

The Science of Relationships and the Impact on Leadership

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We are living in and through times of need. Two years into this unpredictable and ever-changing pandemic, we all find ourselves experiencing a prolonged period of threat, stress, and distress and with needs that we previously only imagined. One such need is to feel secure and safe at work. This is arguably absent amid so much uncertainty and turmoil, and nowhere perhaps more so than in the hospitals and health systems that you and your senior teams govern and lead. This article explores the impact leaders can have when they build secure relationships and create a positive, compassionate environment—a much-needed leadership style in the COVID era and beyond.

Understanding Your Role

As board leaders you play a special role with your management team. The question board members and leaders can ask themselves is, *Am I bringing out the best or the worst in my management team during these stressful times?*

These kinds of questions are best explored personally first: Have you ever noticed how you show up differently depending on who you are showing up for, particularly when you are under stress or distress? For some, you are an open book—vulnerable and not afraid to share anything with this person. For others, you are a tightly locked vault. With some, you are confident and strong, ready to take on the hardest of challenges; with others, you feel like a blubbering idiot who’s barely able to keep it together, let alone face the difficult road ahead (and all the while hoping it doesn’t show).

People show up differently depending on whether their needs are being met by a “secure other,” and especially during times of uncertainty or distress. This is a ubiquitous phenomenon and we are not immune to it at work, particularly in our reporting relationships.

This can be a bit awkward to consider at first because we have been conditioned to believe that leaders should always be strong and independent, not needing others to make them feel safe or validated to be effective. Perhaps that can be true for an instance or even a period of time, but over time there is a cost to the person, leader, and culture they lead.

→ Key Board Takeaways: Ready to Show Up Differently?

As board members and senior leaders, this might be a good time to reimagine your relationship with each other. Here's a question to get at the heart of our attachment needs: **ARE you there for me?**

Use this question and the following acronym to remember the three elements of a secure bond and help you on your journey to showing up differently:*

- **Accessible:** you give me your attention and are emotionally open to what I am saying.
- **Responsive:** you accept my needs and fears and offer comfort and caring.
- **Engaged:** you are emotionally present, absorbed, and involved with me.

If you and your management team can't answer "yes" confidently to this question, you will inevitably see insecure responses and behaviors.

Ask yourselves:

1. What environment are we creating as a board for the senior leaders that are running our hospital?
2. Are they reluctant to speak up and trying to solve problems alone or are they turning to you and others with questions in their time of need?
3. How can we create stronger bonds between our board members and the management team? You might consider assigning each senior team member to a board member for a period of time, the expectation being that moving forward these "secure board/senior leadership team dyads" will share the value they each receive from this relationship at an upcoming board meeting.

*Sue Johnson, *Love Sense: The Revolutionary New Science of Romantic Relationships*, First edition, New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2013.

Below we highlight some fascinating studies that bookend the human experience and shed light on the need for secure relationships and why this matters so much for leaders and their teams.

The Importance of Secure Relationships

In the beginning of life, babies can have food, shelter, and clothing, but without the felt sense of a secure bond with another human being, they die. We are born with a life-depending need for one another. While studying this phenomenon almost seven decades ago, psychoanalyst and physician, John Bowlby established “attachment theory” and its therapeutic implications, which state that humans will fail to thrive—literally die—without a secure relationship.¹

Robert Waldinger, psychiatrist at Massachusetts General Hospital and a professor at the Harvard Medical School, continued Bowlby’s work. In an 80-year longitudinal study trying to understand health and happiness, he discovered that **at the end of life** our relationships and how happy we are in our relationships has a powerful influence on our health.² “When we gathered together everything we knew about [those in the control groups] at age 50, it wasn’t their middle-age cholesterol levels that predicted how they were going to grow old, it was how satisfied they were in their relationships,” he says. “The people who were the most satisfied in their relationships at age 50 were the healthiest at age 80.”

What about the middle, between the dawn and dusk of life, where we spend most of our waking hours in the workplace? Several studies have demonstrated that our need for secure relationships doesn’t go away just because we are at work.

The implication for leaders is that in times of stress or distress, your followers reach for you (as a leader) much like they might a parent or loved one looking for support and reassurance. When they receive support and guidance, they are soothed, and when they don’t, they become triggered. When the people we seek are not available, responsive, or engaged, we are triggered to hide, retreat, and withdraw. We feel isolated and are more likely to react without thinking, even lying and cheating to save face.

1 John Bowlby, “Attachment Theory and Its Therapeutic Implications,” *Adolescent Psychiatry*, 1978, pp. 5–33.

2 Liz Mineo, “[Good Genes Are Nice, but Joy Is Better](#),” *The Harvard Gazette*, April 11, 2017.

One study on leaders as attachment figures described an effective leader like this:³

Effective leaders are sensitive and responsive to their followers' needs; provide advice, guidance, and emotional and technical resources to group members; support their followers' creativity, initiative, and autonomy; enhance their followers' self-worth and self-efficacy; support their followers' desire to take on new challenges and acquire new skills; affirm their followers' ability to deal with challenges; and encourage their followers' personal growth.

Easy, right? Not at all.

Leaders get triggered just like everyone else and feel the pressure to deliver results, which can make it hard to show up in difficult situations with patience, curiosity, and compassion.

But the difference is a CEO and management team that's not only willing but excited to bring challenges forward and will do so more freely because they trust that you

→ Connecting Leadership at the Top to the Patient Experience

Caring for others in their greatest time of need is one of the most human things we do. When leaders build secure relationships and create a positive, compassionate environment among the board and senior leadership, it will flow through the organization like a splash of cream in a cup full of black coffee. It creates a culture that allows the organization's leaders to bring out the best in themselves and others when it is needed most—because your caregivers experience love and compassion, their cups are full enough to be more human in those moments with their patients. Cultural transformation happens when leaders create this environment at the top. Enabling the human side and emphasizing the need for strong connections with others can help providers make the shift towards embracing their humanity—treating every patient as a human, and seeking to find a deeper level of understanding and connection so that their care needs can be fully met.

3 Philip Shaver, et al., "Leaders as Attachment Figures: Leaders' Attachment Orientations Predict Leadership-Related Mental Representations and Followers' Performance and Mental Health," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, American Psychological Association, Vol. 93, No. 4, 2007.

have their best interests at heart. They are quicker to learn from their mistakes because they are not afraid of what Amy Edmondson, Novartis Professor of Leadership and Management at Harvard Business School, calls “interpersonal risk” associated with saying the wrong thing or failing.⁴ And just like the study on health and happiness, the mental and emotional state of your leadership team will improve, making it possible for them to model compassion, kindness, and wisdom to their organization.

This is why it’s imperative that boards work hard to build strong bonds and shift away from the perception that perfection is achievable. When that happens, leaders can then accept that they are never perfect, and when they do miss the mark, they are quick to repair and reconnect with their people. The process of embracing tensions and healing conflict creates a new kind of experience that reinforces the belief that there’s nothing (or very little) someone can do that they can’t work out and learn from together.

That’s resilience. It’s ironic, but in many cases, the best way to help people be accountable and recover from stressful times is to let go of the outcomes long enough for people to believe they are more important than what they do. That’s when they will surprise you with what they are capable of at work—and life.

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4 Amy Edmondson, “Psychological Safety and Learning Behavior in Work Teams,” *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 44, No. 2, 1999, pp. 350–383.