A Failure of Nerve:
Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix
Edwin H. Friedman
Seabury Books
2007
260 pp
$18.95 (Amazon) Softcover
ISBN-13: 978-1596270428
Rating: Three Stars

In the beginning of the movie *The Matrix*, Morpheus, the leader of the clandestine movement that seeks to reveal and undermine those who are operating a societal-wide system of control called "the matrix," says to Neo, someone who Morpheus is inviting to join him, *"Let me tell you why you're here. You're here because you know something. What you know you can't explain, but you feel it. You've felt it your entire life, that there's something wrong with the world. You don't know what it is, but it's there, like a splinter in your mind…"* Friedman's *A Failure of Nerve* is a very similar invitation to those who would seek to lead in a climate of anxiety, reactivity, and sabotage. There is something wrong and the problem may be the leader.

Friedman's work, published originally in 1999 and revised in 2007, is a powerful and thought-provoking book that challenges leaders on a number of levels not commonly addressed in a "typical" leadership book that speaks about tools and practices. As a therapist, Rabbi, and consultant to institutions of all types, Friedman looks at leadership using a family systems approach and perspective. He takes his experiences and deep understanding of family systems (systems thinking in general) and applies this perspective to his work as a consultant to the leaders of organizations and institutions. Most of this book addresses broad-scale issues and challenges confronting functional leaders and the institutions for which leaders are responsible. This book is not so much about technique or tools. Rather, Friedman primarily speaks to the very difficult work of leaders who, in paying attention to their own self-differentiation, seek to bring growth, vision, and health to organizations in the midst of increasingly disruptive and anxious organizational and

community realities that view these leaders as challenges to a dysfunctional status quo.

This book is not for the faint of heart. This book is a must read because it invites leaders to go deeper into an understanding of how any system can be dysfunctional and thus keep people within those systems reactive and unaware of the primary issues that feed and fuel the dysfunction. Furthermore, he challenges leaders to resist the many temptations that create an addiction to leading through a dependency on the acquisition of technique, technology, and maximizing data as their primary means of correcting the dysfunction. Freidman does not stop with addressing the leaders of organizations but takes his systems approach to leadership to a national and even global level. Friedman argues that there is a slow, insidious, emotionally regressive devolution at work within many organizations and institutions in America that constricts the development of healthy relationships and systems, and constricts the accomplishment of deep change and growth. To these dysfunctional systems, healthy leaders (those who maintain their individuation and integrity and avoid enmeshment) are viewed as antagonists and disruptors and not as sources of strength.

Freidman's writing style is clear and compelling. Each sentence and thought can be taken and explored further by the reader. The reader will find multiple layers of meaning in Friedman's approach. For example, readers will be invited to think about their own families of origin and the patterns of their family systems, functional or dysfunctional, which continue to influence the way leaders think and act. Friedman addresses the complexity of American institutions and the issues, challenges, and opportunities confronting leaders in those institutions. He decries and provides a strong and fair critique of the lack of leadership present in many societal organizations such as businesses, education, government, and religious communities. It is clear that Friedman's intent is to pull back the thin layer of veneer that masks for "good" leadership in order to highlight the continued malaise that grips organizations for want of leadership that addresses emotional systems, chronic anxiety, and reactivity. Leadership, he argues, more often than not, leaves

the most powerful and destructive influences in an organization untouched. Furthermore, these systems can coopt the leader into believing they are making a difference when, in reality, their actual work can be compared to rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic.

Friedman begins his discussion, based on his research, by identifying four leadership issues in institutions (that also exist within family systems). First, we are experiencing "a regressive, counter-evolutionary trend" (p. 12) where the agenda is calibrated to appease weakness as opposed to strength. Those who are given power are typically not the creative, imaginative, or the energetic members but rather, those who can assert their passive-aggressiveness and voice their own concerns and issues most effectively. Second, there is "a devaluation of the process of individuation" (p. 12) where leaders focus not on their own process of self-differentiation as the most important factor in leadership but rather on the acquisition of expertise and style. Third, there is a massive obsession with data and technique. What we call leadership is often a description of the man or woman who has acquired specialized knowledge and the ability to use that knowledge and expertise to move organizations forward. However, these same leaders ignore and are unwilling to address the emotional processes in organizations that undermine and even sabotage good ideas. Finally, leaders can exhibit a failure to recognize and address the destructive processes in institutions. It is impossible, Friedman argues, to address the toxic forces in organizations by attempting to be reasonable, to love, to promote values, or to work toward consensus. Effective leaders must set clear limits to the invasive behaviors of others who either are unwilling or unable to regulate themselves. The primary way of doing this type of difficult work is for leaders to be clear on who they are and how to manage themselves when surrounded by the constant cacophony of anxiousness and reactivity that cannot see beyond its own emotional system.

How do leaders address these issues? Friedman proposes that leaders, if they are to be effective, must first attend to their own self-differentiation (that is, identifying and developing their own sense of self and building their own integrity).

Leaders should resist "the siren call" of the culture that says that leadership is first about "the other," that is, about building consensus, community, and direction. Next leaders must self-regulate and manage their own anxiety in the midst of systems where anxiety and reactivity permeate institutions and society. Regarding anxiety, Friedman stats that, "...the climate of contemporary America has become so chronically anxious that our society has gone into an emotional regression that is toxic to well-defined leadership" (p. 53). This reviewer would agree. Friedman's comments some 20 years ago were indeed prescient.

There are five ways this anxiety is demonstrated through the behavior of people (though Friedman uses family systems language here, the reader can interpolate the words "business, organizations, and institutions" to make a seamless application to their own work environments). The first expression of anxiety is reactivity. Here people are quick to react, interrupt, take things personally, look for reasons to be offended, focus on pathology instead of strengths and assets, and, without hesitation, are invasive and intrusive into the boundaries of others. Second, when people are anxious, they engage in "herd behavior." Herding behavior puts pressure on people to abandon individuality and autonomy (think independent thinking and acting) and to "fall in line" with, as Friedman describes it, "the least mature, the most dependent, or the most dysfunctional" (p. 67). The third expression of anxiety is blame displacement. Anxiety in dysfunctional groups moves blame and finding fault outside the group and eschews any ownership of issues that would invite individuals to addresses their own issues. Friedman does a marvelous job here of describing how openness to identifying and addressing problems builds resilience or the individual's "behavioral immune system." Fourth, anxious individuals demand quick fixes to uncomfortable issues or challenges. This involves an impatience with and intolerance for growing and maturing over time and, instead, searching for an expeditious way out of challenges by looking for tools, tips, and techniques that will quickly resolve and otherwise ameliorate disruptive forces. The four areas above contribute to and are further promoted by what Friedman calls poorly defined leadership, the final expression of anxiety. Chronic anxiety has a

regressive effect on the leadership of an organization. This would include, for example, the inability to create distance from a group to build a clearly defined vision, a crisis-to-crisis response of the leader instead of a proactive and creative approach to existing or emerging issues, an unwillingness to take a clear and firm stand based on principles or convictions, and leaders selected by the group who will be more concerned about indulging the needs of the group and who, therefore, are vulnerable to sabotage by the group.

Following Friedman's excellent discussions addressing the insidious effects of chronic anxiety on individuals and groups, he calls out another issue that can undermine a leader's effectiveness: the addiction to data (which he calls a type of "substance abuse") as a means of influencing leadership thinking and acting. This has become particularly true in 2015 even more so than it was when Friedman first addressed the issue in the mid-1990s. Leaders seem to be bombarded by a steady stream of data and the importance of leveraging analytics in order to be efficient. Friedman's point is that a steady reliance on the use of data and technique as "the" means of leading can begin to atrophy leaders' capacity or even their belief that their presence, influence, and interaction with human beings (where the reliance upon data is utilized as "a" resource but not a replacement for the leaders' influence upon and within emotional systems) is crucial to leading successfully.

As Friedman brings his book to a conclusion, he explores such issues as the importance of integrity, understanding emotional triangles, and the ways in which a leader can encounter sabotage. However, it is Friedman's chapter on empathy that is tremendously important (and probably counter-intuitive) to the leader. Friedman discusses what this reviewer calls the abuse of empathy where leaders, in an attempt (perhaps based on an over-eager effort based on weak self-differentiation) to align themselves with the frustration and pain of others, can leave people unchallenged, underdeveloped, and embedded in their emotional dysfunction. It is the wise leader who knows when to withhold empathy and opt for tough and firm accountability when the frustration and anger of others is an expression of their emotional immaturity.

The reader will, without question, find parallels to the issues Freidman discusses and the issues leaders address on a daily basis. In fact, this reviewer believes that the themes identified by Friedman in the 1990s have become more acute and prominent in today's institutions. The book reads smoothly, though at times Friedman seems to jump around between topics. The message is clear nonetheless, and Friedman makes the issues he addresses practical and backed by rich anecdotal experiences that emerge from his work as a consultant. Finally, the book speaks openly and honestly about failure, the complexity of emotional systems that are often the undoing of leaders, and how to make the type of changes that can lead to survival and success. This book is firm and clear: leaders must pay attention to developing their sense of self and act congruently and in ways that will allow them to address people and systems that are reckless, anxious, and often angry.

Key words: Emotional systems, leadership, anxiety, reactivity, integrity, self-differentiation, empathy, data, technical solutions, sabotage, expertise, and regression.