

A business founded in a market system has as its principal function its own propagation. It seeks to do this by earning a return on capital invested in it, and its success endeavor is measured by its profitability. A measure of its functioning, therefore, is its ability to return a consistent profit on its operations. When a business grows beyond a sole proprietorship, that growth rests in large measure on the ability of its employees to bring their talents and skills to the task at hand. The functioning of employees, therefore, represents an important component of the company's effort to propagate itself and distinguish itself in terms of profitability.\*

A stroll through the business and management section of a good bookstore leads one to conclude that organizations currently find the topic of individual functioning in the organizational context of pertinent subject. Managers are advised to create highly effective people through a regimen for the development of proper habits, exhortation and even, occasionally, threat. Thinkers and activists also look at the functioning of organizations themselves, focusing on communication, strategic planning, the definition of mission, efficiency and a host of other variables believed to be important to enhancing individual effectiveness and organizational productivity. While many of these areas are undoubtedly important, family systems theory suggests that a more basic variable may form the distant drumbeat of personal and organizational functioning, a protean rhythm that sets the pace and challenges the ability of individuals and of organizations to function at their best.

This basic variable, anxiety, affects both individuals and the organization as a whole. People often think of anxiety as a psychological phenomenon or state and, indeed, it falls within the current system of diagnostic categories of psychiatric evaluation. The classification recognizes that anxiety is broader than mental, that the term describes a condition or state of the entire organism or individual. Within the diagnostic categories one finds several classifications of anxiety, such as panic disorder and various types of phobias. All of these apply to the individual alone, and do not touch on the linkage between the state of the individual and his or her position in a relationship network. Family systems theory views any of the various classifications of anxiety as an expression of the condition of the individual organism. Family systems theory also posits that the condition of the individual cannot be separated from the condition or state of the relationship network in which the individual lives and functions. The markers of the condition of the individual, therefore, mark the condition of the relationship network.

The use of the term relationship network, while accurate, inadequately describes the nature of the group, unit, or perhaps even superorganism (a whole comprised of multiple individuals). Family systems theory, extrapolating from the human family, proposes that units or groups of individuals are connected, each to the others in their various constellations, in a manner that links the functioning of each (physiologically, mentally, and behaviorally) to the functioning of all the others. Some are more vitally linked than others, who are more peripheral. Each person both contributes to and reflects the condition or state of the unit physiologically, mentally and behaviorally. The interdependence constitutes species-typical behavior of the human and of a large portion of animate life.

Clearly individuals bring to the unit differing capacities for functioning. Some constitutionally display traits that move them into positions of leadership, while other slip into the positions of subordinates. Yet family systems theory maintains that how well each functions either as chief or subordinate is influenced by how the group as a whole functions. Said somewhat differently, the condition of each person (physiologically, mentally, behaviorally) depends to some degree how the group or unit is managing the pressures to adapt to changing conditions. For example, how well the leader leads may relate directly to how well the followers follow. How the leader leads and the followers follow both shapes and reflects the condition of the unit.

The neuroscientist Robert Sapolsky describes clearly the interplay of individual and group in his studies of a baboon troop in Kenya. He notes that physiological functioning changes with social position and an animal one year to the next may be quite different physiologically as its social position changes within the group (Sapolsky 1992). He goes on to propose that the physiological correlates of rank, particularly of dominance, depend upon the

type of society in which the rank occurs. With the term type of society he refers to whether the society is stable or unstable.

He describes in particular a period of social instability in the group of baboons. He notes that typically in a baboon troop, when an alpha (most dominant) male nears the end of his prime, a beta male, occupying the number two position, is ready to move into the alpha slot when the incumbent falters. During the period he describes, however, no beta was clearly waiting to inherit the alpha position. Instead, positions two through seven had formed a coalition to harass the old leader, who was quickly deposed. Subsequently the coalition rapidly dissolved, and the group entered a period of social instability. No clear hierarchy emerged among the victors. Coalitions formed and dissolved quickly, even several times within a given day. Behaviors reflected a dramatic increase in dominance interactions and aggression and a decrease in feeding and mating behaviors. During this period, according to Sapolsky, the psychological advantages of dominance disappeared. For the half dozen animals at the top of the hierarchy, lack of predictability and lack of control characterized life. Furthermore, the physiological advantages of dominance, present during previous stable periods, vanished. The highest ranking animals no longer enjoyed the lowest basal cortisol concentrations (a measurement of physiological stress) nor the fastest elevations during stress (a measure of flexibility of response). Viewed through the lens of family systems theory, the animals had lost flexibility of response.

From this study and others showing similar findings, Sapolsky concludes that a single physiological profile of dominance does not exist among social primates (Sapolsky 1992). The physiological profile depends, instead, upon the type of society in which it occurs, the critical variable being whether the society is stable or unstable. He further states: "It is my feeling that the psychological advantages and disadvantages of dominance, varying according to social setting, are the critical variables in this stable/unstable dichotomy." (1992, 276-77) Those advantages can be generally described for the individual as a sense of control, of predictably accessible outlets for frustration, and a broad, predictable relationship network around the particular animal. These characteristics vanish during a period of instability.

The instability of the group is actually one of perception, based presumably in each animal's perceived lack of predictability and lack of control in the absence of a clear group structure. That perceptual instability leads to each individual's focus on the relationship system, on the position of each with regard to the other(s). The focus on the other(s) coupled with the increased interactional intensity results in the various behavioral indicators of increased instability in the group.

Sapolsky's description of the baboon troop as stable or unstable approximates family system theory's use of the term anxiety applied to the unit. The unstable unit is reflected in the changes in physiology, mental process, and behavior of the unit's members. Instead of the dichotomous concepts of stable and unstable, family systems theory views the condition of the unit ranging along a broad continuum from very stable to very unstable with many variations between the extremes. In the mid ranges of the stability/instability continuum (in family systems terms the continuum of the intensity of anxiety) the condition of the unit might be reflected in the functioning of a portion of the group, perhaps in a few peripheral relationships or in the functioning of a few individuals.

Again extrapolating from knowledge of the human family, various markers reflect the changing condition of the unit. Intensifying anxiety for the individual is marked by heightened sensitivity to others in the group, shifts in perception and interpretation of events and behavior, and an increasing automaticity of behavior. A characteristic feeling is that of helplessness and fear. Aside from the markers of individual distress characteristic of changes in the condition of the individual organism, relationships predominantly express the shifting condition of the group from more to less stable. As with Sapolsky's baboons, interpersonal encounters -- aggression, conflict, postural bluffing (often in what appears to be the human variant of dominance interactions) -- emerge and recede. Alliances also appear and dissolve, a process family systems theory incorporates in the concept of triangling. The various emerging markers of increasing instability (i.e. anxiety) reflect shifting physiology, mental process and behavior of the participants. If the anxiety is sufficiently intense and the instability severe, the various markers of "mob process" emerge -- intense efforts to extrude one individual or one group leading even to violence, stalemated polarization between subgroups, panic reactions based on a shared perception and consequent fear, and so forth. Family

systems theory defines these processes as emotional and automatic, predictably repeating to reflect the intensity of anxiety and the degree of instability in the group.

A most remarkable quality of anxiety, so well-known to humans that it often is overlooked, is its infectiousness. The physiological, mental, and behavioral markers of anxiety tend to spread upon exposure from one person to the next to the next. Sometimes the spreading of anxiety leads to a dampening of intensity; at other times the spreading is accompanied by rapid intensification of anxiety. Whether anxiety spreads and whether it intensifies as it spreads depends upon the interplay of at least the following variables: the severity and magnitude of the actual stressor(s), the state or condition of the relationship network at the time of the stressor (where it would fall on the continuum from unstable to stable), and the ability of key individuals to maintain functioning (both mental and behavioral) in the face of the changes and pressures in the network marking the intensification of anxiety or increasing instability.

If anxiety spreads and becomes more intense, the characteristic markers of instability appear. If sufficiently intense, large numbers of people become involved, and one can speak accurately of a storm of anxiety sweeping through the unit, displaying in intense version on a large scale the characteristic markers of anxiety in the unit. Among the more prominent examples of large storms of anxiety one can include the witchcraft persecutions of Europe and North America in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, any number of investment frenzies and their corresponding financial panics, and even, perhaps, the polarizations of large nation-states, for example that of the United States and the Soviet Union during the so-called cold war.

If Bowen theory's description of the relationship between anxiety and functioning in the unit is accurate, what then can be drawn from this perspective that may be of use to organizations and businesses as they attempt to position themselves in the shifting climate of modern society? The first may be simply the basic idea that when the intensity of anxiety decreases, the ability of the individual and the unit to function at a more efficient level increases. The people who form any work group represent a portion of the anxiety equation. To the degree that such people recognize, understand the impact of, and possess skill in the management of anxiety, the organization should be able to maintain a high level of efficiency in functioning in highly uncertain, difficult environments. If the concept of differentiation drawn from the Bowen theory is accurate, some will automatically possess such knowledge. Others may be able to acquire a satisfactory degree of mastery through effort and experience. If the critical personnel in an organization have developed a degree of competency, and can operate with the skills of anxiety management, their functioning in the relationship network can help stabilize others whose skills are not so well developed and practiced.

How leaders emerge and conduct themselves, therefore, takes on heightened importance. An important task of a leader concerns maintaining stability in the group. Sapolsky discusses the characteristics of animals that rise to dominant positions in a troop. He writes about the style of the animal, how it achieves and manages its rank within the group (Sapolsky 1992). Analyzing ten years of data on the behavior of the animals. Sapolsky and his researchers found subsets of animals that show certain extremes of behavior (styles) and that low basal cortisol levels characterized a certain stylistic subset of dominant animal.

These animals displayed the following behavioral characteristics: 1. They were excellent at discriminating between threatening and neutral interactions with social rivals, and 2. If a rival was determined to be threatening, these animals tended to initiate the fight. Even though in general Sapolsky's researchers determined that initiating a fight is not usually a successful strategy (initiators typically lose 80% of such fights) these animals mostly initiated winning fights, implying that they were picking their fights carefully, suggesting social knowledge, control, and general savvy. 3. Once the fight had occurred, these animals were best at determining whether they had won or lost. 4. If the animal lost the fight, low basal cortisol levels were associated with those animals who most often displaced aggression onto third parties. Sapolsky refers to this behavior as an outlet for frustration. 5. Finally, lower basal cortisol levels were found among those animals who spent the most time grooming and being groomed by non-estrus females and interacting with females and infants. In short, Sapolsky's research demonstrates that a fully flexible stress response, indicative in terms of this paper of efficiency of functioning, and a set of behaviors

described previously characterize the group of animals that consistently maintain high ranking positions within the baboon troop.

In writing about the function of the human family unit, Dr. Bowen wrote the following:

Operationally, ideal family treatment begins when one can find a family leader with the courage to define self, who is as invested in the welfare of the family as in self, who is neither angry nor dogmatic, whose energy goes to changing self rather than telling others what they should do, who can know and respect the multiple opinions of others, who can modify self in response to the strengths of the group, and who is not influenced by the irresponsible opinions of others . . . A family leader is beyond the popular notion of power. A responsible family leader automatically generates mature leadership qualities in other family members who are to follow. (Kerr and Bowen 1988, 342-43)

Generalizing from Sapolsky's research and from Bowen theory, one can speculate about the characteristics of people who may become effective leaders, particularly during periods of accelerating anxiety in the organization. First of all, effective leaders will likely have good control of their own emotional reactivity. They will have the ability to establish relationships and remain in contact with the various factions in the organization that push for rapid, fix-it change and the victory of narrow self-interest. The ability to remain in contact with intense, conflictual others is necessary if the potential leader is to employ knowledge of triangles to help position him- or herself in a manner to reduce the intensity of anxiety in the system and produce greater stability.

The ability to discriminate among threats and challenges to the organization will certainly be an important characteristic. Leaders who are functioning efficiently will recognize situations that must be responded to and those that do not represent a significant challenge to the organization. They will also tend to initiate the response to the challenging situation and will quickly and accurately assess how effective their response has been. These three characteristics, the efficient assessment of threat, the initiation of the response, and the assessment of effectiveness check and reinforce one another.

People who may become effective leaders will have developed what Sapolsky calls outlets for frustration and what Bowen theory refers to as the management of emotional reactivity. Whether such mechanisms involve displacement of aggression remains to be seen. Clearly the human displays this characteristic, but it is less clear whether it is a component of effective leadership. This linking of Bowen and Sapolsky is not exactly accurate, since the concept of outlets for frustration incorporates the mechanisms that Bowen theory refers to as anxiety binding, but the notion of mechanisms for the management of the stress response/anxiety is common to both. In a sense all of the characteristics listed above are psychological, a matter of perception, of attitude, of mindset. No one has said it better than Sapolsky. ". . . the psychological filters with which those external events are perceived alter the resultant physiology with at least as much potency as the stressor itself. . . . For us clever primates, life is filled with ambiguous events, and we differ as to whether we quench life's thirsts from glasses that are perceived as half full or half empty." (Sapolsky 1992, 280).

The subject of psychological filters leads again to Bowen theory, and the subject is more complex than simply half empty or half full. The view of the glass as half empty comes out of a position of high anxiety and personal sense of loss of control and lack of predictability. When individuals and units can shake the pervasive filter of helplessness, anxiety decreases and functioning improves. Knowledge of how the emotional system of the unit operates can assist in reducing helplessness. Leaders may well need the skill of recognizing the difference between the content and the process of organizational situations. While the content of anxiety or instability shifts with the wind, the process of how people and the group act remains relatively predictable. For example, the emergence of the alliance process in the group, triangling in terms of Bowen theory, can occur around all sorts of issues when the anxiety is sufficiently intense. Knowledge of how triangles function and how particular triangles operate as well as developing the skills of detriangling can all be important aids to reduce helplessness in the anxious climate of the organization.

Many of the skills developed to manage one's own emotional reactivity derived from family systems theory can assist the individual and the leader's efforts to remain functional in the face of intense group instability. Such skills include the ability to listen to and comprehend the other's perception of the situation, an ability to grasp what the other believes he or she is facing. The leader will have to have a deep interest in the welfare of the entire organization and be able to retain that interest in the face of forceful pressures to follow the quick-fix proposition of one or another group or the appeasing gestures that lead to long term confrontation and disruption. He or she will have to have some capacity to maintain the position that family systems theory refers to as emotional neutrality, characterized by not taking sides in response to emotional pressures to do so, the capacity to observe while participating, and the paradoxical stance of full involvement without becoming too concerned about the outcome of the endeavor. The leader will have to be able to distill facts from the cauldron of intense feeling and communicate about those facts to feelingful others. He or she will have to present thinking about those facts that is not heavily laced with personal subjectivity.

Beyond addressing the challenges of leadership, what does family systems theory have to offer the contemporary corporation or organization? First and foremost may be the lesson, hard-learned in families, that change-oriented, fix-it approaches that focus on changing the behavior of someone else to quell one's own anxiety are not only ineffective but can make the problem worse. They are expressive of the unstable condition of the unit. Family systems theory would posit that the identified problem, whether in an individual or in a relationship or a network of relationships, reflects the condition of the group, its position on the stability/instability continuum. Approaches that focus on the problem without including overall condition of the unit appear much more likely to be ineffective or even counterproductive. Slower, long-term approaches to problems, approaches that focus on the system that has produced the problem, may be more effective than an approach that promises a quick fix. A corollary would suggest that what seems to be the easy way may not be the best way to improve functioning within an organization.

Whether such a measured approach is feasible in an anxious organization remains to be seen. The discomfort generated by the intensity of anxiety or degree of instability in the group will emerge typically as a strong pressure to relieve discomfort quickly. All things being equal, the pressures for quick relief will be self-centered on the individual or the subgroup, leading to conflict and potential polarizations as the self interest of the various groups clash, heightened by the discomfort of anxiety. The outcome can be increased discomfort, anxiety, and instability, leading to even more intense pressures for rapid solutions which relieve discomfort. The leadership qualities noted above will have to emerge in this climate.

## ***REFERENCES***

Kerr, Michael E. and Murray Bowen. 1988. Family Evaluation: An Approach Based on Bowen Theory, New York; W. W. Norton & Company.

Sapolsky, Robert M. 1992. Stress, the Aging Brain, and the Mechanisms of Neuron Death. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press.

[Home](#)

[Overview](#)

[Syllabus](#)

[Synopsis](#)

[SupplementalReadings](#)

[ClassRoster](#)

[BulletinBoard](#)

[Library](#)