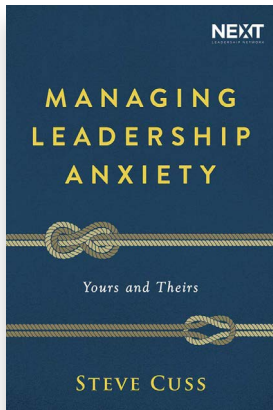


EXECUTIVE BOOK SUMMARIES

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Managing Leadership Anxiety

THE NUTSHELL

Thomas Nelson 2019

The Anxiety Gap

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. Once you get the hang of it, 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.

Anxiety, Freedom, and How the Gospel Works

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. 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.

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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 in 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. 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 might be, “Obsessively thinking about this upcoming difficult meeting will not help pre-empt the outcome. I believe the lie that worrying will help. Instead I’m going to stop, pray, and ask God to guide me.”

Idols, Vows, and the Stories We Tell Ourselves

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. 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. 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.

Sources of Relational Anxiety

Relational sources of anxiety 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. 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. Admit you just needed help from a third party, not to gang up on them.

Applying Family Systems to Leadership

A system is simply a group of people who function in an emotional unit. Systems become toxic 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

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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 by paying attention to relational patterns and help his people detangle and break free.

Tools That Diffuse Anxiety

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.

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.

Verbatims: Knowing How You Show Up

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 Wider Scope and a Deeper Capacity

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.