

# A Failure of Nerve

## Edwin Friedman

### Excerpts

The colossal misunderstanding of our time is the assumption that insight will work with people who are unmotivated to change. If you want your child, spouse, client, or boss to shape up, stay connected while changing yourself rather than trying to fix them.

(Healthy and effective leaders focus) on strength, not pathology; on challenge, not comfort; on self-differentiation, not herding for togetherness. This is a difficult perspective to maintain in a “seatbelt society” more oriented toward safety than adventure. This book is not, therefore, for those who prefer peace to progress. It is not for those who mistake another’s well-defined stand for coercion. It is not for those who fail to see how in any group or institution a perpetual concern for consensus leverages power to the extremists. And it is not for those who lack the nerve to venture out of the calm eye of good feelings and togetherness and weather the storm of protest that inevitably surrounds a leader’s self-definition. For, whether we are considering a family, a work system, or an entire nation, the resistance that sabotages a leader’s initiative usually has less to do with the “issue” that ensues than with the fact that the leader took initiative. It will be the thesis of this work that leadership in America is stuck in the rut of trying harder and harder without obtaining significantly new results.

Poor leadership training today (including courses on parenting) puts primary emphasis on others (children or employees) as objects to be motivated rather than on the systemic effects of the presence, or self, of the leader. A leader must separate his or her own emotional being from that of his or her followers while still remaining connected. Vision is basically an emotional rather than a cerebral phenomenon, depending more on a leader’s capacity to deal with anxiety than his or her professional training or degree.

(When consulting with a congregation or family) I learned to stop listening to the content of everyone’s complaints and, irrespective of the location of their problem or the nature of their institution, began saying the exact same thing to everyone: “You have to get up before your people and give an ‘I Have a Dream’ speech.” The outcome was dramatic! Most of those who followed through with what I had suggested found that the chaos in their group soon waned.

(The focus of healthy leaders is to change) the criterion from “Who has the problem?” to “Who has the motivation to focus on strength, not weakness, and on leadership, not pathology?” The focus on pathology rather than strength throughout our society is itself a form of displacement, since it protects us from the far more difficult task of personal accountability. If a society is to evolve, or if leaders are to arise, then safety can never be allowed to become more important than adventure. We are on our way to becoming a nation of “skimmers,” living off the risks of previous generations and constantly taking from the top without adding significantly to its essence. In fact, the amount of chronic anxiety in a group is inversely proportional to its capacity for enduring pain. What makes the chronically anxious group’s anxiety chronic is not its pain,

but the way it deals with its pain, In fact, the root of the word anxiety means pain, as in angina, anger, anguish, or angst.

(To break barriers takes courage.) The attempt to run a mile in less than four minutes serves as an excellent illustration of the power such emotional barriers can have. Back when the great Swedish runners Gunder Haag and Arnie Anderson kept failing to run a “four-minute mile,” despite prodigious efforts, sports pages would actually ask the question whether it was physically possible for a man (not to mention a woman) to run a mile faster than four minutes. The goal seemed so beyond their endeavors that the four-minute mile took on the character of a constant, like the speed of light, a natural barrier. But when Roger Bannister finally broke that barrier in 1957, the following year three men broke it in the same race. We tend to attribute Bannister’s feat to new training techniques rather than a capacity to get outside the emotional processes of running. But in 1994 an African runner understood. When asked how he thought his colleague was able to lower the mile record by one of the largest amounts ever accomplished in one race, he replied, “He is not caught up in the mythology of Western runners.” Similar stories can be told about how Chuck Yeager broke the sound barrier when he sped up at precisely the point where others slowed down because the plane began to rattle as it approached that “barrier.” Another example of a well-known emotional barrier was the belief in biblical times that a god was chained to a geographic area as well as to the fate of the god’s people. The god would never, therefore, punish them. It was the breaking of that barrier that led to universal and ethical, rather than parochial and self-justifying, religion.

As lofty and noble as the concept of empathy may sound, and as well-intentioned as those may be who make it the linchpin idea of their theories of healing, education, or management, societal regression has too often perverted the use of empathy into a disguise for anxiety, a rationalization for the failure to define a position, and a power tool in the hands of the “sensitive.” It has generally been my experience that in any community or family discussion, those who are the first to introduce concern for empathy feel powerless, and are trying to use the togetherness force of a regressed society to get those whom they perceive to have power to adapt to them. I have consistently found the introduction of the subject of “empathy” into family, institutional, and community meetings to be reflective of, as well as an effort to induce, a failure of nerve among its leadership. The great myth here is that feeling deeply for others increases their ability to mature and survive; its corollary is that the effort to understand another should take precedence over the endeavor to make one’s own self clear. The constant effort to understand (or feel for) another, however, can be as invasive as any form of emotional coercion.

(Have you ever wondered,) why are the people who are the most dependent in charge in any relationship? Because they are the most invested. The responsibility of the leader is not the entire group but the position of leadership. As long as the leader is trying to change followers, the followers are in charge. If the leaders functioning is dependent on the functioning of others, the others are in control. When leader focuses on calling, the pressure changes, the dependents will find they are forced with choice and responsibility and will follow by default. When leader tries to change followers they gain power. When leader resists pressure to change, the followers try and force on him or her, power shifts. Leader is resistant one- which is a difficult position but

far less stressful than overfunctioning, burnout, or sabotage. The more a leader can control his or her reactivity to others, the more likely their intensity will wane or fall short.

(Columbus offers a helpful example.) On the way to the Canaries, the Pinta's rudder broke down and the crew seemed to have trouble fixing it. After several becalmed days, Columbus began to sense that this might be an effort to sabotage his whole venture; his colleagues' will had already waned. Displaying an unusual awareness of the value of self-definition over efforts to coerce another, he signaled that he was going on to the Canaries by himself and would wait for them there, prepared to go on alone if he had to. He jots in his log, "I see that I'm going to have to accept what I cannot control." The Pinta arrived two days later. Columbus was probably not the first member of his civilization to try to push out the end of its envelope. Others also ventured past Gibraltar into the Atlantic, but all went the northern route. Because they knew of the strength and danger of westerly winds, the way to play it safe was to stay in northern latitudes and thus be assured that those winds would eventually ensure one's return. But the cost of safety was great. It meant beating against those same winds on the way out, and that took its toll in terms of time, energy, supplies, and progress. What most differentiates Columbus is that he says in effect, "I'll worry about returning after I get there."

### **Overall:**

Friedman's "A Failure of Nerve" challenges conventional leadership thinking by emphasizing the importance of self-differentiation, strength-based focus, and overcoming emotional barriers. The book argues that true leadership lies in resisting the pressure to change based on the needs of others and instead focusing on holding one's position firmly, thereby empowering followers to take responsibility for themselves.

### **Main Themes:**

**Leadership is about self-differentiation, not conformity:** Effective leadership requires the courage to stand apart, define oneself, and resist the pressure to conform or appease others. This often provokes resistance, but weathering this storm is crucial for progress.

**Focus on strength, not pathology:** Leaders should focus on empowering themselves and others, rather than getting bogged down in weakness or problems. This requires shifting the focus from "who has the problem" to "who has the motivation to change".

**Emotional barriers impede progress:** Societal and personal anxieties create invisible barriers that limit our potential. Leaders must recognize and overcome these emotional hurdles to achieve breakthroughs.

**Leaders must be responsible for their position, not the entire group:** Focusing on changing followers gives them power. A leader's responsibility lies in holding their position firmly and resisting the pressure to change based on the demands of others.

### **Important Ideas & Facts:**

**Misunderstanding of Insight:** Insight alone is insufficient for change. People need motivation, which comes from within, not external pressure.

**Safety vs. Adventure:** A society focused on safety over adventure stifles progress and breeds anxiety. Leaders must embrace risk and challenge.

**Chronic Anxiety:** Anxiety stems from our inability to deal with pain, not the pain itself.

**Breaking Barriers:** Historical examples like the four-minute mile and breaking the sound barrier demonstrate the power of overcoming emotional limitations.

**Dependent Leadership:** The most dependent individuals often hold the most power in relationships because they are the most invested in maintaining the status quo.

**Shifting Power Dynamics:** When leaders resist pressure from followers, the power dynamic shifts, forcing followers to take responsibility and make choices.

### Key Quotes

"The colossal misunderstanding of our time is the assumption that insight will work with people who are unmotivated to change."

"(Healthy and effective leaders focus) on strength, not pathology; on challenge, not comfort; on self-differentiation, not herding for togetherness."

"If a society is to evolve, or if leaders are to arise, then safety can never be allowed to become more important than adventure."

"He is not caught up in the mythology of Western runners."

"As long as the leader is trying to change followers, the followers are in charge."

"When leader focuses on calling, the pressure changes, the dependents will find they are forced with choice and responsibility and will follow by default."

### Glossary of Key Terms:

**Self-differentiation:** The ability to separate one's emotional being from others while remaining connected. It involves maintaining a clear sense of self and boundaries, even in the face of pressure to conform or react emotionally.

**Emotional reactivity:** Responding to situations with heightened emotions, often in a way that escalates conflict or hinders clear thinking.

**Chronic anxiety:** A persistent state of worry and unease that can stem from a group's inability to tolerate pain or face challenges directly.

**Leadership:** The capacity to influence and guide others towards a shared vision or goal, often by setting an example and maintaining a clear sense of purpose.

**Pathology:** In this context, refers to focusing on weaknesses, problems, and dysfunction rather than on strengths and potential for growth.

**Seatbelt society:** A metaphor for a culture that prioritizes safety and comfort over risk-taking and personal growth.

**Togetherness:** An emphasis on group harmony and consensus, sometimes at the expense of individual expression and initiative.

**Vision:** A compelling and inspiring picture of a desired future state, often fueled by the leader's emotional commitment and ability to manage anxiety.

**Motivation:** The driving force behind action, often stemming from internal desires and goals rather than external pressure.

**Emotional barriers:** Internal limitations and beliefs that prevent individuals or groups from reaching their full potential.

### **Short-Answer Quiz:**

1. According to Friedman, what is the "colossal misunderstanding of our time" regarding personal change?
2. How does a "seatbelt society" hinder effective leadership?
3. Explain the difference between focusing on "strength" versus "pathology" in leadership.
4. What does Friedman mean by stating that "vision is basically an emotional rather than a cerebral phenomenon"?
5. How does chronic anxiety relate to a group's capacity for enduring pain?
6. Describe how the example of the four-minute mile illustrates the concept of emotional barriers.
7. What is the significance of breaking the belief that a god was geographically confined?
8. In a relationship dynamic, why are the most dependent individuals often "in charge"?
9. How does a leader focusing on their "calling" impact the dynamics of a group?
10. Explain how a leader's ability to control their emotional reactivity influences the intensity of others.

### **Answer Key:**

1. The misunderstanding is assuming that insight alone will motivate people to change, neglecting the importance of the leader's self-differentiation and influence.
2. A "seatbelt society" prioritizes safety and comfort, discouraging risk-taking and the challenges necessary for leadership and personal growth.
3. Focusing on "strength" emphasizes potential and positive qualities, while focusing on "pathology" dwells on weaknesses and problems, hindering progress.
4. Vision is driven by passion and commitment, rooted in the leader's ability to manage their own anxiety and inspire others, not just intellectual understanding.
5. Chronic anxiety stems from a group's inability to tolerate pain and face challenges directly, leading to avoidance and perpetuating the anxiety.
6. The belief that running a mile under four minutes was physically impossible acted as an emotional barrier until broken, demonstrating the power of limiting beliefs.
7. Breaking this belief allowed for the development of universal and ethical religions, moving away from self-serving and localized beliefs.
8. Dependent individuals exert control by making others responsible for their well-being, holding the relationship hostage to their needs.
9. Focusing on their "calling" shifts the leader's attention from trying to change others to fulfilling their own purpose, forcing followers to make choices and take responsibility.
10. By controlling their emotional reactivity, leaders avoid escalating situations and feeding into the intensity of others, allowing those emotions to subside.

### **Essay Questions:**

Discuss the concept of self-differentiation and its importance in effective leadership, drawing on examples from the text and your own observations.

Analyze Friedman's critique of contemporary leadership training, exploring the implications of shifting the focus from motivating others to the leader's self-development.

How does the concept of a "seatbelt society" relate to the challenges of fostering leadership in modern culture?

Explain Friedman's assertion that "the amount of chronic anxiety in a group is inversely proportional to its capacity for enduring pain." What are the implications of this statement for leadership and group dynamics?

Using examples from the text and your own understanding, discuss the concept of emotional barriers and their impact on individual and collective potential.