

On Self-Trust¹

“The story of your life is not your life; it’s your story.” – John Barth

It’s no wonder that our self-trust might also take a hit. In these strange, stressed times...

- with fires burning the West Coast
- with the pandemic still raging
- with so many people hurting financially
- with adjustments continuing in the ways people must work
- with a deep racial reckoning going on
- with institutional leadership in question just about everywhere
- with deep, partisan wars disrupting the body politic

...yes, in these strange, stressed times, it’s no wonder that we might *react*. We might feel overwhelmed or depleted, restless or agitated, more sensitive to provocation – and maybe just a little bit crazy. We might not feel these things front and center every day, but can easily represent a kind of background noise that interferes with our sense of a satisfaction with our world, our lives, our work and ultimately with ourselves.

However, it’s good to keep in mind that even if these factors were *not* present, the challenges of leadership and living day-to-day – all by themselves – still would cause us to *react*, affecting our level of self-trust. So instead of pointing to these “strange, stressed times” as requiring radically new capabilities, it benefits us to look at what’s been going on all along and to explore it in depth. If the current stress factors have done anything, it’s mostly lowering the water-line on emotional issues related to leading that have always been present.

If we go back to that feeling of *reaction*, for example, low-key or high-key as it may be, we may well find more specific, underlying, very human emotions are taking their toll in combination with one another. It isn’t just one overall, generic reaction, but several reactions that synergistically feed each other. Having worked with literally hundreds of organizational leaders over the past thirty years, I’ve regularly picked up on four emotional states that get to us interactively and in so doing undermine our ability to trust ourselves in our leadership roles.

While there are some patterns here, that doesn’t mean everybody experiences all four of these emotional states in exactly the same way. The “cocktails” of these uncomfortable feelings that undermine our self-trust typically make them a truly *individual* experience.

¹ I like the term self-trust better than the more common usage of “self-confidence.” First, self-confidence too easily connotes a state of *too much* confidence, especially for clients who specifically want help gaining more confidence but also frequently qualify their request with statements about not wanting to become insensitive or arrogant. Second, the etymology of the word, *confidence*, turns out to be “having full trust,” so that the notion of self-trust seems to be the more original or basic idea.

THE FOUR REACTIVE EMOTIONS

ANXIETY GUILT ANGER DEPRESSION

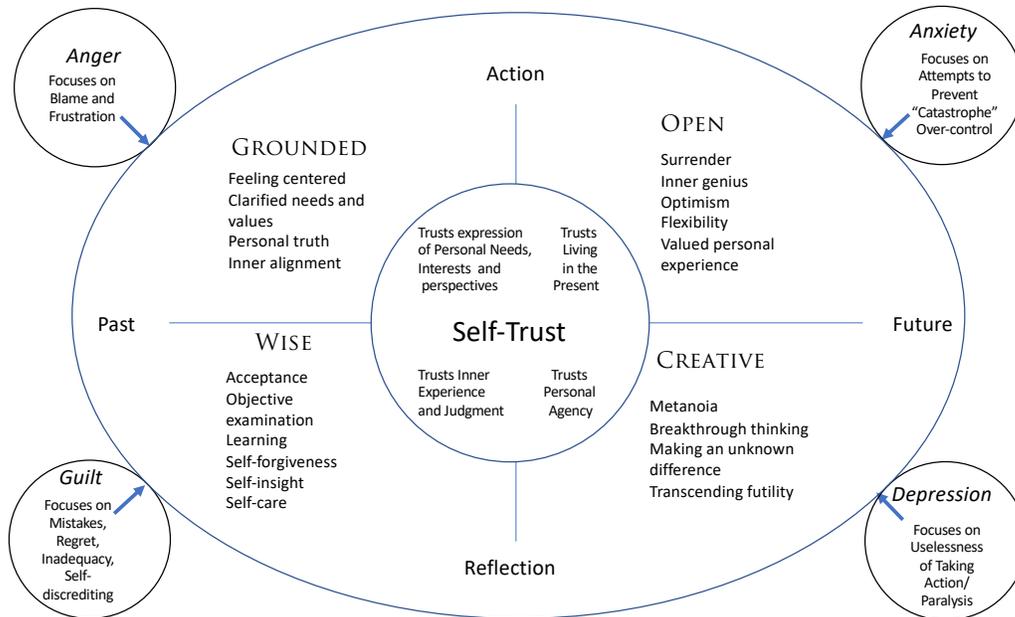
Mostly clients suggest they want to get rid of these feelings and it's clear they have tried through suppression, avoidance or through unconscious expression coupled with denial, meaning they express anger, for instance, but then say they aren't angry. That's natural when we don't seem to have other ways out and the social conditioning of leaders is to be "strong" by *not* showing emotional states. However, feelings are an essential part of our temperament and humanity and cannot be suppressed without damage. Suppressed emotions "leak" into our behavior and continue to contribute to burn-out whether or not we wish to feel them.

It's also clear that these emotions can be easily magnified by a sense of isolation – something many leaders are experiencing these days – or by venting them to people (such as life partners) who have no ability to influence the problems causing the emotions. When feelings become intolerable, it's no wonder people move toward suppression and self-protection – if only to prevent further exhaustion. It's the equivalent of throwing our feelings into the closet and pulling over a dresser to block the door, often rationalized as necessary so that we can get on with the *important* work. And yet, unless we allow ourselves to feel exactly what we feel we'll never learn about the nature of our insecurities our feelings are pointing to or find the rare gift of fully being ourselves.

Emotional reactions are always an opportunity to look at two things: first, our *conditioning* — meaning the formulas for living we adopted as children, some of which we learned before we were even conscious beings; and second, our *practices* – the things we currently do, often without thinking, to maintain a sense of emotional and mental equilibrium. If we are *not* self-aware, our conditioning drives our practices more or less completely. As a leader this can result in suffering for ourselves and also for those around us as we act out our blind spots and cover up our truths. While we might not be able to fundamentally change all of our conditioning, we can certainly make better choices about how we respond to it.

For each of the four emotional states – anxiety, guilt, anger and depression – the following model identifies a way of being or quality to aim for (shown below as "The Goal") along with a courageous practice to foster that quality. In turn these qualities and practices support a healthier sense of self-trust, one able to get past the blocks and barriers to transformative energies – energies leaders need to navigate personal and organizational vulnerabilities and make tough decisions. It's important to keep in mind that the goals and practices listed in this model ultimately are only examples. In the end you must develop your own model, one that suits you and is a mirror to your interior growth of leadership capability. Truly, the charge for all of us is to develop our own goals and our own practices based on a unique psychological make-up, understanding of our background cultures and our conditioning.

Pursuing this inner work helps any leader to surpass past selves and better function in a world where unexpected, imposed change is constantly erupting and conscious adaptation is essential.



CONDITIONING AND PRACTICE

ANXIETY

The feeling state: Internal tensions can lead to over-thinking and attempts to over-influence outcomes that actually can't be controlled. While anxiety pushes us to look into the future to see everything that could go wrong as a matter of preparation and caution – and this undoubtedly prevented our ancestors from getting eaten by unseen predators – we can be “over-conditioned” to experience anxiety. This over-conditioning then can work against us, spoiling our capacity to be open to what is *actually happening right now*. Because, as the phrase goes, “what we focus on will grow,” too much preparatory analysis (or brooding) ends up paralyzing us in ever deeper loops of worry. When we are unable to loosen ourselves to the practice of living in the moment, it may well be because at a fundamental level we don't trust

ourselves to do so. Given real world circumstances, it may certainly be reasonable to worry to an extent, but too much worry can become a state of dread.

There are many ways over-conditioned anxiety originated. We may have learned to be fearful from perfectionistic parents who themselves were constantly anxious, or from our fundamental rejection of parents who created instability if not outright trauma for the child. The lesson learned too well early on might have been that the future must be controlled *or else*, as a matter of physical or psychological survival. Part of the challenge in tracing the origins is that these aspects of early relationships may have been covered up or were communicated in subtle rather than overt ways. It's not, for example, uncommon for a leader to say, "I had a great childhood" but then also then share micro-events that suggest a subtle pattern of abandonment or criticism. When this person finds themselves in a leadership role, they may suddenly over-anticipate possible confrontations, high-stakes conflicts or personal mistakes. A leader feeling unsettled and so responsible that he or she must urgently make all decisions may be one manifestation of leadership anxiety. But so also may be the leader who runs away from those same decisions, deflects or defers them in an attempt to avoid the tensions that come with making an unpopular call.

The goal: The desire to be unruffled is less vital and less practical than being genuinely open to the flow of what *is*. Anxiety closes us down. The more we worry, the more we become rigid so that we cannot see or hear what's actually happening around us. Openness means relaxing our inner voices of criticism or control in favor of simply being present to the actual opportunities and demands of the moment. There's a quality of surrender in this, and also of flexibility and faith or optimism about our capabilities. We believe in the value of our past personal experiences and trust our "inner genius" in the sense of inborn, spontaneous skills.

The practice: Living in the moment does not mean we stop preparing for meetings, give away all our decisions, or mean we simply "wing it." The practice is more about trusting that we will be fine in the midst of whatever is happening and that we don't need to over-prepare or over-manage in order to protect our well-being or influence. This means, even in the hardest circumstances that we "show up" as who we are, surrendering away the fear in favor of trusting ourselves in the moment to do and say the right things. We let go, walking back the anxiety, reacquainting ourselves with the natural self-trust that's been concealed by over-conditioned fear.

GUILT

The feeling state: Feelings of regret, remorse or inadequacy are an inevitable part of leadership. A product of working with differing human needs and interests, complex issues, and ambiguous circumstances that contain interpersonal risks, guilt represents the hard fact that none of us are perfect. We don't always know the right thing to do nor will we be right in every thought, decision or action. Credibility

certainly can be a delicate thing but focusing too much on transient errors, missed opportunities or other compulsive “shoulds” can lead to unnecessary self-punishment. Guilt can be especially activated whenever our fraud syndrome is triggered – we don’t know enough, we’re not agile enough or sensitive enough, we’ve screwed things up, and so on and so on. (In saying these things I am intentionally incorporating some of what others identify as *shame* -- a more global sense of being flawed or wrong as a human being.)

If anxiety represents worry about the future, guilt is often worry about the past: what was not done or was done wrong. A leader who tries to overcontrol because of their anxiety and then, additionally feels guilty after completing a task is truly between a rock and a hard place. Banging between these two states too many times creates exhaustion and erodes a leader’s sense of credibility with themselves.

Our over-conditioning to feel guilt may have made us particularly sensitive to anything we might regard as a mistake, or worse, as a reflecting some inherent flaw in the way we see ourselves. If we feel, for instance, that we have always lacked empathy or will never have enough knowledge for the role we’ve been assigned, that we are too arrogant or lazy, then the chances of guilt erupting are high. It can be anything where we have labelled ourselves and bought into the lie. A college president recalled with me how her high school counselor told her she could look forward to repeatedly “finding herself in positions too big for her abilities.” A brilliant Director of Human Resources confesses to a constant background sense of threatened failure. Whenever we come up against our own privately held standards, expectations and self-labels, particularly those that are unrealistic, we can fall into serious guilt traps – holes in our personality that lead to disabling recrimination.

As much as we might associate guilt with mistakes in the past, guilt can also play a role in our sense of the future. We can worry about potential mistakes in a way that makes *anticipatory guilt* part of a cycle of both anxiety and reflexive self-criticism. This can lead to debilitating self-consciousness before anything bad has even happened. This is especially true when a person feels too many “shoulds” – “Okay, it’s past midnight but I should stay up to get the budget done” – to the detriment of well-being.

The goal: Transforming self-consciousness starts from trusting our own inner experiences and judgments. Instead of second-guessing ourselves, we focus on what is real and what is right about ourselves rather than what might be wrong or has gone wrong. If we are able to objectively examine our intentions and actions, we can begin a process of acceptance, self-forgiveness, learning and insight. This becomes a path of wisdom gathering as we learn to accurately assess ourselves and our worlds. Ironically, this can mean that we begin to question and doubt what may have been very strong, but mechanical self-judgments. We begin to mistrust the patterned, intrusive inner “voices” that conclude – once again – we’ve made mistakes or not done enough. Instead, we recognize our value and experience the relief and power of stopping the inner judge in its tracks.

The practice: Trusting our inner experience means we are able to examine the nature of the “wrong doing” or “inadequacy” in detail as a kind of reality check, utilizing our faith in our capacity to learn *without* self-punishment. How does one do a reality check? Of course, this can include other people to talk out situations and perceptions. But beyond this, it’s also learning to observe and challenge inner perceptions without the help of others. This is the exact opposite of brooding over behavior and instead means questioning for oneself generalized or exaggerated guilt to determine what’s real and what’s not real, what was intended, what is known, and what is actually “forgivable” if self-forgiveness is called for. In this way, we gain wisdom and insight into ourselves, into others, and into the situations we encounter. In sum, a self-conducted reality check isn’t about exonerating or condemning but determining what is true as an interruption to an over-conditioned guilt reaction.

For example, the college president’s recollection of her high school counselor’s remarks had been triggered by her own complete misinterpretation of comments made by some of her reports. Luckily, a supportive colleague, recognizing the president’s pain, took her aside to privately point out how badly the president was misinterpreting the managers. This immediately changed the president’s understanding and helped her restore her self-trust. It also caused her to wonder where such a bad misinterpretation came from and to examine more objectively her over-conditioned pattern of catastrophizing. Over time these reflections helped her gain deeper insight and wisdom. She learned to question her self-judgments and walk back the destabilizing guilt she had been feeling since her appointment to her role. As a result of this inner work she was able to regroup emotionally and better discern where real problems in her administration were happening. A year after our conversation about her high school counselor, she courageously confronted long-term unethical conduct by one of her key reports – something she felt she wouldn’t have done without learning to better meet the guilt she had been feeling.

ANGER

The feeling state: If over-conditioned anxiety and guilt erode self-trust, anger is one way to displace both of these emotional states without actually facing them. Over-conditioned anger habitually blames others for our own lack of self-trust. In some circumstances, anger may certainly play a useful role by compelling us to stand up for ourselves and our needs, but all too often, and especially if focused in blame and projection, it does just the opposite. Holding a grudge or engaging in a long-term argument do not in fact reinforce self-trust because in the end they do not represent faith in our ability to effectively voice our own truth, satisfy our own needs or address circumstances adequately *without aggression*. If we habitually make others or external factors responsible for whatever suffering we might be going through, we deplete the natural source of seriousness, often known as “gravitas,” that we use to ensure we are fully heard and seen. Without being centered in this way, we fall prey to stories, deceptions, over-simplifications, paranoias and gas-lighting that

keep us angry and in fantasy. Over-conditioning toward anger ultimately takes us toward a state of rage, an explosive, dangerous and ultimately powerless expression of pain, most often ending in obstinate defensiveness and disgrace.

To be aggressive is to be ungrounded. Even in the midst of conflict, even when a leader feels attacked, and particularly when aggression *could* erupt from deep mistrust and fear, the self-trusting leader stands their ground and meets objectives in ways that are proportionate, responsible to the community at large, and fair. This principled approach aims to defeat the projections (and potentially incorrect stories and paranoid views) of others with clarity, decisiveness, even-handed humanity, good will and good humor.

I think of many leaders I've coached who for one reason or another refuse to ask for what they need from people with more authority or power. They may express anger to me in the background but do not have a plan for moving forward or getting their needs met. Instead, they may drop into a frozen state of depression, where depression is a shunt for their anger, a way to numb it into false submission.

The goal: Being grounded means we communicate the "seriousness" of our intent. We take a stand. We share our personal truths. We ask for what we want and what we need. This is not to say we never compromise – we must learn to do that, too – but it also means that we can sustain being in conflict and are willing to do the hard work of turning conflict into synergy. This means letting go of negative assumptions about others' motives or capabilities and other bogus, often over-simplified meanings we place on situations and the truth.

The practice: Being grounded begins with a leader's taking meaningful risks to express themselves -- their truths, wants, needs, perspectives, and values in consistent and open ways. It also means being able to translate a personal vision into concrete action that helps both self and others transcend old problems and old hurts of the past. It's about putting uncomfortable truths on the table, but not to punish people, but to lead and guide a community out of self-perpetuated darkness. To be grounded is to be deeply congruent within ourselves, not trying to be anyone else, and that our acts are deeply aligned with our sense of identity (and maybe even our sense of destiny).

DEPRESSION

The feeling state: Because it takes from people their sense of personal agency, depression robs us of the very energy needed to overcome it. It makes the future hopeless by walling out potentials for initiative and change. For a depressed leader change feels pointless, overly risky, doomed and, given the culture of the workplace, possibly very unsmart.

Like anger, depression can be illuminating as a mirror to our growth. For example, it can be helpful when a person truly needs to rest, find a new standpoint in life and come to terms with the tough work of leadership. But if we are over-conditioned toward depression, it can become the gauze that covers the unresolved wounds we want others to resolve for us. Like anxiety, guilt and anger it obscures our native self-trust. In a way, depression and anger are closely aligned. Depression may protect us from *expressions* of anger that get us into trouble. Better this anger stay quiet, depressed, passive and *hidden*. But this internal retreat and victim thinking disowns our own soulful individuality and creativity: our private, intuitive and trust-based ways of developing new ideas and new solutions for ourselves and others.

The goal: To trust oneself means that in the face of our troubles, ones perhaps where we are feeling a distinct loss of our own credibility, we find the phoenix within us, the life force able to reinvent itself from the ashes of the past. This is the essence of renewal, regeneration and transformation. It is self-trust being consciously reclaimed at its spiritual source. The waters of creativity find a new path through what seems a solid wall of stone or, to use another metaphor, a seedling sprouts and blooms through a crack in the sidewalk.

The practice: I think of any number of leaders I've worked with who left their jobs before they got fired. They might have lost their credibility as a matter of temperament or because the match with the organization's needs was no longer present. Yes, making that decision took some courage, but I would say in the end it was less about the courage than a smart, timely *reinvention*. They allowed themselves the freedom and creativity – and self-trust – to recreate who they were.

This “change of heart,” also known also as metanoia, represents a breakthrough of some kind, be it large or small, leading to the release of the energy that lifts a person up. A leader's metanoia may well represent an inspiring example for others. It may be a kind of redemption or a less dramatic moment of inspiration or hope. However it comes forth, the lotus grows up out of a necessary mud.

Moving out of depression depends on creatively discovering new possibilities, new ways of doing things as a form of artful self-liberation. Creativity is what helps us negotiate our inevitable passages through the Underground, whether that's responding to the failure of a major project at work or just a moment of embarrassment. We flow through a crack in the wall of our unmet expectations.

THE EMOTIONAL COCKTAIL

Our predilection to fall into these four emotional states as a product of our conditioning happens in countless ways and invisible split seconds. The cocktail we drink when things are not going well and low self-trust is triggered may involve all, a couple or only one of

these emotions. It may be one part anxiety, two parts guilt, and one part depression swirled with a dash of anger. Or maybe I'm just angry and then guilty about the anger, or I'm anxious and then depressed and exhausted from too much anxiety, and so on. The four emotions surely drive and combine with each one another, which is why the drink is so potent. We've created it out of ourselves – and especially for ourselves – based on our unique temperaments and circumstances and with the certainty that if we drink too much it literally puts us out of commission. It benefits us to become deeply aware of which emotions we are feeling in the moment, *right now*, and then have a practice to address each one as it comes forth. The model presented here offers a starting point for identifying these practices based on four common emotions. But as mentioned earlier, it's only a start. We are likely to find other goals and practices and other emotions that we can incorporate into a personalized framework. Consider loneliness, for instance, envy or abandonment. What's important is the self-knowledge that these emotions are my particular go-to forms of over-conditioning.

Sticking with this practice, we begin to see ever more deeply into our patterns and we start to respond to them with more facility. We recognize our over-conditioning and the underlying insecurities we're attempting to avoid or conceal for exactly what they are – impediments from which we want to find some release. I think of a manager who had a hard time asking colleagues for what she needed from them because it drove an intense sense of guilt for being “selfish.” To respond to this strong feeling she began to consciously keep track of all the situations where it arose at work. She eventually assembled some of her closest colleagues, acknowledged this overactive emotion and asked to do a reality check with them. Of course, they replied that she was one of the *least* selfish people they'd ever met. As she continued to reflect ever more deeply on her conditioning, moments from the past revealed themselves, including one just before her wedding when her mother told she was being selfish for wanting her own wedding dress rather than wearing her mother's. Her mother's voice on that and many other occasions illustrated perfectly and came to symbolize the over-conditioned guilt that had stood too long in the way of her growth as a leader.

A common insight for those that follow this path is that whatever the over-conditioned emotional states may be, they can drive a sense of personal difference from others and an artificial separation from them. This, too, reflects an erosion of self-trust. Each state can be tinged with the perceived loneliness of leading and often a feeling of being misunderstood. If, however, we can notice this and interrupt it, we can begin to welcome belief in community and belonging back into our hearts and souls. The more we practice building and restoring self-trust, the more awareness we are able to bring to the work of seeing and trusting others, too, offering our leadership to them and receiving their leadership in return.

It is patently clear that we do not all come at this type of self-development work from equivalent places. Not only are our psychological backgrounds and conditioning different from one another, our sociological and economic backgrounds are different, too. Patterns of racial and ethnic discrimination, gender bias, assumptions about those with disabilities, the experience of poverty and many other factors mean that many leaders potentially face

higher walls to self-trust in this American society than others because they are and have been disadvantaged.

There is so much more work to do at every level. I hope it is evident that the inner work described here for individuals is a fractal of a much larger enterprise. It is my view that broad, social failures in diversity, equity and inclusion are related to our society's current inability to truly trust itself. There is a connection between the emotions we feel as individuals and the emotions that are prevalent in the broader context. It isn't just us as unique persons who, because of our make-up, experience anxiety, guilt, anger and depression. Those emotions also reflect the nature of our organizations, our institutions and our society *as community*. Insofar as we feel anxious about each other, want to shame others or blame them, feel constantly angry with other people, and depressed about our lack of actual agency, we are living a social emptiness that we need to help fill – with joy, with trust, with creativity and openness, with grounded wisdom, with welcoming and appreciating one another – just as we want those things for ourselves. For that is what a society that trusts itself is like.

MOVING ON TO OUR GREATER WORK

It's crucial to keep in mind that wherever we start as individuals, self-trust is a way of moving *through* a labyrinth of emotional reactions rather than trying to suppress or circumvent them. We aren't getting rid of anxiety, guilt, anger and depression. To do so would be to also get rid of the reasons for these emotions and the potential value they bring when not over-conditioned into us. Rather, self-trust enables us to creatively sustain these discomforts and tensions, recover from them faster, understand them and ourselves better, learning from them how we uniquely can realize emotional and social freedoms.

While it may take a long time to master our unconscious reactivity, every step moves us closer to the experience of our birthright and even higher order work to shape, expand and explore our capacity to lead. Moving out of *reaction*, we can ask, "What's next?" or "Where do I really want to take my work now?" or any of those other questions that invite us to develop our visions, acumen, sense of ethical action and courage in gifted ways. We become freer people, able to do our *greater* work, the work in which we become instruments of the positive changes this society and the world truly need – changes so much larger than ourselves. By serving our growth as individuals, as people and as leaders, we truly serve the growth of humanity, a vital and humbling goal if there ever was one.

The model described in this paper is the product of a collaboration between myself and my colleague, Jay Howell. Over many years, Jay has been a companion to me in my work and an exceptional co-developer and thought partner. Although professionally retired, he is known to his friends and family as a healer, personal guide, singer and poet of the human condition. My thanks also go to Richard Wilkinson for his insights, able feedback and editing suggestions along the way.