



THE LEADER'S JOURNEY

Coaching for Wholehearted Leadership

Being an Emotional Grown-up Defined and Connected in an Emotionally Charged System

The concept of differentiation of self can be complex and multifaceted. However, one simplified expression of what this kind of emotional maturity looks like is this: the ability to be both ***defined and connected***.

Defined, defined

Being defined in relationships has two parts. First, we define ourselves with our words and our actions when we take a position. In other words, when we say, (again, with our words and our actions), “This is what I think and believe, this is what I want, this is what I am doing, this is where I stand.”

Second, being defined in relationships means that we allow others to define themselves by taking a stand for themselves. We make room for them to say (with their words and their actions) what they think, believe, want and will do and where they stand ***even if their position is different from our own***.

This is not necessarily the dramatic process that the phrase “take a stand” might imply. However, when we are defining ourselves in a relationship differently than others are defining themselves, drama may ensue. Because our brains are hardwired to perceive “different” as “threatening,” we easily switch into threat-management mode, ready to instinctively fight, flee or freeze. When we are in that autopilot, we are likely to react in ways that make things worse, not better.

This is not because we are bad or immature people; we are literally designed to keep ourselves safe in these ways. The problem arises when we react as though an emotional threat (someone doesn’t agree with me or approve of me) is a matter of life and death. (One of the most fascinating things about family systems work is learning to see how this

happens in real time.) When this happens, it helps me to say to myself, “This is anxious people doing what anxious people do. It’s not personal.”

This is a challenging stance to take, especially since it feels deeply personal, especially when the other person is making accusations or calling names or refusing to speak to you. When you can affirm that this is exactly what anxious people do, it creates some space for you to think clearly and choose your response. Of course, remember that you are also an anxious person, prone to “doing what anxious people do!”

Connected but not fused

On one level, it is not hard to stay connected to others; in fact, it is in our nature to be overly connected to others, to be fused. We are fused when we get stuck to others, feeling their feelings and reacting to their reactions. When we are fused, we feel as if we do what we do because others do what they do. We think, “If they would only change, I could be different and things would get better!” Whether we react by fighting or distancing or over/under-functioning or lighting up triangles, our fused reactions to others are automatic and we often blame others for them.

We are appropriately connected to others when we can stay in relationship with them (at a level of intensity appropriate to the relationship) without taking self away from them or giving up self to them. We are appropriately connected when we care *for* them without taking care *of* them, when we are responsible *to* them without being responsible *for* them, and when we stay in one-to-one contact with them even in the face of disagreement and emotional intensity.

The difference between being fused and being appropriately connected is the difference between being handcuffed to another person and holding hands with them.

Defined AND connected

When you were a child, did you learn to pat your head while you rubbed your tummy? I practiced every day until I mastered that feat! It’s easy to pat your head and it’s easy to rub your tummy. It’s hard to do both at the same time!

In the same way, it feels easier to define ourselves when we aren’t connected to others; it feels easier to stay connected to others when we aren’t defining ourselves. It’s difficult to remain defined and connected at the same time.

When we define ourselves and when others define themselves differently from us, we often let go of our connection—we distance from each other and/or we push each other away. When that isn't acceptable to us, we often let go of self-definition in favor of preserving the status quo of the relationship. Instead of tolerating the discomfort of the difference in our positions and the intensity that creates, we give up our own position, focusing instead on seeking approval or “going along to get along” or staying still, trying to be invisible.

Staying defined and connected in an anxious system

In systems thinking, there are no quick fixes or easy answers. However, there are some things you can focus on in an effort to increase your ability to remain defined and connected in an emotionally charged situation:

1. **Get to the balcony.** Sometimes this is described as taking the position of the calm, emotionally neutral observer. This means taking a step back and watching to see what is happening. What are people (including yourself) doing or not doing? How are people (including yourself) moving toward each other or away? How is the anxiety flowing through our interactions? How is our anxious reactivity showing up? What triangles are lighting up? Although this involves separating yourself temporarily from the heat of the emotional process, it is not a distancing move since you continue to stay connected to the others in the system, including yourself, from a different vantage point, with the goal of returning to our interactions. Getting to the balcony also gives you a chance to calm your physiology—usually by focusing on returning your breathing to a normal rate.
2. **Define yourself.** Resist the temptation to react to others in the moment and instead turn your focus to your self. Try to determine what you think, what you believe, what you think is best, what choices you have, how you will respond. The template question I use personally is this: Given that this is happening, who do I want to be? The first half of the question helps me to give up on trying to change others and their beliefs or behaviors; the second half of the question helps me to refocus on the only thing I actually have any say over—myself.
3. **Allow others to define themselves.** Deliberately make space for others to think, believe, want and do differently from you. This means acknowledging that they are separate from us with their own agency and their own perspectives. Other people are not just characters in my story.

4. **Stay appropriately connected to each person in the system.** This happens by default when we are managing ourselves in our triangles. Staying appropriately connected engaging in conversation that is not focused on either the area of disagreement or on the other people that we both know but is instead focused on ourselves, getting to know each other as individuals from a whole-life perspective.

5. **Convert anxiety to curiosity.** What are the facts here? What are people doing or not doing? What do they see that I don't see? What happens when I do this or stop doing that? It seems that anxiety and curiosity can't exist in the same space; by expanding my curiosity, I seem to crowd out the urgency of the anxiety and I find that I'm better able to think, to wonder and to choose my responses.

Questions to coach myself in this process

1. Take a moment to respond to these prompts: When it comes to this situation, I think . . . I believe . . . I feel . . . I react by . . . I want . . . I choose . . . This helps you to define yourself.

2. Ask yourself: *Am I vibrating about another person seeing things differently than I do? Am I upset because they are wrong?* Take a deep breath, imagine the person as if they were in front of you and say to them with a smile, "You have the right to be wrong." *What is that like?* Ask yourself: *Am I working hard to help them see the error of their ways so that they can change? How can I stop doing that?*

3. Plan a conversation with the other person in which you don't focus on another person or a problem, no matter how urgent those topics may feel. What other topics of conversation can you come up with?

4. Regularly practice calming yourself physiologically. This usually means focusing on your breathing until you can breathe deeply and regularly and your heart rate returns to normal. (If your heart rate is over 85 bpm, there is a good chance that you are too upset to continue a conversation, no matter how urgent it feels.) Exercise, centering prayer and meditation can all be helpful tools in this process.