be spontaneous!" Having been commanded to suddenly stop whatever you are doing and be spontaneous, you now cannot. Anything you do may appear spontaneous but is not, because of the command. The best solution for a paradox once you recognize it is to simply name it to the person and work on a new approach together that is actually achievable.

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## *Phantom strikes.*

A phantom strike is anytime one person takes a shot at you, but she is carrying a hidden army with her. It is any variation of “Me and a bunch of people who aren’t here and who I won’t name all think there is something wrong with you.” People who have strong personalities but don’t have emotional maturity to communicate directly are most prone to phantom strikes. They speak boldly against someone and interpret people’s silence as agreement, and then co-opt it into a mob. If you’ve ever received criticism that hurt more than usual it might be because you received a phantom strike.

## *Stepping on a leadership land mine.*

Leadership land mines can really do damage. You’re leading a group and you have no idea there are highly emotional topics and history involved in the decision at hand. As leading you think all is well, you’re even excited, but someone in the group is hurt or highly offended. You’ve stepped right on a land mine you didn’t know existed. Like many of these sources, the best way to diffuse the issue is to name it, in the moment if you’re able. You cannot undo the damage, but you can diffuse the anxiety by naming it and inviting people to share their point of view and assumptions. You can share yours as well and move through the situation together.

## *Power and responsibility.*

Another source of relational anxiety is when you are serving in a role where your responsibility and power do not match. You are constantly in an anxious state, but you cannot put your finger on the source. It may be because you are responsible for significant aspects of your organization, but you’ve not been given the authority to manage your responsibility. If you find yourself “in trouble” for a decision that impacts your work or you have to clean up a mess not of your making, it may be because you have responsibility but no power.

## *Triangulation.*

A triangulated relationship is any three-person relationship that should have two people in it. This isn’t to be confused with a three-person relationship that should have three people in it! A healthy three-person relationship might be a father, mother, and daughter who all relate together. A triangulated version of that relationship is where the daughter says, “Don’t tell Dad,” or the father says to the daughter, “I’ll let you do it, but your mum is going to hit the roof! You know how she can be.”

A triangulated relationship is where two people collude against the third or one person co-opts an outsider into a two-person relationship. Gossip is always a form of triangulation, as are most middle school relationships. The simplest way to get out of a triangulated relationship is to inform everybody that you are going to inform everybody. Give everybody the same access to the same information. I have had instances where I say, “You have twenty-four hours to tell them and then I am going to.” Again, the exception is for those of us whose role requires confidentiality, but even then, you must proceed with extreme caution.

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All these relational sources can be extra challenging because the solution to them almost always involves engaging the person you're anxious about. Dealing with internal anxiety can be a private matter, but the best way to reduce relational anxiety is to address it with the people you are in tension with. On most occasions, if you have trust and respect, this will go well. If you don't trust the people, or if they are toxic, you may not be safe to deal with them directly about it. That is why your anxiety continues—because you do not have an outlet for it. In those cases, you may need to take a more drastic measure, such as asking someone safe to join the conversation, but again, no triangulating. Just admit you needed help from a third party for your own sake not simply to gang up on them.

## Chapter 6: Applying Family Systems to Leadership

A system is simply a group of people who function in an emotional unit. Everyone in the system is interconnected (connected to one another and affected by one another's connections), so a system becomes a complex environment that generates a lot of emotional subtext, especially if one member of the system is unhealthy or disruptive. Systems become anxious when members of a system adopt and escalate one another's anxiety and reactivity. System leadership is a developed skill where the leader pays as much attention to the system dynamic as she does to conversation. A leader who pays attention to a system isn't so much concerned with the content of what is said, but rather the process of how people are relating and behaving. Systems get stuck in predictable patterns and a skilled leader can break through this "stuckness" by paying attention to relational patterns and help his people detangle and break free.

When a system is stuck, more content is rarely the answer. By applying systemic change, by focusing on process as much as content, you can bring massive change to an organization or family. One of the reasons is because systems theory echoes the gospel in its power for health to infect ill health. The miracle of systemic change is that it does not require everyone in the system to agree, or even be aware of the problem. You only need the person motivated to change to be willing to change the system. When a system is stuck, one disrupter is all that is required to break free and potentially heal the problem.

Here is how it works. First try to name the dynamic of what is going on. Spend less time on content and more time on the pattern that is recurring and stuck. The more specific you can name the pattern, the more chance of true change. Next, see if you can identify your attempted solutions to the pattern. If you want to see quicker process change, bring all the parties into the discussion. In other words, name the dynamic with the people involved. Note: the absolute magic sauce of this is the capacity to name the dynamic without heat in your words. I have led many process-level changes where I first had to work on my own reactivity before proceeding, sometimes taking days or even weeks to get into a non-reactive place to be able to lead a group through change. Leading a productive, non-anxious conversation about a difficult or sensitive topic is essential to process-level change. Remember, people pay attention to content but react to process, so you'll have to be prepared for an anxious response. Your ability to be non-anxious will be key.

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Finally, your ability to change the system will be dependent on several factors, one of which is the willingness of the others in the system to move toward health. If you are a young pastor leading a traditional church board, set your stopwatch for a few years. It is going to take time and some allies and therefore some stamina.

So many leaders struggle with self-care, or get sucked into the next crisis, or carry people's problems, but making sure you are well is the first fundamental step in bringing any systemic change. According to Ed Friedman, the path to systemic change is for a leader to work on "their own integrity and the nature of their own presence rather than techniques for manipulating or motivating others." This is a fascinating and bold theory. If leaders truly want change, working on their own composure will bring about more change than trying to get others to do something. This is known as differentiation and it is the most foundational tool for this entire book and yet can be the most difficult to grasp.

Differentiation is the ability to be fully yourself while being connected to people. It is gaining clarity on where "I" end and the "other" begins. A differentiated person allows space between herself and another, even when that other person is highly anxious or asking for rescue. A differentiated leader is clear on her own values and convictions and is not easily swayed from them.

The opposites on either side of differentiation are enmeshment and detachment. An enmeshed leader is unable to hold any space between himself and the other. If the other is struggling, the enmeshed leader gets pulled into it. The detached leader holds too much space between himself and the other. There is so much space the leader does not care for the other. An enmeshed leader struggles with co-dependency but calls it empathy. The detached leader struggles with indifference and thinks it is healthy. In contrast, a differentiated leader is fully present, but fully intact, with space between where he or she ends and the other begins.

Becoming a differentiated leader is a journey, and none of us fully arrive. We are all continually on the spectrum of becoming more differentiated. A non-anxious leader is still often anxious, and still makes mistakes, raises his voice, or says regrettable things. Differentiation has nothing to do with being perfect or always calm. Differentiation is about managing your own anxiety and being aware of the contagious anxiety of a group while staying relationally connected to that group. None of us arrive at it, but we can all work toward it.

## **Chapter 7: Tools That Diffuse Anxiety**

One of the most common catalysts of anxiety is exhaustion. John Ortberg said, "Sometimes the most spiritual thing you can do is take a nap." Colin Powell said, "Everything is better in the morning." They are both saying the same basic principle: exhaustion clouds your thinking. Rest opens you back up to see clearly. Digging deeper, some exhaustion can't be addressed by sleep because the problem isn't

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simply rest; it is an imbalance of input and output. Too much doing for God, not enough abiding in God. It's a chronic problem most battle. Knowing and recognizing capacity, and especially knowing when to fill up your own tank before pouring out to others, is key to ongoing soul health.

The most effective leaders I know have a "whatever it takes" approach that means they find themselves doing tasks and projects they do not need to be giving time toward. Over time, we can find ourselves anxious by the sheer scope of work we have on our plates. One simple way to right-size this is to do a workload scrub. The first time could be painful, but it is generally liberating. Open a spreadsheet with four columns. In the first column write every single thing you do for your organization during the course of a year. My list typically has around 120 items on it. The next column shows an estimate of the hours per month each task takes. The final column is a simple yes or no question: can someone else do this task or project? The fourth column is the name of the person.

We all take on projects or tasks that we have no business doing, and the particularly insidious tasks are the "I'll do this one time" tasks that end up on your plate more permanently. Creating a workload scrub is not a simple endeavor. My key leaders do one annually as do I, and I am always amazed at what has ended up on my plate that ought not to be there.

When people come to me and ask how they should handle anxiety between them and another person, they often do a beautiful job of succinctly laying out the exact dynamic. After explaining the situation and the dynamic, they ask what to do. My most frequent response is, "Can you tell them exactly what you just told me?" When you are stuck in a pattern with someone, the very best way to diffuse anxiety is to name that pattern with the person.

The absolute secret to this conversation going well is your ability to have it without heat. If you are angry at someone, take time to remove the heat from the situation before addressing it with him or her. Talking about a dynamic between you is vulnerable and could be threatening, especially for an indirect communicator. It could escalate or de-escalate the dynamic and anxiety, and the magic secret is removing heat and anxiety when you talk.

One of the simplest ways to de-escalate anxiety is to develop a knack for playfulness. Ed Friedman says, "A major criterion for judging the anxiety level of any society is the loss of its capacity to be playful." Playfulness is a form of reframing without having to reframe directly. You can simply bring some levity into the situation. You'll know the playfulness worked if the group relaxes and didn't work if the group looks at you sideways because your attempt was ill-timed or in poor taste. I've experienced both.

A few tips: playfulness works best when not directly aimed at the issue or person at hand. You should not try to seek a laugh at the expense of the matter at hand or the person in question. Playfulness should be equally enjoyed by all, and so the best playfulness offers a relief valve for the building pressure of anxiety or the exhaustion of a long meeting focused on an important, detailed task.

# Managing Leadership Anxiety

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## Chapter 8: Genograms: What Has Been Handed Down

A genogram is a family tree sketched out on butcher paper, or sometimes digitally using an app. On it, you record names and births and deaths like a family tree, and then add extra information like divorces, remarriage, affairs, miscarriages, and mental health. You also record relational health using various diagrams—who got along with whom, who was in tension, who was cut off, who was a favorite, who was a secret keeper. Once you’ve sketched out your genogram, including all the relational keys and major events, you gather some trusted friends and present your family history for an hour or so.

A genogram helps you see the traits passed down from generation to generation. While a genogram may reveal some significant challenge from your upbringing, it is not about blame or being a victim. A genogram is about understanding what you’re holding and what is holding you in your family system. As Seth Godin wrote, “It’s not your fault, but it might be your responsibility. That’s a fork in the road on the way to becoming a professional.”

Making and presenting a genogram is a deeper level of work. Constructing it takes at least two or three hours, longer if you need to get on the phone with a relative. Sometimes those phone calls generate more work too! Once you’ve constructed a genogram, you’ll spend another hour to ninety minutes presenting it to a group of friends. The time is worth it. We grow in fits, starts, and breakthroughs and a genogram can offer you some powerful breakthroughs. I learned a great deal when I first presented a genogram more than twenty years ago. The beauty of presenting a genogram to a group is that both the presenter and the group learn something about themselves.

Four recurring themes to look for in a genogram are: cutoff, enmeshment, conflict, and abuse. We commonly understand conflict and abuse, and we have covered enmeshment in our discussion on differentiation, so we will spend the rest of this chapter diving deeper into cutoff. If dysfunction is not named and addressed, it is transmitted down to the next generation, which will commonly deal with it through cutoff. Cutoff often comes in the form of a childhood vow, “When I am an adult, I will never \_\_\_ like my parent did.”

Cutoff isn’t the only common trait in a genogram. We also see anger being passed down generation to generation, addiction, and the power that secrets have to keep us bound. Tragically, physical abuse and sexual abuse are frequently transmitted generation to generation and are among the most horrific and damaging generational traits. Of course, the power of transmission is also very positive. Genograms also reveal resilience, humor, playfulness, and family bonding. The point of a genogram is not to dig up dirt; you may spend some of your genogram celebrating the traits you cherish. You can get a long way by Googling a genogram to find examples and even instructions on how to build one.

# Managing Leadership Anxiety

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## Chapter 9: Verbatims: Knowing How You Show Up

Some experiences have such a profound impact that you can recall them in vivid detail, and in recalling them you almost relive the experience. This is the type of experience we examine in a verbatim. A verbatim is a three- to five-page written account and analysis of a leadership experience you recently had. You capture, as best as you can remember, actual dialogue from the encounter, as well as what you were thinking and feeling leading up to the encounter and what you were thinking and feeling during the encounter. You conclude a verbatim document with a summary of what you observe about it upon reflection and also where you see or don't see God at work in it.

A verbatim offers a leader the rare gift of being able to revisit a leadership encounter to learn from it and grow for the next one. The goal of a verbatim is not to “do it better next time” and certainly not to have a mulligan. The goal is to be aware of how you show up in leadership encounters and what is going on in you under the surface. The best way to utilize a verbatim is in a small, trusted group setting where one person presents a verbatim encounter and the other people help her or him process what he or she was thinking and feeling during the encounter.

All of us carry experiences and anxieties that inform our world view and most certainly inform how we show up in leadership. We bring to every encounter a set of assumptions and wounds, or maybe something as simple as a bad day, and all of these form us under the surface of our awareness and infect our leadership ability. By examining these in a verbatim, we are able to grow in awareness of how the self can get in the way of being fully present to God and the people we are called to serve and lead. Instead of being triggered and reactive, we can be freer to serve the person in front of us, even if that person is hostile or frustrates us or throws a curve ball our way. By going through several verbatim experiences, we become less reactive and better able to serve and lead. This is not nearly as easy as I make it sound, but it is a journey well worth taking.

All leaders experience stepping on land mines with groups of people and causing unintentional pain. All leaders have experienced bringing a wound into a meeting and acting out of it or holding assumptions about specific people and then seeing the world through those assumptions, reinforcing them. All leaders have chronic patterns that shrink their leadership reach and ability.

A verbatim doesn't eliminate land mines or wounds or assumptions, it simply allows a leader a safe environment to become more aware of them and therefore be able to manage them in future leadership encounters. A verbatim gives a leader the incredible gift of self-examination so that the leader can then choose to die to that aspect of self and see if God has a better, more freeing reality than the one the leader assumed.

# Managing Leadership Anxiety

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## Chapter 10: A Wider Scope and a Deeper Capacity

Jeremiah is one of my favorite Old Testament writers because he wrote before and during the Exile, one of the most forging experiences in the life of God's people. God instructed Jeremiah to buy a field (Jer. 32). It made little sense because the people were about to be exiled. Babylon would lay to waste all the farms and buildings, and the place would be desolate for a few generations. But Jeremiah obeyed God, bought a field, and gave the deed to one of his assistants. God was basically saying, "I know things are about to get worse, but on the other side of that, this field will produce all manner of abundant fruit." Jeremiah's purchase was about knowing that fruit would come to that field after a difficult season.

I sometimes feel the same way about these materials. Things may get worse in the short term as you disrupt status quo within yourself and your organization, but on the other side is immense fruit provided by the goodness of God. I encourage you to set your face like flint toward the healing and freedom the gospel promises, even if you are under siege right now.