

# Use of Self as Leader

Session Two

Online 2020-21



 Rocky Mountain Synod, ELCA

Courageous, resilient, and faithful leaders for the sake of the world

# Use of Self as Leader

## Session Two Participant Outcomes:

1. Sketch a plan for improving personal emotional competence, focusing on self-perception and emotional expression.
2. Explain how you can soothe yourself and bounce back from setbacks more quickly, using concepts of self-perception and emotional expression.
3. Identify a personal or professional situation when lack of self-differentiation resulted in an impasse.
4. Identify a time when anxiety got in the way of working towards a healthy outcome.
5. Describe a situation in which leveraging triangles was at work.

## Preparation for this Session:

- Read *Failure of Nerve* by Edwin Friedman.
- Read this section of the manual.

## Found in this Session:

Developing Emotional Competence	page 2
Leader's Presence in Managing Group Anxiety	page 6
Emotional Triangles	page 9



## Developing Emotional Competence

### Emotional Intelligence

A set of emotional and social skills that influence the way we perceive and express ourselves, develop and maintain social relationships, cope with challenges, and use emotional information in an effective and meaningful way.

Emotional intelligence is also known as **EQ**, which stands for *emotional quotient*, and corresponds with the common concept of **IQ**, or *intelligence quotient*. While research has indicated that IQ remains constant throughout a person's life, EQ is variable and can change with intention and effort. Again, to contrast the two quotients, IQ measures the intellectual concepts of verbal, mathematical, and spatial ability. EQ measures self-awareness and a person's ability to use one's self in everyday interactions with other people. Ultimately, emotional intelligence begins with knowing yourself, so that you can manage relationships in healthy, life-giving ways.

The most common model of EQ, and the one used in the personal assessment we asked you to take, employs the four quadrants of self-awareness, self-control, community awareness, and relationship management.

Throughout this course we will use the graph to the right as the foundation for all the material we present, discuss, and explore.



### Neuroscience and the Command of Jesus

The label 'emotional intelligence' can be off-putting to some people who were raised to believe that emotions are inconsequential at best and maybe even harmful. Some people were raised to ignore, suppress, or dismiss their emotions. Neuroscience, however, tells us that all reasoning is filtered first through that part of the brain through which emotions pass. One neuroscientist, Antonio Damasio, explains "we are not necessarily thinking machines. We are feeling machines that think." When we ignore our emotions, it is to our own detriment. In order to best use our self for the sake of the world around us, whether that is our family and friends, our faith community, our places of work, or the civic community, we need to know, understand, and manage our response to our own emotions. Jesus commands us to love our neighbors as ourselves. We are coming to understand, however, that we cannot love with the fullness of who God is creating us to be if we do not understand our own emotions and then use our emotions to love our ourselves and others.



Think about your current emotions and how they are impacting you right now, as you read this material. How has your emotional state affected your relationships today? Your decision making? Your creative work? Your ability to carry out the tasks you assigned yourself today?

## Increasing Emotional Intelligence

As stated earlier, the good news is EQ can be developed throughout a person's lifetime. We can become more self-aware and use that awareness to be more present in our daily life, make choices about how we respond in any given situation, maintain meaningful relationships, and attend to our mental health.

A reframing of the earlier EQ graph may help us begin our own journey toward increasing our emotional intelligence.

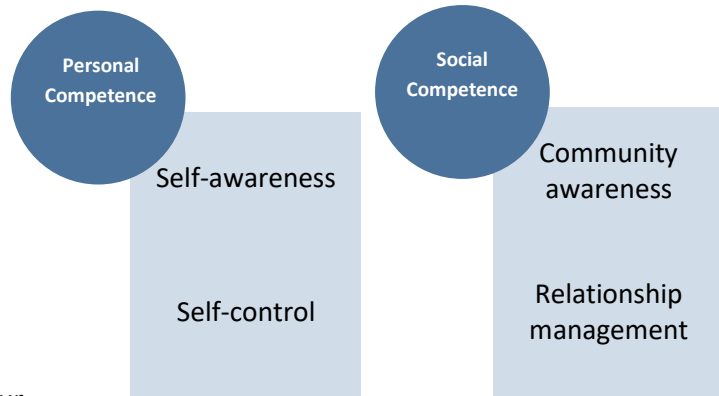
So, let's look more specifically at each of the four quadrants:

### Self-awareness:

The important skills in self-awareness are:

- Become aware of your SELF as your primary tool in life, for all your life and all your relationships.
- Pay attention to your self-regard. Understand both your positive and negative qualities and learn to like who you truly are so that you can generate confidence in yourself.
- Lean into your potential. Give yourself permission and space to grow and become the person God is creating you to be.
- Be curious about your own emotions. Learn to identify and then distinguish one emotion from another.
- Begin to make connections between knowing yourself, loving yourself, and loving others as Jesus teaches us to do.
- Spiritual wholeness comes through meditation, contemplation, opening ourselves up to God, and doing our own inner work.

Embracing self-awareness is a life-long journey and leads to living a richer, more engaged life. No one arrives at complete self-awareness because we are evolving creatures and with God's guidance we are constantly becoming. The journey begins with listening to our own emotions without judgment. Emotions are not good or bad. Emotions are messages about how we are experiencing the world around us. They give us information that will inform our decision. We may have learned from our families that some emotions are more acceptable than other, but the emotions themselves are not good or bad.



As you become aware of your emotions, notice the ripple effects in your own body and in the people surrounding you. Begin to track what pushes your buttons and brings an emotional response influenced by your past. Learn to lean into discomfort and ask yourself detective-like questions. Why is my heart pounding? What has caused my tears to well up? Why is my voice becoming louder or more strained? Why have I stopped listening to what this person is saying? All these questions are clues to your emotional reality. A noted therapist, Moshe Feldenkrais, reminds us, “You can’t do what you want till you know what you are doing.” Self-awareness is the beginning of this long journey.

### **Self-control:**

The important skills in self-control are:

- Learn to share, communicate, and remain transparent with your feelings and emotions.
- Practice putting your needs, thoughts, and opinions out into the world in ways that are true to yourself and not over and against the people around you. In a Martin Luther-ish way, learn to take a stand.
- Practice being self-directed in thinking, feeling, and actions. Know yourself. Become self-differentiated, knowing the boundaries between yourself and others.
- Become aware of how our expectations of self and others interferes with our working with others.
- Think through the difference between what you intend to accomplish and the results of what you do.
- Practice a wide range of possible responses to internal emotions and moods.

Self-control is not about suppressing or ignoring emotions. Self-control is about recognizing emotions and allowing them to impact your response to situations. Improving self-control requires a diverse set of practices that incorporate awareness of your motivation, your history, the internal voices gathered throughout your lifetime, and appropriate vulnerability. Working on regulating ourselves in order to cultivate meaningful relationships necessitates a balance between authentically opening ourselves up, sharing our true selves, and doing so in a way that is fitting for the circumstances around you. Self-care, self-compassion, and space to deal with uncomfortable emotions (notice we did not judge the emotions as good or bad) are key to practicing self-control. Trusted friends who are willing to both support and challenge you, and are willing to give honest and loving feedback, are invaluable in this part of your journey.

### **Community Awareness:**

The important skills in community awareness are:

- Giving and receiving trust and compassion in order to establish and maintain mutually satisfying personal relationships.
- Developing empathy increases our ability and willingness to take notice of and be sensitive to other people’s needs and feelings.

- Committing to social responsibility. Jesus calls us to care for the least, the lost, and the oppressed. Cooperating and contributing to the well-being of the larger social system increases our own emotional intelligence in very life-giving ways.
- Systems theory helps us identify healthy and unhealthy relationships within all spheres of our lives.

The skills of community awareness are essential in engaging not just ministry contexts, but our whole lives – family and friends as well as the broader civic community. These skills are at the core of becoming strong leaders. If you remain inattentive to the people surrounding you, you will have very little positive impact on your ministry and work. This course and learning community provide opportunities to practice organizational development theories and tools to strategically think about your ministry context in a safe and brave environment. In order to increase community awareness, we all need to practice listening, observe body language in the moment, be intentional about our interpersonal relationships, and broaden the intentionality out into the world around us.

God came into the world, for the sake of the world. We, therefore, are to reflect God’s love for the world and work to bring wholeness in whatever ways we can and in whatever situation we find ourselves. Today, the world and our communities need each of us to be paying attention, to be aware of the full community God has created.

### Relationship Management:

The important skills in relationship management are:

- **Problem solving** – All human encounters involve emotion. How can we become more adept at using our emotions and our awareness of other people’s emotions as an effective problem solving tool?
- **Reality testing** – A key component in attending to relationship management is assessing what is really going on, as opposed to fluttering off into the story you are telling yourself, daydreams or biases that make unhelpful or hurtful assumptions. We need to know the reality of the present situation to make decisions that will truly enhance the community.
- **Impulse control** – Our communities will benefit from our capacity to resist or delay the temptation to do or say something or to decide too quickly or rashly. Our emotions ought to inform our reasoning, not hijack a thoughtful way forward.
- **Flexibility** – A crucial skill in managing relationships is the ability to adjust our emotions, thoughts, and behavior to changing situations, conditions, and data. The ability to take in new information and change our mind or our approach to a situation will increase positive outcomes and healthier relationships.
- **Stress tolerance** – We are all feeling the weight of the accumulation of stressors in our world which also impact our family and faith community: the pandemic, the confronting centuries of systemic racism, the economic realities, and the polarized political divide in our country. Yet, in order to attend to relationships and make a positive difference in the world, we need to find ways to hold our personal and communal stress without getting overwhelmed.

- **Optimism** – Optimism is another important skill in managing relationships. We need to practice looking on the brighter side and finding hope even in the midst of adversity. Optimism is the skill that will counter our tendency to spiral into a negative and not a generative mindset.

Managing our relationships and making a difference in whatever spheres of influence we find ourselves takes intentionally building our capacity to use ourselves as primary tools. Increasing emotional intelligence is about effectively engaging the people around us and maintaining meaningful relationships. Again, neuroscientists remind us that “our brains are built to help us function as members of a tribe,” a community.<sup>1</sup> We are not wired to live only as individuals, self-sufficient, without the need for others.

We are created in the image of God, the Triune God, God in relationship to God’s self and the entire created world. Attending to and positively managing our relationships is our work as followers of Jesus. We achieve meaningful relationship when we remain open, curious, and authentic. As members of the Body of Christ, we want to increase our capacity to inspire and guide individuals and groups to move forward toward effective and healthy relationships.

## Leader’s Presence in Managing Anxiety

### Managing Anxiety

How we as leaders show up in community permeates the community or system. Whether in our families, workplaces or communities of faith, the person’s values, way of being and responding all contribute to the health or unhealth of the community. The leader(s) especially influence the culture. Leaders influence the activities, decisions, and values of the system. A healthy leader influences the system by acting as an immune system for dysfunctional behavior. If leaders can remain calm during a time of stress and high anxiety, people will be less likely to act in destructive ways. How the leaders manage their own anxiety and how the leaders self-differentiate matters in the overall health of the community. Leaders who respond calmly and thoughtfully when others are caught in anxious behaviors have the potential to keep the system healthy and better able to make good decisions based on principle not emotional reactivity. Close attentions to one’s own functioning is more important than concern about others functioning.

### Two Types of Anxiety

Anxiety within a relationship system comes in two forms: acute and chronic.

---

<sup>1</sup> Van der Kolk, Bessel, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*, p. 80.



**Acute anxiety** is triggered when a threat is posed by a particular incident. Acute anxiety manifests when a temporary crisis occurs. Usually acute anxiety gets the full attention of leaders and will reduce as the incident or crisis is resolved. Congregational examples include an unexpected transition of clergy leadership, a natural disaster in the area, a fire in the building, etc. Family examples might be a heart attack of a family member or the sudden death of someone close to the family.

**Chronic anxiety**, on the other hand, is ongoing. Chronic anxiety is like unresolved pain or a chronic disease. The symptoms of chronic anxiety in a congregation can be experienced as a decline in membership and resources, an increasingly aging membership, or a distrust of leaders. Tension, depression, or an underlying anger will be present in a chronically anxious system, and it can be provoked by small events. Chronic anxiety goes underground only to be retriggered, again and again. Individual relationships within the system remain fragile because of the constant anxiety. An example of chronic anxiety in a faith community is congregational or pastoral misconduct that was never dealt with. Examples of chronic anxiety within a family system could be alcoholism, mental health issues, or abuse that has never been dealt with.

Humans tend to deal with anxiety by either moving closer in relationship with others or by distancing themselves.



Either one of these responses distort the system. The more these responses embed themselves in the system, the more dysfunctional the system becomes. Healthy communities and congregations invite self-differentiation which reduces the level of anxiety in the system. Relationships in a healthy system balance individuality and togetherness; people connect without fusing or cutting off.

## Anxiety Binders

Eight behaviors may temporarily reduce bursts of anxiety in the short term. These behaviors, however, over the long term create a system of chronic anxiety and can, over time, have extremely negative consequences to the whole community. Some come anxiety-binders are:

- 1) **Conflict** – starting a fight over small matters
- 2) **Triangulating** – getting caught in an emotional triangle in negative ways
- 3) **Projection** – blaming someone else for the situation or assigning your uncomfortable emotion onto another person



- 4) **Over-functioning** – taking over for someone else, either emotionally or in the work being done
- 5) **Under-functioning** – being passive and letting others take over your responsibility, either emotionally or in the work being done
- 6) **Enmeshment** – becoming too emotionally connected to another person in the system
- 7) **Distance or withdrawal** – ceasing to stay connected to the system
- 8) **Cut-off** – completely walking away from the situation (i.e. quitting the congregation or being estranged from the family)

All of these anxiety binders distort relationships in the system causing breakdowns in communication, decision making, trust, and engagement in mission. As these behaviors become default mechanisms within a community, the patterns become harder and harder to break in order that the community might be brought back to healthy functioning.

## Self- Differentiation

Leaders and community members should strive for a stance of “engaged detachment,” or being emotionally engaged, yet independent. Healthy leaders will practice staying calm, reflective and responsive without becoming emotionally fused or disengaged from others. This self-differentiation allows others to be responsible for their own emotional response and maintains boundaries and healthy self-care.

The emotional intelligence framework mentioned earlier in this session provides helpful ways to increase self-differentiation in all aspects of our life and build healthy relationships.

### Personal Competence:

Some helpful practices for personal self-awareness and self-expression:

- Practice tracing your own emotions in less stressful times.
- Become aware of your own tendency toward cynicism, passivity, placating, and over-identifying.
- Deal with your own desire to withdraw, quit or fantasize about how it used to be.
- Spend time in meditation and prayer in order to observe the person you truly are through God’s eyes.

### Social Competence:

Some helpful practices for engaging with the people around you:

- Share yourself with the people around you – feelings and ideas.
- Practice active listening skills such as – paraphrasing, referencing another’s ideas, offering both positive and construction feedback.
- Pay attention to your non-verbal attention – eye contact, posture.

- Encourage others in the group.
- Expect resistance and sabotage.
- Sense the emotional climate of the group – tense, apathy, withdrawn, bored, over excited, etc.

## Emotional Triangles

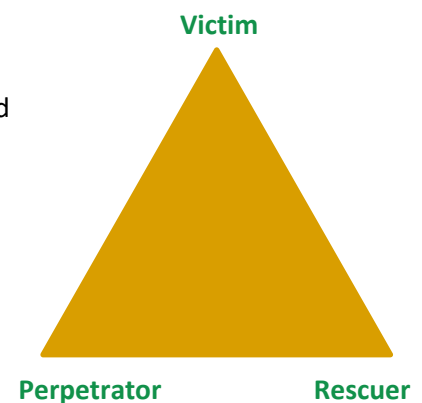
Triangles are the basic molecule of human relationship systems, so observing how emotional triangles function in a system can be very helpful to leaders. A two-person dyad becomes unstable once anxiety increases. Then, one or both members of the dyad usually pulls in a third person to relieve some of the pressure. In a three-person system, anxiety has more places to go, and the relationship where it originated experiences some relief. When the three-person system can no longer contain the anxiety, it involves more people and forms a series of interlocking triangles. Systems researchers consider triangles a natural function of living systems.

Some familiar examples of emotional triangles are:

- Spouse – Spouse – Child
- Boss – Worker – Company
- Pastor – Congregational President – Congregation
- Pastor – Pastor’s Spouse – Congregation
- Council President – Administrator – Needy Parishioner
- Parishioner – Pastor – Choir Director

All of these relationships are normal, natural, inevitable.

Triangles can have negative and positive outcomes depending on how members manage anxiety and reactivity. Murray Bowen postulated that if one member of the triangle remains calm and in emotional contact with the other two in the triangle, the system will calm down. On the other hand, with enough stress and reactivity, members lock into a triangulating pattern of **victim**, **perpetrator**, and **rescuer**. Within all healthy relationships, we need to be aware of getting sucked into this negative pattern.



### Leveraging Emotional Triangles

The main goal in leveraging triangles or using the theory of triangles is for each individual to think about their place in the system and take responsibility for their own relationships, anxiety, and functioning.



### Understanding Self-Organizing:

Because triangles are natural in all systems, they are harmless unless someone is being triangulated. When conflict occurs, anxiety or stress can increase, and the healthy distance between those in relationship can shift in harmful ways and triangulation can happen.

### Recognizing Distancing and Enmeshment:

Changing the distance between two people in the triangle can disrupt healthy relationship. Secrets and gossip, for example, inhibit communication, thus contributing to distancing and/or enmeshment. Infusing valid and useful information into the triangle can break down the shifting distance, thereby helping to bring the system back into healthy balance.

### Reading Perversity/Fickleness:

Triangles are perverse in that relationships within the triangle can flip flop quickly. One who was a perpetrator could become the victim or rescuer as partners within the triangle try to change each other. The differentiated leader's presence is more powerful than coercion, intervention, or therapy. One can only change a relationship of which one is directly a part. Staying in the triangle without getting triangulated gives a leader more power to change the system. Leaders who can stay differentiated and help parties take responsibility for their relationships while remaining in relationship is how to leverage a perverse triangle.

### Interlocking Triangles:

The emotional triangles of any emotional system interlock. They can extend beyond the group to a larger system such as the Synod, or they can involve relationships from the past as well as in the present. The side that is shared by two triangles is the key to how transmission of emotional processes, anxiety, or conflict spreads from one triangle to the next throughout the system. This network of interlocking triangles accounts for either the stability of the system or its anxiety and conflict. Mapping the interlocking triangles gives leaders insight as to how to approach any given leadership initiative or understand resistance to change.

## References for this Section

- Bradberry, Travis, and Greaves, Jean, *Emotional Intelligence 2.0*, Talent Smart, 2009.
- Friedman, Edwin, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in an Age of the Quick Fix*, Seabury Books, New York, 2007.
- OKA, 3605 Chain Bridge Rd, Fairfax, VA 22030, 703-591-6284, [www.oka-online.com](http://www.oka-online.com).

