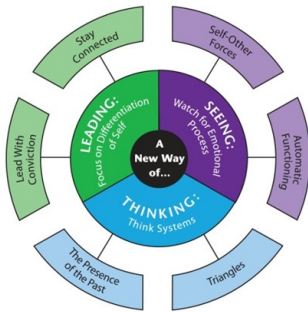


# Resilient Leadership

Lead with Conviction ▲ Stay Connected ▲ Be a Less Anxious Presence ▲ Think Systems



## Understanding Reactivity

*One of the basic challenges we all face is how to achieve a healthy balance between our thinking and feeling responses. When our level of anxiety rises—either as a result of internal stressors or from the escalating anxiety of those around us—our feeling levels also rise, and it becomes proportionately more difficult to maintain a healthy balance between thinking and feeling responses. The automatic tendency is to react without thinking, and a vicious circle can quickly be established, with heightened feelings feeding anxieties which in turn make us more and more reactive. Resilient Leadership points out the need for a leader to understand the dynamics involved in this potential chain reaction, and to know how to moderate reactivity in him/herself as well as in others.*

### RE-CAP

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### Predictable Patterns

Reactivity is expressed in a few basic behavioral patterns that show up repeatedly in organizations as well as in individuals. These can be summarized in the following way:

- **Conflict:** This pattern can be expressed as criticism, competition, or overt argument, and it can vary in degree and intensity from mild to severe.
- **Distance:** This pattern embraces a range of expressions, from refusal to communicate, to changing the subject, to leaving—whether that be an actual physical departure or simple “checking out” emotionally. At its most extreme, it can result in a complete cut-off.
- **Over– Under- Functioning:** This pattern involves reciprocal interactions within a relationship, with one side slowing or even halting its functioning, while the other becomes dominant through techniques such as excessive worry over others, having all the answers, doing all the talking, and so forth.
- **Triangling:** This pattern represents the automatic tendency to relieve stress by focusing on a third party, either as an object of concern (victimizing) or as the object of negative judgment (demonizing).

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## Resilient Leadership

Our society is in the midst of an escalating pattern of reactivity that has intensified over a period of many years. The polarization of political debate, fundamentalist thinking in an increasing number of fields, hypersensitivity to perceived slights, and many other symptoms are clear reminders of the challenge faced by those who wish to exercise effective leadership in contemporary organizations, whether large or small.

A leader who can recognize this bigger context of reactivity will be better able to identify specific issues that arise as part of a larger pattern of anxiety. One key to being a Resilient Leader lies in the ability to maintain a thoughtful stance, even in the face of social pressures inviting a more emotional response. Resilient Leadership encourages adopting the stance of an observer as one very valuable technique for lowering one's own reactivity. Distance from the immediacy of the situation is automatically guaranteed in a leader who is intent on observing how the phenomenon of reactivity is playing itself out in others, in organizations and even in oneself.

### Tips for Leaders

An atmosphere of pervasive reactivity is extremely debilitating for any leader who wishes to function as a voice of reason in the midst of a sea of automatic, feeling-driven responses. Nonetheless, Resilient Leadership highlights how crucial it is for an organization to have a leader who does not get caught up in or carried away by the reactivity of others. Here are some suggestions for leaders who wish to be a calming

force within anxious organizational families:

- Recognize that the intensity (seriousness) of others is a sure sign of reactivity. A loss of playfulness is always symptomatic of high levels of anxiety. The leader who is able to use irony and humor will be less easily “hooked” by that reactivity and will help others to become more playful—more resilient—and, ultimately, less reactive.
- A persistent focus on pathology is another typical symptom of elevated levels of anxiety within an organization. Leaders who can acknowledge the existence of problems without becoming fixated or overly preoccupied by them are better able to offer creative solutions and to think out-of-the-box about how to meet future challenges.
- Reactive people (and organizations) tend to be intrusive in the boundaries of others. Resilient Leaders are alert to such violations and act quickly to insist on better management of self and respect for others' independent functioning. Intrusive behavior can take the form of criticizing situations where one has no legitimate involvement, or becoming involved in initiatives that are beyond one's scope or area of expertise. When such reactive patterns occur, the leader should challenge those behaviors and be a model of mutual respect, tolerance, and an old-fashioned “mind-your-own-business” approach.

