
IMPLICIT, INTERSUBJECTIVE PRACTICES: ATTACHMENT THEORY AS A RESOURCE FOR ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP

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Abstract

From a pandemic to racial injustice to political upheaval, our nation faces intense adaptive challenges. These adaptive challenges have provoked loss, fear, anxiety, and conflict. Adaptive change often provokes such distress, but too much distress can overwhelm the emotional resources of individuals and groups, preventing successful adaptation. Leaders often attempt to respond to such distress with cognitive and behavioral resources. Recent developments in attachment theory, however, suggest using implicit, interpersonal practices to target emotional resilience more specifically and increase adaptive capacity more fully. To grow these capacities, leaders may employ practices such as attuning to verbal and nonverbal communication, building joy, recognizing overwhelm, and quieting when emotions run high.

Introduction

Tremendous challenges face us as a nation: the coronavirus pandemic, the violent highlighting of chronic racial injustice, and questions about the future of our two-party system of democratic capitalism. Systemic complexities and competing narratives make it difficult to define or understand the problems accurately. Our current repertoire of technical solutions falls far short. What will become our new normal is unknown and highly unpredictable. In addition, the changes necessary for successful and life-giving adaptation touch the treacherous waters of deeply held beliefs, strong emotions, and ingrained habits.

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Harvard School of Government professor and researcher Ronald Heifetz and his colleagues describe the difference between technical and adaptive challenges. Technical challenges have solutions that are already within the repertoire of the group.¹ These solutions are usually implemented by specialists, such as a doctor setting a broken leg or an IT person fixing a computer. Adaptive challenges, on the other hand, do not have existing solutions. Adaptive challenges require new learning from a whole group, and “can only be addressed through changes in people’s priorities, beliefs, habits, and loyalties.”² A leader or specialist cannot implement change on behalf of the people with the problem. Rather, the people themselves have to internalize the change, such as social distancing and wearing personal protective equipment to combat a pandemic.³ One way that adaptive challenges are distinctive is that they provoke not only cognitive but also emotional distress.⁴ Leaders who face adaptive challenges will need to deal with a wide range of emotional turmoil.

The years 2020 and 2021—with all their upheaval, discord, and threats—challenged many previous assumptions, upended standard remedies, and fostered high levels of emotional distress. In the United States, anxiety, suicide, and depression rates roughly tripled compared with 2019.⁵ Homicides, aggravated assaults, and gun assaults rose dramatically.⁶ Alcohol and drug use increased as

¹ Ronald A. Heifetz and Marty Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive Through the Dangers of Leading* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2002), 14.

² Ronald Heifetz, Alexander Grashow, and Marty Linsky, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World* (Boston: Harvard Business Press, 2009), 19.

³ Heifetz and Linsky, 13.

⁴ Ronald A. Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 37–39 (hereafter cited as LWEA).

⁵ Advisory Board, “Charted: The Coronavirus’ Staggering Toll on America’s Mental Health,” *Advisory.com*, August 14, 2020, accessed October 16, 2020, www.advisory.com/daily-briefing/2020/08/14/covid-mental-health.

⁶ National Commission on COVID-19 and Criminal Justice, “Impact Report: COVID_19 and Crime,” November 30, 2020, accessed January 6, 2021, covid19.counciloncj.org/2020/11/30/impact-report-covid-19-and-crime-2.

well,⁷ and many have been concerned about upsurges in sexual addiction and domestic violence under quarantine restrictions.⁸ Even people not experiencing clinical diagnoses, addictions, or physical violence are feeling the stress of uncertainty, loss, fear, conflict, and change.

It is important to realize that the very distress that adaptive challenges provoke is also the most significant impediment to successful adaptation.⁹ Emotional distress can provoke intense resistance to change, or even completely overwhelm the emotional resources of individuals and groups. Unable to process the emotional stress, organizations often revert to an earlier way of being that will not survive the new environment. Facing the emotional challenges, however, requires tremendous emotional resources—more than many people have in their current supply. Attachment theory highlights an often-unrecognized resource for generating the emotional capacity needed to survive, and even thrive, in new contexts: interpersonal relational interactions designed to access and strengthen the brain's built-in implicit emotional processes. These kinds of interactions can be used to grow an adaptive leader's emotional capacity and to facilitate the development of holding environments that strengthen the group's resilience and, therefore, its adaptability.

⁷ Emilio Marrero, "Survey: Alcohol and Drug Use Increase During COVID-19 Pandemic," *Baptisthealth.net*, Baptist Health South Florida, September 10, 2020, accessed January 6, 2021, baptisthealth.net/baptist-health-news/alcohol-and-drug-use-on-the-rise-during-covid-19-pandemic; Peter Grinspoon, "A Tale of Two Epidemics: When COVID-19 and Opioid Addiction Collide," Harvard Health Blog, April 20, 2020, accessed October 16, 2020, www.health.harvard.edu/blog/a-tale-of-two-epidemics-when-covid-19-and-opioid-addiction-collide-2020042019569.

⁸ For example, Amalesh Sharma and Sourav Bikash Borah, "Covid-19 and Domestic Violence: An Indirect Path to Social and Economic Crisis," *Journal of Family Violence* 35(5) (July 2020): 1–7, accessed January 6, 2021, www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7386835; and Gemma Mestre-Bach, Gretchen R. Blycker, and Marc N. Potenza, "Pornography Use in the Setting of the Covid-19 Pandemic," *Journal of Behavioral Addiction* 9(2) (June 2020): 181–183, accessed January 6, 2021, pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32663384.

⁹ Heifetz, *LWEA*, 37.

Cognitive, Emotional, and Behavioral Approaches to Adaptive Change

It is well established that adaptive change is difficult in large part because it requires us to change our “mental models.”¹⁰ Although mental models are intellectual, or cognitive, constructs, they run much deeper into the core of our selves, tracing their roots down into deeply held values, emotions, and implicit beliefs. Although the cognitive stress of changing mental models is significant, Heifetz argues that the “ultimate impediment” to adaptive change is not cognitive but emotional stress/distress (terms Heifetz seems to use interchangeably).¹¹ Emotional distress can arise from cognitive sources when people’s mental models—their deeply held beliefs, values, and habits—are challenged and shaken down to their emotion-laden roots. Currently, some provocative questions we face include: What does teaching look like without a classroom (and can I survive it)? Is racism really a systemic as well as an individual problem (and am I guilty of it)? Does our democratic process inherently provide a fair, stable, representative government (and will I have a voice)? Emotions also may arise directly from the situation regardless of whether mental models are challenged. In the past year, millions have suffered through the loss of family and friends to COVID, the anxiety of layoffs and financial uncertainty, the anger of racial injustice and political conflict, and the despair of isolation and seemingly unending global crises. These are not small matters, nor are the associated emotions easily navigated.

While acknowledging that affective, behavioral, and cognitive aspects of change are deeply intertwined, it seems that most leaders and adaptive leadership consultants still attempt to respond to emotional distress primarily with cognitive and behavioral resources rather than the brain’s built-in emotion regulation system. This cognitive-behavioral focus may be a residual effect of the Enlightenment emphasis on rational cognition, and possibly Kant

¹⁰ Heifetz, *LWEA*, 254. For a more detailed description of mental models as they relate to adaptive change, see Scott Cormode, *The Innovative Church: How Leaders and Their Congregations Can Adapt in an Ever-Changing World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020), 21–29.

¹¹ Heifetz, *LWEA*, 37.

and Ames's emphasis on will and behavior.¹² But as neuroscientist Antonio Damasio demonstrates in *Descartes' Error*, thinking and willpower—the ability to intentionally act upon our conscious choices—has far less influence than intellectual and voluntarist models assert.¹³

Pastor and professor Tod Bolsinger, and Harvard educational psychologists Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey, recognize the emotional layer of adaptive change and offer helpful resources for addressing it. Unfortunately, these scholars address emotional distress with cognitive and behavioral methods alone. Bolsinger applies adaptive leadership to congregations in his 2015 book *Canoeing the Mountains*. He uses the term *reframing* to name the “shift in values, expectations, attitudes or habits of behavior necessary to face our most difficult challenges”¹⁴ and asserts that this reframing “is perhaps the most critical skill for adaptive leadership.”¹⁵ Citing family therapist and leadership consultant Edwin Friedman, he acknowledges that “reframing...is more of an emotional capacity than a function of intelligence.”¹⁶ Bolsinger rightly identifies emotional regulation and resilience as a key element of adaptive leadership, going so far as to say “the real challenge is emotional.”¹⁷ Using the terms *red zone* and *blue zone* to distinguish between moments of high and low emotional intensity, he describes the ways in which emotional reactions can hijack rational decisions and intentional behaviors.¹⁸

This attention to emotion is clear and helpful, but Bolsinger continues to work within the Enlightenment frame, using reason

¹² Jim Wilder, “Joy Changes Everything,” *Conversations Journal: A Forum for Authentic Transformation* 12(2) (Fall/Winter 2014): Flourishing; Jim Wilder, *Renovated: God, Dallas Willard, and the Church That Transforms* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2020), 72–75.

¹³ Antonio Damasio, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (New York: Penguin, 2005), 245–247.

¹⁴ Tod Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2015), 96.

¹⁵ Bolsinger, 208.

¹⁶ Cited in Bolsinger, 208.

¹⁷ Bolsinger, 136.

¹⁸ Bolsinger, 145–147.

and behavior to try to change emotional reactions. His brief recommendation to the leaders experiencing intense emotions is to “attend to it, give it to the Lord, pray for peace and clarity, and ask for God’s wisdom and perspective.”¹⁹ He recommends Mark Goulston’s self-talk and encourages leaders to “[m]ake it a conviction to stay calm and connected.”²⁰ These recommendations are not a bad place to start, but explicit cognitive thoughts and rationally determined intentions are the last element of neural processing. As will be explained in more detail later, working backward through this “top-down” and individualistic approach is a more difficult and costly way to change emotional reactions than using the implicit interpersonal pathways in which the emotions arise in the first place. Bolsinger’s consulting experiences since releasing *Canoeing* have continued to provoke questions about emotional regulation and resilience, resulting in his 2020 book *Tempered Resilience*, which begins to address emotional processes more directly.²¹

Another approach to adaptive leadership is offered by Heifetz’s colleagues Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey. Kegan and Lahey, professors and researchers at Harvard’s Graduate School of Education, apply their own research on adult learning to adaptive change in the books *Immunity to Change* and *An Everyone Culture*. They recognize that emotions are hidden drivers of resistance to change, identifying fear as the most problematic emotion.²² Even though they identify emotional resistance as a key factor, like Bolsinger they use top-down cognitive and behavioral approaches to modify emotions, focusing on naming the beliefs or commitments that underlie the fears, and then experimenting with alternative behaviors that will test whether those beliefs are actually true.²³ Bolsinger and Kegan and Lahey come closest of all

¹⁹ Bolsinger, 147–148.

²⁰ Bolsinger, 148, 178.

²¹ Personal conversation with Tod Bolsinger, February 20, 2020.

²² Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey, *Immunity to Change: How to Overcome It and Unlock the Potential in Yourself and Your Organization* (Boston: Harvard Business Review, 2009), 48–49.

²³ Kegan and Lahey, *Immunity*, 47–84.

adaptive leadership consultants to helping people recognize and address the emotional elements of adaptive change, yet they fall back on cognitive and behavioral approaches at the very moment when emotions become most important to the change process.

A recent burgeoning of trauma-informed and attachment-based psychology, however, offers alternatives to the modern reason- and will-centric approaches to human growth. Attachment theory helps us “see” what until now has been invisible and intuited only, making it possible to go beyond cognitive and behavioral solutions. The processes involved in attachment suggest a way to address emotional distress directly from the bottom up using the brain’s implicit channels for relational and emotional formation. Attachment’s emphasis on implicit processes and interpersonal interaction provides understanding and processes for developing the emotional capacity needed for successful adaptation.²⁴

I will establish a foundation for this claim by describing attachment and its links with emotional regulation. Then I will show how the implicit and interpersonal processes for emotional regulation may be used to help leaders “tolerate uncertainty, frustration, and pain,” create and strengthen holding environments, and thus facilitate a group’s movement through the distress of adaptive change to arrive at a thriving “new normal.”

Attachment Theory

In the realm of psychology, *attachment* refers to the relational bond between two people, often referred to as a *dyad*. Attachment bonding begins in infancy. In their early interactions with their caregivers, infants develop particular patterns of relational bonding. Patterns of attachment formed in infancy become a deeply ingrained, subconscious model for how future attachments

²⁴ This is not to say that emotional processing is sufficient for adaptive change. A greater range of cognitive and behavioral tools is needed, such as systems thinking and political savvy. But without adequate emotional processing, many adaptive challenges will be derailed by the intensity of loss, fear, conflict, and anxiety. In many situations, emotional processing is necessary even if not sufficient.

are formed with non-parental attachment figures (godparents, teachers, coaches), close friends, and life partners.²⁵

British psychologist John Bowlby first began to hypothesize about attachment bonds in the mid-twentieth century. Though trained in Freudian psychoanalysis, Bowlby believed that real relationships, more than fantasies, shape children's sense of self and patterns of social interaction.²⁶ He theorized a psycho-biological "attachment system" that enhances infants' chances of survival by seeking out and trying to maintain proximity to an attachment figure (usually the mother).²⁷ In an ideal scenario, the attachment figure provides a physical and an emotional sense of security—a "safe haven" from danger and a "secure base" from which to explore and learn.²⁸

Caregivers who consistently provide an adequate safe haven and secure base facilitate the development of secure attachment patterns in the children under their care. Secure attachments develop when caregivers are "available, sensitive, and responsive to an individual's proximity-seeking efforts in times of need."²⁹ Security-producing caregivers meet infant needs in a timely, consistent fashion; attune, or emotionally synchronize, with their infants; and co-regulate the infants' emotions, calming distress and amplifying joy.³⁰ Attachment security results in a pervasive subconscious "sense that the world is generally safe, that attachment figures are helpful when called upon, and that it is possible to explore the environment

²⁵ Importantly, the subconscious model – called an internal working model – is not determinative but influential. Internal working models, and therefore attachment styles, can be changed for the better or worse as people experience new relational bonds with others who carry different models, and behave and communicate differently. See, for example, David J. Wallin, *Attachment in Psychotherapy* (New York: Guilford, 2007), 3, 134; and Todd W. Hall and Lauren E. Maltby, "Trauma, Attachment, and Spirituality: A Case Study," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 40(4) (2012): 302–312.

²⁶ Mario Mikulincer and Phillip R. Shaver, *Attachment in Adulthood: Structure, Dynamics, and Change* (New York: Guilford, 2007), 6.

²⁷ Mikulincer and Shaver, 9–11.

²⁸ Wallin, 12.

²⁹ Mikulincer and Shaver, 19.

³⁰ Allan N. Schore, *Affect Regulation and the Repair of the Self* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003), 7–15.

curiously and confidently and to engage rewardingly with other people” and provides the growing person “important procedural knowledge about distress management.”³¹ About sixty percent of the U.S. population has secure attachment patterns.³²

In contrast, insecure attachments experienced by the other forty percent generally developed from early caregivers not being “physically or emotionally available in times of need, not responsive to...proximity bids, or poor at alleviating distress or providing a secure base.”³³ Under these conditions, an infant already feels a deep sense of insecurity even before language is available. If given language, the implicit, preverbal fear might be articulated in questions such as: “Is the world a safe place or not? Can I really trust others in times of need? Do I have the resources necessary to manage my own emotions?”³⁴ This insecurity can result in mild to severe anxiety, such as aggressiveness or persistence in seeking attention from others, or mild to severe avoidance, such as withdrawal, dismissiveness, and diminishment of visible affect in the body, face, and voice tone.³⁵

³¹ Mikulincer and Shaver, 19.

³² “40% of Children Miss Out On the Parenting Needed to Succeed in Life,” The Sutton Trust website, March 21, 2014, accessed November 27, 2108, www.suttontrust.com/newsarchive/40-children-miss-parenting-needed-succeed-life-sutton-trust. The Sutton Trust reports that the sixty percent/forty percent statistical breakdown “is consistently found across studies that use reliable measures of attachment, and have nationally representative samples.” Among leaders, the percentage of insecure attachments is likely lower because of formal and informal leadership filtering processes such as academic and professional success, relational influence, and job interviews. Although attachment research has only explored a small cross-section of global cultures so far, results seem to show that the four attachment patterns are universal, and secure attachment is psychologically normative across cultures. The specific rates of secure attachment, as well as the concrete behaviors that mark various forms of attachment, vary across cultures (Judi Mesman, Marinus H. van IJzendoorn, and Abraham Sagi-Schwartz, “Cross-Cultural Patterns of Attachment: Universal and Contextual Dimensions,” *Handbook of Attachment: Theory, Research, and Clinical Applications*, 3rd ed., eds. Jude Cassidy and Phillip R. Shaver (New York: Guilford Press, 2016), 866–871.)

³³ Mikulincer and Shaver, 19.

³⁴ Mikulincer and Shaver, 19.

³⁵ Mikulincer and Shaver, 37, 39.

One of the main themes arising from research on attachment is the breadth of its impact on childhood and adult life.³⁶ Consider this partial list of outcomes of secure attachment:

Strong, stable identity: A strong identity involves “deep, pervasive, stable, and well-integrated feelings of self-acceptance, self-compassion, self-esteem, and self-efficacy but without being arrogant, selfish, or narrow-minded.”³⁷ Interpersonal neurobiologist Daniel Siegel explains that this strong sense of self arises from the ability to organize past, present, and future into a coherent sense of self over time, enabling self-reflection.³⁸ This ability to organize the self over time arises, in turn, from the next outcome, emotional regulation.³⁹

Emotional regulation and resilience: Neuropsychology researcher Allan Schore theorizes that one of the primary functions of attachment is to develop affect regulation.⁴⁰ Relationally secure people have “coping strategies [that] are generally effective, and they regulate their emotions successfully. ... Emotions flow freely but without causing distortions or disorientation.”⁴¹ They can face “suffering, disappointment, aging, and change...without losing

³⁶ As Mikulincer and Shaver note, a couple of cautions are needed when considering the breadth of impact of attachment: First, although it is tempting to link attachment to an overly broad range of results, the fault in this is less about exaggerating the scope of attachment’s influence than about not recognizing the mediating factors between attachment and specific outcomes. Mediating factors may include socioeconomic status, environment, culture, intelligence, temperament, access to multiple attachment figures throughout life, and more (497, 517). Second, when describing the wide-ranging impact of attachment, we need to be careful not to imagine that a flourishing life has no other elements. Meaningful work and experiences of the transcendent, for instance, can be valuable regardless of secure attachment (517). In short, “attachment security by itself does not necessarily produce exceptional psychological growth” or a “fully functioning person” (517).

³⁷ Mikulincer and Shaver, 498.

³⁸ Daniel J. Siegel, *The Developing Mind: How Relationships and the Brain Interact to Shape Who We Are* (New York: Guilford, 1999), 314.

³⁹ Siegel, 159; Allan N. Schore, *The Science of the Art of Psychotherapy* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2012), 123.

⁴⁰ Schore, *Science*, 1.

⁴¹ Mikulincer and Shaver, 498.

their balance or becoming lastingly demoralized.”⁴²

Empathy: An “abiding sense of security makes it easier...to attend to the needs of others—to be compassionate and altruistic.”⁴³ As psychologist Daniel Goleman has famously shown, the ability to empathize with others is an essential factor in ethical and moral behavior.⁴⁴ Empathy depends a great deal on attunement, the ability to “tune in” to another, synchronizing with them emotionally so that they feel seen, heard, and understood—or, in Siegel’s words, “feel felt.”⁴⁵

Relational health, including interdependence and differentiation: People with secure attachment patterns “are neither compulsively self-reliant nor compulsively dependent.”⁴⁶ Secure attachment experiences establish the right prefrontal cortex’s ability to execute the self-correcting, self-regulating “human” functions of right brain, including “social adjustment and control of mood, drive and responsibility.”⁴⁷ The kind of relational connectedness that facilitates and results from secure attachment “stimulates the

⁴² Mikulincer and Shaver, 498.

⁴³ Mikulincer and Shaver, 498.

⁴⁴ Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence*, 104–110. See also Schore, *Repair*, 120–122, 234.

⁴⁵ Siegel, 70.

⁴⁶ Mikulincer and Shaver, 498.

⁴⁷ Schore, *Repair*, 120–122. By claiming these as “human” functions, I do not intend to make theological or philosophical claims about essence. Lack of these functions does not make a person less human in essence, but it limits their ability to act in ways that usually apply to mature humans. In general, people with insecure attachments have less integration among cognitive, emotional, and behavioral systems, and are thus less consistently able to “modulate the motivational control of goal-directed behavior” (Schore, *Repair*, 136).

growth of the brain systems involved in character formation, identity consolidation, and moral behavior.”⁴⁸

Reflective function: Secure attachment fosters the ability to link emotions with ideas and thoughts, articulate the meaning of an experience while feeling the emotions it generates, and recognize that others’ visible behaviors are guided by invisible thoughts.⁴⁹ Secure people “can think and talk about distressing experiences coherently, without becoming enmeshed in or overwhelmed by painful memories, old injuries, or hostile feelings, and without having to suppress, repress, or deny injuries and aggravations.”⁵⁰

These outcomes of secure attachment are mediated by many other things, such as socioeconomic status, environment, culture, intelligence, temperament, and access to multiple attachment figures throughout life.⁵¹ Leadership development might supplement these mediating influences with education, mentoring, and the practice of management skills. If we only address these mediating influences, however, and never get down to the subconscious level where attachment and emotional regulation occur, we miss the depth of development that is possible.

For leaders in the religious sphere especially, addressing the relational and emotional elements of leadership is important. Christians, in particular, might find that attachment research aligns with some of their deepest beliefs. Psychology professor Todd Hall and psychologist Lauren Maltby identify three main ways

⁴⁸ Wilder, *Joy*, 47. Attachment relationships impact the brain’s ability to coordinate higher-level explicit verbal and rational processes. Contrary to Enlightenment emphasis on reason and will as the centers of control, attachment-related relational and emotional processes actually control the ability to access reasoning and reflective abilities and to carry out intended behaviors, especially under circumstances of high emotional intensity. For example, we determine which thoughts to act on not primarily through conscious reasoning but through subconscious processes of emotional appraisal and arousal (Daniel J. Siegel, *The Developing Mind: How Relationships and the Brain Interact to Shape Who We Are* [New York: Guilford, 1999], 136–137; see also Damasio, 115).

⁴⁹ Schore, *Repair*, 54, 120–122, 264; Siegel, *Developing Mind*, 136–139; Wallin, 44.

⁵⁰ Mikulincer and Shaver, 498. See also the significant work of Peter Fonagy on reflective function and mentalizing.

⁵¹ Mikulincer and Shaver, 497, 517.

attachment resonates with Christian theology: (1) the emphasis on humans as relational beings reflects the a trinitarian-relational view of the *imago Dei*, (2) the concept of internal working models points to the centrality and depth of relational interconnection, and (3) healthy, life-giving relationships are not only the goal of growth and healing but also its means.⁵²

Interestingly, attachment theory has a counterintuitive connection to the Buddhist notion of “detachment.” According to leading attachment scholars Mikulincer and Shaver, along with practitioner David Wallin, Buddhists believe that the quality of detachment is not a lack of involvement or caring in life but rather letting go of the craving of particular outcomes, things, or people. In this sense, *attachment* in the psychological sense of the term does not contradict Buddhist detachment. In fact, attachment has strong ties with Buddhist practices of loving-kindness and mindfulness.⁵³ Mindfulness involves being fully present in the moment, tuning in to both the inner self and the outer world, practicing loving-kindness toward oneself, and calming the emotions that arise from unhelpful *spiritual* attachments of the self to the material world. The more secure one’s psychological attachments, the more quiet is one’s “anxious, grasping mind.”⁵⁴ The less we grasp onto things anxiously, the more we are able to endure the loss of those things and persons that are most important to us.⁵⁵

Holding Environments Help Regulate the Emotional Distress of Growth and Change

Attachment is so deeply linked to self-regulation, including emotional regulation, that neuropsychology researcher Allan Schore

⁵² Hall and Maltby, “Attachment-Based Psychoanalytic Theory and Christianity: Being-in-Relation,” in *Christianity and Psychoanalysis: A New Conversation*, eds. Earl D. Bland and Brad D. Strawn (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2014), 200–204.

⁵³ Mikulincer and Shaver, 514–516; Wallin, 5–6, 165.

⁵⁴ Mikulincer and Shaver, 515.

⁵⁵ Mikulincer and Shaver, 515.

defines *attachment* as an “affect regulation theory.”⁵⁶ Emotional regulation both creates and results from secure attachment, and it is an essential skill in the development of the infant’s self.⁵⁷ The emotional regulation processes essential to attachment and adaptive leadership occur in *holding environments*.

Although attachment theorists rarely use the term *holding environment* to describe the context in which attachments are formed, the term was originally coined by psychologist D.W. Winnicott, and it fits closely with what Bowlby intended and what later researchers and practitioners have found.⁵⁸ In Winnicott’s work, the term *holding environment*, or simply *holding*, arose in the context of mother-infant dyads and sounds almost exactly like the caregiver-infant dyad behavior that cultivates secure attachment. “Holding” involves, first, “the actual physical holding of the infant” and the “love that physical holding expresses.”⁵⁹ Second, holding involves providing material, nutritional, and relational nurture that is continually adapted to the infant’s needs as it grows (e.g., warmth, food, diaper-changing, facial expressions and verbal interaction).⁶⁰ The experience of being held provides a context in which the infant can develop a sense of self separate from the mother and learn to handle the anxieties that attend the process of growth and change. As this development occurs, the mother gradually removes elements of her holding that are no longer needed or that keep the infant overly dependent.⁶¹ Winnicott eventually extended the concept of the holding environment to include the way in which a therapist or social worker “holds” clients as they learn new, healthier patterns

⁵⁶ Schore’s three-volume “Affect Regulation” series develops this theory in depth. A summary can be found in the introduction to *The Science of the Art of Psychotherapy*.

⁵⁷ Siegel, 159.

⁵⁸ Schore explicitly links between Winnicott and secure attachment explicit in *Repair*, 93.

⁵⁹ Winnicott, *The Maturation Processes and the Facilitating Environment: Studies in the Theory of Emotional Development* (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1965), PDF e-book, 20, 25.

⁶⁰ Winnicott, *Maturation Processes*, 21, 28.

⁶¹ Winnicott, *Maturation Processes*, 22–23.

of thought, emotion, and behavior.⁶² Today, Winnicott's idea of the emotionally regulating holding environment has become a common way of conceptualizing the therapeutic relationship.

Heifetz translates Winnicott's holding environment from family and therapy contexts into the context of adaptive leadership. Heifetz explains:

The term "holding environment" originated in psychoanalysis to describe the relationship between the therapist and the patient. The therapist "holds" the patient in the process of developmental learning in a way that has some similarities to the way a mother and father hold their newborn and maturing children. For a child, the holding environment serves as a containing vessel for the developmental steps, problems, crises, and stresses of growing up.⁶³

Just as the holding of the attachment relationship allows parents to temporarily co-regulate the infant's development-related anxieties, successful adaptation in organizations requires a holding space for co-regulating the distressing emotions that attend the organization's development and transformation.

A group's affective response is so vital to its ability to adapt successfully that Heifetz identifies one of the main tasks of adaptive leadership as recognizing and modulating the emotional stress in the system by creating a holding environment. The holding environment of adaptive leadership consists of a bounded space (physical or psychological) in which a group has a "secure base" to experiment safely with new ideas and behaviors, and a "safe haven" in which distressing emotions can be surfaced, acknowledged,

⁶² Winnicott, *Maturational Processes*, 124, 135–137, 144.

⁶³ Heifetz, *LWEA*, 104.

contained, and either defused or used in a productive way for growth and learning.⁶⁴

Obviously, significant differences exist between what a mother provides for an infant and what a leader provides for a group facing adaptive challenges. Significant similarities are also evident though, primarily the function of the holding environment as a stable, secure “space” (literally or figuratively) that requires empathy, care, and a calming presence on the part of the leader. Its main purpose in both scenarios is to pave the way for growth by regulating the sometimes-overwhelming emotions involved in growth and change, and thus maintaining a coherent sense of identity over time.⁶⁵ These similarities highlight the need for adaptive leaders to have the regulation and resilience capacities to bear significant emotional stress and to discern when and how to gradually hand the adaptive challenges back to the group as the group becomes able to bear it.⁶⁶ The holding environment allows the leader to have some control over the pace of the learning or change process.⁶⁷

The centrality of holding environments in adaptive change requires adaptive leaders to have the psychological abilities required to create and sustain these kinds of environments. At the top of this list of abilities for adaptive leaders, as for parents and therapists, is the capacity to maintain their own affective regulation throughout a long and emotional process, “tolerat[ing] uncertainty, frustration, and pain.”⁶⁸ Because the group will pick up any anxiety expressed verbally or nonverbally by the authority figure, the leader’s

⁶⁴ Heifetz, *LWEA*, 104–113; Bolsinger, 65. Kegan and Lahey’s 2016 book, *An Everyone Culture: Becoming a Deliberately Developmental Organization* (Boston: Harvard Business School), also emphasizes the importance of holding environments in creating the emotional and relational context in which people might be most able to make adaptive changes (152–153).

⁶⁵ Heifetz, *LWEA*, 104; Siegel, 159; Schore, *Science*, 123.

⁶⁶ Heifetz, *LWEA*, 128. This analogy in no way intends to present the leader as a more developed human being than the rest of the group. Following Heifetz’s person/role distinction, the analogy between parent and leader refers to the *role* of the leader, not the *person* of the leader.

⁶⁷ Heifetz and Linsky, 107–120.

⁶⁸ Heifetz, *LWEA*, 110.

“immediate mechanism to contain distress during a crisis is to contain himself.”⁶⁹

Heifetz and fellow leadership consultant Marty Linsky suggest six skills or capacities adaptive leaders might need in order to regulate themselves and the groups they lead.⁷⁰ These are not the only adaptive leadership capacities but the ones that specifically link to the use of holding environments and the ability to regulate oneself and the group effectively.⁷¹

Getting on the balcony: Heifetz explains that leaders “often get carried away by the dance. To discern the larger patterns on the dance floor...we have to stop moving and get to the balcony.”⁷² Getting on the balcony involves rising above one’s embedded perspective and seeing the bigger picture, the systems and patterns at play in a group or situation. Leaders who can “get on the balcony” are able to shift back and forth between participating and observing during their daily work and during intense situations.

*Distinguishing self from role:*⁷³ Professional and volunteer leadership roles are defined in large part by others’ expectations. But “[t]he self relies on our capacity to witness and learn throughout our lives, to refine the core values that orient our decisions—whether

⁶⁹ Heifetz, *LWEA*, 140. See also Bolsinger’s references to the work of Edwin Friedman (68, 136–137, 220). Bolsinger adds, “Regulating the heat is a delicate art built around one crucial leadership skill: *regulating ourselves*” (148).

⁷⁰ These *capacities* are different from the *steps* a leader would take in addressing adaptive change, such as “think politically” and “orchestrate the conflict.” Heifetz and Linsky do not list them in this way, but I have compiled this list based on their recommendations in *Leadership Without Easy Answers* and *Leadership on the Line*.

⁷¹ An example of an adaptive capacity not addressed is systemic thinking. Adaptive leaders need to learn specific cognitive understandings of systems theory and behavioral practices for intervening in systems. Without a strong capacity for reflective function rooted in secure attachment, the ability to diagnose one’s own system would be compromised. Yet reflective function by itself is not sufficient to understand and apply systems theory in a particular organization.

⁷² Heifetz, *LWEA*, 252–253. Psychologists call this “participant-observer” capacity.

⁷³ Heifetz, *LWEA*, 263ff; Heifetz and Linsky, 187–207. Heifetz and Linsky devote an entire chapter to this skill.

or not they conform to expectations.”⁷⁴ Distinguishing self from role helps leaders remain connected with the group when emotions run high, especially when the group is blaming the leader.⁷⁵ The ability to separate themselves from the expectations of their role also gives leaders more freedom to take the risks that adaptive change requires.⁷⁶

Finding sanctuary: Heifetz and Linsky define sanctuary as “a place where you feel safe both physically and psychologically. The rules and stresses of everyday life are suspended temporarily. It is not a place to hide, but a haven where you can cool down, capture lessons from the painful moments, and put yourself back together.”⁷⁷ In the midst of high-stress adaptive work, it is especially essential to find places to quiet our minds and calm strong emotions, and to recenter in who we are, our purpose and values.

*Careful listening:*⁷⁸ Careful listening involves curiosity, flexibility, empathy, and humility in order to truly understand the other and to revise one’s interpretations based on new discoveries.⁷⁹ Good listeners also are aware of the ways in which they filter, and distort, what they hear.⁸⁰

*Relational connectedness:*⁸¹ While leaders provide a holding environment for the people they lead, they also need someone to provide a holding environment for them.⁸² They need supportive confidants who can listen carefully and maintain confidences, who care more about the leader than the adaptive issues, and who can speak freely to the leader and say things that other people might

⁷⁴ Heifetz and Linsky, 187.

⁷⁵ Bolsinger, 211; Heifetz and Linsky, 196–197.

⁷⁶ Heifetz and Linsky, 198; Heifetz, *LWEA*, 242–243.

⁷⁷ Heifetz, *LWEA*, 273; Heifetz and Linsky, 204.

⁷⁸ Listening is listed as its own skill in *LWEA*. In *Leadership on the Line*, it reappears as a subset of other skills, primarily under the terms *compassion* and *curiosity* (227, 233).

⁷⁹ Heifetz and Linsky, 227, 271.

⁸⁰ Heifetz and Linsky, 271.

⁸¹ In *LWEA*, Heifetz identifies both confidants and allies as vital relationships for the adaptive leader. In *Leadership on the Line*, he and Linsky focus on confidants.

⁸² Heifetz, *LWEA*, 268.

not say.⁸³ In addition, because helpful and innovative ideas might come from minority voices with unique perspectives, leaders must protect those who disagree with them, resisting the temptation to silence them or exclude them from the process.⁸⁴

*Sacred Heart.*⁸⁵ “Sacred heart” is the ability to feel pain without numbing oneself, to remain connected to others and one’s life purpose even when it involves disappointment and suffering.⁸⁶ Heifetz and Linsky assert that the greatest motivation for adaptive change is love: caring for and wanting the best for those within the organization and for the people the organization serves.⁸⁷ As love deepens and matures, it grows in resilience and vulnerability, becoming what Heifetz and Linsky call “sacred heart.” This inner strength is what keeps a leader going when adaptive change is most difficult. It empowers the leader to “manage hungers” and reactions that might otherwise sidetrack or destroy their adaptive work or personal lives.⁸⁸

In the table to the right, I have reordered the list of secure attachment outcomes above and set them alongside the list of adaptive leadership capacities from Heifetz and Linsky. The parallels between the two theories are evident.⁸⁹

⁸³ Heifetz and Linsky, 220.

⁸⁴ Heifetz, *LWEA*, 270–271.

⁸⁵ Heifetz, *LWEA*, 274–275. This is a composite term, drawing together the embryonic ideas of purpose and values from *LWEA* as they developed into the more robust “love,” “connectedness,” and “sacred heart” from chapters ten and eleven in *LL*.

⁸⁶ Heifetz and Linsky, 227–230. The image Heifetz and Linsky use as a model for this kind of loving and purposeful ability to suffer well is the image of Jesus on the cross.

⁸⁷ Heifetz and Linsky, 210–211.

⁸⁸ Heifetz and Linsky, 210–211, 227–228.

⁸⁹ Although the parallels and overlaps are strong, the pairings in each row of this chart are not exact. For example, “Distinguishing Self from Role” in the adaptive leadership column includes differentiation, which is linked to both “Strong, Stable Identity” and “Relational Health” in the attachment column. I have also divided “Emotional Regulation and Resilience” into two distinct outcomes to parallel the capacities of “Finding Sanctuary” and “Sacred Heart.”

Outcomes of Secure Attachment	Capacities for Adaptive Leadership
Reflective Function— <i>linking emotions with ideas and thoughts, ability to step outside oneself to reflect on oneself and one’s experiences</i>	Getting on the Balcony— <i>stepping out of the fray to see the big picture, reflecting, anticipating, prioritizing</i>
Strong, Stable Identity— <i>self-acceptance, self-compassion, self-esteem, and self-efficacy</i>	Distinguishing Self from Role— <i>staying relationally connected without taking others’ emotions and attacks personally</i>
Emotional Regulation— <i>feeling emotion, regulating it, and coping with it without distortion</i>	Finding Sanctuary— <i>practicing ways to calm big emotions and recenter oneself</i>
Empathy, or Attunement— <i>“feeling with” others and attending to their needs</i>	Careful Listening— <i>tuning in to others with curiosity, empathy, and humility</i>
Relational Health— <i>neither compulsively self-reliant nor compulsively dependent, adjusting one’s responses to the social environment</i>	Relational Connectedness— <i>cultivating and maintaining relationships with confidants, allies, and people who disagree</i>
Emotional Resilience— <i>ability to bounce back from big emotions, to hope and persevere in the face of suffering</i>	Sacred Heart— <i>remaining open and connected to people and purpose even through suffering</i>

Side by side, these lists reinforce the contention that secure attachment patterns provide essential capacities for adaptive leaders.⁹⁰ Focusing specifically on the emotional aspects of adaptive change, there are three significant ways these outcomes of secure attachment might be valuable for leaders: First, leaders with a high capacity for emotional regulation and resilience will be better at “tolerat[ing] uncertainty, frustration, and pain” and using their own emotional awareness and responses to modulate the group’s emotional distress. Because secure attachment outcomes are interrelated, leaders with high emotional capacity are also more likely to have secure identities, good reflective function, and healthy relational dynamics. Second, leaders with strong emotional regulation and resilience will be able to create more sturdy, flexible, and attuned holding environments—environments that can handle a wider range of emotions at higher intensities and still recover. Third, as a result of the first and second points, leaders with strong

⁹⁰ Although approximately forty percent of the general population has various forms of insecure attachment, it is likely that the percentage for leaders is lower because of formal and informal leadership filtering processes such as academic and professional success, relational influence, and job interviews. For a detailed review of literature on emotional and relational virtues of transformational leaders, with special attention to attachment, see John E. Rugg, “Connected Leader Inventory: The Development of a Relational Virtue Model and Measure of Leadership” (unpublished manuscript, no date), PDF file.

emotional regulation and resilience will have greater capacity to develop their groups' emotional capacities through modeling and co-regulation, decreasing the chances that emotional distress will derail successful adaptation.

Implicit Interpersonal Processes Facilitate Deep Change

Bolsinger points out that developing these kinds of adaptive leadership capacities is more than mastering a technique: "It's a set of deeply developed capabilities that *are the result of ongoing transformation in the life of a leader.*"⁹¹ Attachment theory supports Bolsinger's suggestion and extends it, claiming that transformation in emotional and relational spheres occurs not primarily through explicit cognitive interpretation and insight but through the same kinds of implicit interpersonal interactions in which attachment forms.⁹²

Emotional Regulation Occurs Implicitly

As noted earlier, some of the emotional resistance to adaptive change is provoked by new mental models, while some simply stems from the loss, fear, and anxiety that naturally attend change. In either case, the activation and regulation of emotions become vital elements in successful adaptation. Until the rise of attachment research, it has been difficult to address this element because it occurs at the implicit level, below conscious awareness. Now though, a growing body of psychological research on infant development is beginning to distinguish between implicit and declarative knowledge, and to explore the implicit more fully.

⁹¹ Bolsinger, 91. The leader, in turn, must cultivate their people's ongoing transformation so that *they* can grow into the adaptive change and own it themselves (126).

⁹² Schore, *Science*, 6 and Schore, *Repair*, 53. See also Daniel N. Stern, Louis W. Sander, Jeremy P. Nahum, et al., "Non-Interpretive Mechanisms in Psychoanalytic Therapy: The 'Something More' Than Interpretation," *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 79 (1998): 903–921.

Declarative knowledge is explicit and conscious (or easily made conscious). It is stored in the form of images and words.⁹³ Implicit knowledge, on the other hand, is procedural knowing “about what to do, think, and feel” in a specific relationship or in the body’s interactions with the environment.⁹⁴ For example, once learned, the physical action of riding a bike becomes implicit, something that can be done without conscious reflection or attention.⁹⁵ Also implicit is the knowledge about which kinds of bids for attention are most likely to succeed with certain family members. Implicit knowledge is not conscious, nor is it repressed. At times we might be aware that it is occurring and able to reflect on it afterwards. Yet it operates mostly below conscious awareness and cannot be tracked in “real time” by the conscious mind.

Many, if not most, of the attachment system’s neurobiological processes are implicit, occurring before and below conscious thought.⁹⁶ The face-to-face interactions between mother and infant, which establish the groundwork of secure attachment in the infant’s first year of life, occur nonverbally in what Schore calls “hot cognitions” of the “relational unconscious.”⁹⁷ He describes how, in adults as well as infants, “detection and complex processing of the smallest change within a human face occurs within one hundred milliseconds (Lehky, 2000), and these facial expression changes are mirrored (Dimberg and Ohman, 1996) and matched

⁹³ Stern, Sander, et al., “Non-Interpretive Mechanisms,” 3; Daniel N. Stern, Nadia Bruschiweiler-Stern, Alexandra M. Harrison, et al., “The Process of Therapeutic Change Involving Implicit Knowledge: Some Implications of Developmental Observations for Adult Psychotherapy,” *Infant Mental Health Journal*, 19(3) (1998): 300–308.

⁹⁴ Stern, Sander, et al., 3; Stern, Bruschiweiler-Stern, et al., 302.

⁹⁵ One form of implicit knowledge is what leadership professor Scott Cormode calls “cultivated instincts” (209–211).

⁹⁶ Schore, *Repair*, 12–22. See also Todd W. Hall and Lauren E. Maltby, “Trauma, Attachment, and Spirituality,” 303–304. By “before...conscious” I mean sequentially prior to conscious thought in both human development and in-the-moment neural processing throughout life. By “below conscious” I mean subconscious, and I also mean that the literal physical brain systems related to implicit processing are lower and further back in the brain than the systems related to explicit, conscious processing.

⁹⁷ Schore, *Repair*, xvi–xvii, 40–41, 143–144, 216.

by an observer's right hemisphere within three to four hundred milliseconds, at levels beneath awareness (Stenberg, Wiking, and Dahl, 1998)."⁹⁸ The brain processes other nonverbal signals, such as voice tone, touch, and gestures in a similar, nearly instantaneous way. Conscious awareness only moves about eighty percent as fast, unable to track these implicit processes as they are happening.⁹⁹ These faster implicit processes of the relational unconscious shape (in infancy) and can later modify the individual's emotional regulation and reflective function, including the ability to recognize and revise mental models.¹⁰⁰ Explicit, conscious intention can be helpful, but to be truly transformational, these changes cannot happen solely in the conscious mind, and they can happen without any conscious awareness at all.¹⁰¹

Some change—even at the emotional level—can occur through cognitive and behavioral processes because emotional regulation is so deeply intertwined with reflective function. Reflective function specialist Peter Fonagy describes how people begin life “embedded in experience,” fully immersed in our experiences as they unfold and unable to separate ourselves from them.¹⁰² Healthy human development progresses from embeddedness to reflective function, the ability to recognize the psychological depth in oneself and others, acknowledging that visible behaviors are guided by invisible thoughts.¹⁰³ Reflective function is what allows an adaptive leader to “get on the balcony,” to rise above embeddedness and see the bigger picture, the systems and patterns at play in a group or situation.

⁹⁸ Schore, *Repair*, 143–144.

⁹⁹ Rational and linguistic processing occurs at five hertz (five cycles per second) in the brain, whereas emotional and relational processing occurs faster, at six hertz (Marcus Warner and Jim Wilder, *Rare Leadership: Four Uncommon Habits for Increasing Trust, Joy, and Engagement in the People You Lead* [Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2016], 28–29).

¹⁰⁰ Schore, *Repair*, xvi–xvii, 40–41, 143–144, 216; Siegel, 159. Neuroscience is now confirming Winnicott's claim that during the holding stage “physiology and psychology have not yet become distinct” (D. W. Winnicott, “The Theory of the Parent-Infant Relationship,” *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* [41 (1960)]: 585–595).

¹⁰¹ Stern, Bruschiweiler-Stern, et al., 302; Wallin, 81; Schore, *Science*, 106.

¹⁰² Wallin, 135.

¹⁰³ Wallin, 44.

Intriguingly, Fonagy and his colleagues found that reflective function is deeply intertwined with emotional regulation: when parents were able to contain, or regulate, their infants' emotional distress, the infants generally developed into children who exhibited secure attachment and a strong potential for reflective function.¹⁰⁴

Because of the deep links between reflective function and emotion regulation, reflection can be a significant tool for changing emotionally laden thoughts and behaviors, as Bolsinger's and Kegan and Lahey's work attests. Reflection can even help change attachment patterns. In his psychotherapy practice, David Wallin helps clients develop reflective function as part of the means for shifting insecure attachment patterns into more secure ones.¹⁰⁵ Wallin's description of interactions with clients sounds strikingly similar to the way Sharon Daloz Parks describes Heifetz's leadership lab at Harvard.¹⁰⁶ Both Wallin and Heifetz focus on the in-the-moment emotional and intellectual reactions people are having in the room. They attempt to help clients and students begin to notice these reactions in themselves and others as they are happening. The purpose is to learn to respond to each interaction in a calm, relationally connected, thoughtful way rather than simply reacting unreflectively based on assumptions, emotions, and outdated or inaccurate mental models. The process begins as leaders empathize with clients' and students' strong emotions and guide them from there to a calmer, more reflective posture. Eventually, clients and students learn to regulate and reflect for themselves at a new level. Thus, the therapy room and classroom become holding environments for the development of emotion

¹⁰⁴ Wallin, 48.

¹⁰⁵ Wallin, 133–144. Todd Hall works with clients in a similar way, emphasizing the importance of bringing the implicit layers to explicit awareness through story. See especially Hall and Maltby, "Trauma, Attachment, and Spirituality," and Todd W. Hall, "Psychoanalysis, Attachment, and Spirituality, Part II: The Spiritual Stories We Live By," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 35(1) (2007): 29–42.

¹⁰⁶ For example, compare Wallin, 195, 275–276 and Sharon Daloz Parks, *Leadership Can Be Taught: A Bold Approach for a Complex World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2005), chapter three.

regulation and reflective function, which in turn paves the way for flexible thinking and openness to new mental models.

Heifetz and Wallin create these environments using a combination of implicit “bottom-up” processing and explicit “top-down” processing. Neuroscientist James Coan explains the bottom-up and top-down language in more detail. Physical sensations and emotions arise in the lower (implicit) parts of the brain that humans share with animals. The lower brain recognizes and responds to threats with self-protective measures. Once these lower levels are activated, using the higher “human” (explicit) levels of the brain—logic, creativity, morality, story—to deactivate them is costly and effortful.

This top-down process usually involves conscious reflection and cognitive-behavioral approaches. Far more efficient, however, is to use the lower levels themselves. In this bottom-up process, one person contains and calms the distress of another through interpersonal interactions at the implicit level, such as physical touch and emotional attunement.¹⁰⁷ As described earlier, this bottom-up process is what secure parents offer their children to help them learn to regulate their emotions. In fact, experiencing attuned touch, facial expressions, and other socio-emotional communication alongside high-intensity emotions can shift the experience of threat and emotion even before it reaches consciousness, diminishing distress and preventing the need for cognitive reframing or other interventions at a conscious level.¹⁰⁸ A leader who offers this kind of bottom-up self-regulation provides what Edwin Friedman calls a “non-anxious presence.”¹⁰⁹ A non-anxious leader helps regulate others’ emotions and, in the process, begins to implicitly retrain their patterns of emotional regulation.

¹⁰⁷ James Coan, “Toward a Neuroscience of Attachment,” in *Handbook of Attachment: Theory, Research, and Clinical Applications*, 3rd ed., eds. Jude Cassidy and Phillip R. Shaver (New York: Guilford, 2016), 242–272.

¹⁰⁸ Coan, *Neuroscience*, 258–259. Coan cites various studies that, linked together, support this view. He acknowledges, however, that “The extent to which this is true awaits further investigation.”

¹⁰⁹ Edwin H. Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Processes in Church and Synagogue* (New York: Guilford Press, 1985), 208–210.

Heifetz's and Wallin's work is a significant step toward the development of adaptive leaders, providing tested methods for training leaders in handling the cognitive and emotional turmoil provoked by adaptive change and new mental models. However, their processes are still predominantly top down, with the bottom-up elements less intentional, less understood, and more intuitive.

Attachment theory allows a more direct understanding of what is happening in the bottom-up processes that good leaders practice intuitively. I will now more directly explicate those implicit emotional-regulation processes, and then offer some practices for strengthening them.

Implicit processes are shaped primarily through interpersonal interactions.

By interpersonal interactions, I mean more specifically what psychologists call intersubjective interactions. Intersubjective interactions are mutually regulated interactions between two people who are aware of each other as subjects.¹¹⁰ The three marks of intersubjective relatedness are sharing a focus of attention, sharing of intentions, and the sharing of feeling states.¹¹¹

As described earlier, attachment bonds form through intersubjective interactions between infants and their caregivers. Parents (or other caregivers) who successfully train their infants to regulate emotions do so at this implicit level by matching the infant's emotions with facial expressions and voice tone so that the infants feel seen, heard, and understood—or “feel felt.” Then the parents “co-regulate” the infants' emotions, calming them down with quiet voices, gentle touch or rocking, and perhaps a song. As the infants calm down, parents rebuild more joyful relational interactions, restoring the sense that everything is going to be okay. If parents are unable to attune to and calm certain emotions, such as fear or despair, it is likely the infants will not learn to regulate those emotions very well.¹¹² Infants experience and learn all of this implicitly, even without having access to words, reasoning, or interpretations.

¹¹⁰ Wallin, 52, 55.

¹¹¹ Wallin, 53.

¹¹² Schore, *Science*, 228–232, 265.

Later in life, the brain's processing of in-the-moment experiences—attachment-related or not—still begins in these lower-level “hot cognitions,” the implicit processes that attend to bodily sensations, emotions, and relational interactions. Only after progressing through these implicit layers in the hypothalamus, amygdala, and cingulate cortex, does an experience reach the level of slower but explicitly conscious cognition in the prefrontal cortex. In situations that do not provoke strong emotions or bodily reactions, implicit processing generally goes unnoticed.¹¹³ In emotionally charged situations, however, implicit emotional material can derail the brain's progress toward conscious cognition, undermining such “human” functions as rationality, morality, flexibility, and willpower.¹¹⁴ In threatening situations like riots or fires, it is possible for the fear centers of the brain to so override rational function that someone trying to escape might literally no longer recognize other people as human beings and only perceive them as objects blocking the way out—objects to be removed at any cost.

Though it is less dramatic, this same kind of pattern plays out in everyday situations, often interpersonal ones. Imagine a teenage girl trying to show her father how to use Facebook. Struggling to understand her technological vocabulary and keep up with her speed, he feels ashamed. The shame subconsciously evokes embarrassing memories of solving a math problem incorrectly in front of his middle school classmates. The shame is accompanied by a fear of looking incompetent in front of his daughter, and of losing his twenty-year career to younger, more

¹¹³ Schore, *Science*, 77–84; Goleman, 18. Psychologists acknowledge that subconscious emotional and behavioral patterns, called “schema” or “internal working models,” include a cognitive component. This cognitive component actually comes last in the brain's processing of experience. As the discussion of schema moves into organizational leadership and practical theology where the term *mental models* is somewhat parallel, the secondary, cognitive component becomes highlighted and the primary, emotional component is minimized.

¹¹⁴ Bolsinger acknowledges this neuroscientific reality (145–148), which is also described in the second chapter of Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ*, 10th Anniversary Edition (New York: Bantam, 2006). For more neurobiological detail, see Schore, *Science*, 77–84.

techno-savvy workers. These emotions are operating implicitly, so he does not consciously realize what he fears. There is simply a feeling of fear. Because he has not developed adequate emotional regulation capacities, the shame and fear in his lower brain override his higher brain function, diminishing his ability to comprehend his daughter's instruction, increasing his fear and shame even more. Fear activates his sympathetic nervous system, giving him the energy to fight or flee. At the same time, shame activates his parasympathetic nervous system, taking away his energy so that he can more effectively freeze and hide. For a while, his body is stuck in the battle between adrenaline and exhaustion. Eventually, however, his implicit emotion culminates in explicit behavior: he vents his energy by pounding the table and shouting about her poor teaching. Then, energy spent, he collapses on the couch in despair. Glancing up, he sees his daughter's shocked and hurt expression. He feels ashamed all over again, apologizing profusely: "I'm so sorry, honey. I don't know what came over me. I just got so frustrated. It's not because you're a bad teacher. I've just always been horrible at math and computers, and I don't know how I can ever keep up with all of this stupid technology."

The father's explicit interpretations and worries are driven by implicit emotions, reactions that occur below and faster than his conscious attempts to recognize and correct them. Conscious cognition catches up only after a lag, trying to make sense of what has already happened. Only in retrospect is the father able to begin identifying some of the factors that drove his overreaction to learning new technology. He might work hard to learn to recognize and modify those reactions in future situations using cognitive-behavioral tools such as re-interpretation and willpower. But attachment research makes available what until now has been only implicit. Just as babies learn emotional regulation implicitly through interactions with their caregivers, attachment-like interpersonal practices can develop emotional regulation later in life by accessing and reshaping implicit processes. The father does not have to simply think and will his way to a different response to his emotions in the moments after they have spiked. With attention and practice, he can actually change the intensity of his emotions at

the implicit level where they arise. The same is true for leaders and groups facing the distress of adaptive change.

The following section describes four interpersonal practices for developing emotion regulation and resilience in leaders, strengthening holding environments, and helping groups effectively process loss, anxiety, conflict, and fear so that they can move through the adaptive process into a “new normal.”

Increasing Adaptive Capacity Through Implicit Interpersonal Interaction

The formation of holding environments requires attachment-related capacities for attunement, emotional resilience, and regulation. These capacities are created and transformed at their deepest levels through implicit processes below conscious awareness. These implicit processes, in turn, are activated and changed by means of face-to-face interpersonal interactions that occur in real time in safe relationships. I offer here four interpersonal practices for strengthening implicit emotional capacities. Patterned after processes that cultivate secure attachment, these four practices are designed to build on each other to create and strengthen emotional regulation, ultimately cultivating the resilient vulnerability of Heifetz and Linsky’s “sacred heart.” They are: attune to verbal and nonverbal communication, build joy, recognize overwhelm, and self- or group-quiet.¹¹⁵

The four practices are based on the work of therapist Jim Wilder, pastor Chris Coursey, and relational trainer Jen Coursey. Wilder and the Courseys developed a relational and emotional skill training program called Thrive based in large part on Allan Schore’s

¹¹⁵ Although I am suggesting a new set of bottom-up practices for leader training, I intend to supplement, not dismantle, the good work that is already being done. Current models that emphasize cognitive and behavioral approaches should continue to be used for the neurological processes in which they work most effectively: conscious, explicit reasoning and top-down methods of accessing and changing implicit mental models like the methods suggested by Bolsinger and Kegan and Lahey. Adaptive challenges might best be addressed using both top-down and bottom-up modes. I highlight the bottom-up mode simply because it is the part that adaptive leadership theorists and practitioners do not yet seem to have explicit language and processes for.

detailed description of how infants develop implicit knowledge and secure attachments through interpersonal interactions.¹¹⁶ If we imagine that creating a holding environment is like playing baseball, then these practices are less like pitching and batting than they are like the cardio workouts, strength training, and stretching. They make players' actions more powerful and less painful. For leaders used to simply jumping into the game—especially the ones who already do these practices intuitively—the practices might feel unremarkable and self-evident. On the other hand, to those steeped in cognitive and behavioral models of learning and change, these practices might feel awkward and extraneous. The practices have yet to be tested with the specific intent of exploring their value in adaptive change, and they might not prove as valuable as I expect. Given my own and others' experiences with them, however, I anticipate that they will grow adaptive leaders' capacities to “tolerate uncertainty, frustration, and pain,” as well as their abilities to create and sustain holding environments.¹¹⁷ I expect these practices will increase group adaptive capacities by strengthening the holding environment and growing the group's ability to navigate through intense emotions such as loss, fear, and anxiety, which might otherwise derail successful adaptation.

¹¹⁶ I write these descriptions after attending three one-week, intensive Thrive training events, reading Thrive-related resources in depth, and teaching some of the information to others. More detailed information can be found in Chris M. Coursey, *Transforming Fellowship: 19 Brain Skills That Build Joyful Community* (East Peoria, IL: Shepherd's House, 2016); Chris Coursey and Jennifer Coursey, *Mastering Joy and Rest: Thrive Year One Basic Skill Training* (Pasadena, CA: Shepherd's House, 2009); and Chris Coursey and Jennifer Coursey, *Thrive Track II Student Handbook: Mastering Returning to Joy* (Charleston, SC: Shepherd's House, 2011).

¹¹⁷For others' experiences, see E. James Wilder, Edward M. Khouri, et al., *Joy Starts Here: The Transformation Zone* (East Peoria, IL: Shepherd's House, 2013); Marcus Warner and Jim Wilder, *Rare Leadership: Four Uncommon Habits for Increasing Trust, Joy, and Engagement in the People You Lead* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2016); Tom Anthony, *Building Better Community: Twelve Exercises to Strengthen Your Relational Muscles* (Carmel, IN: Deeper Walk, 2018); and Jim Wilder and Michel Hendricks, *The Other Half of Church: Christian Community, Brain Science, and Overcoming Stagnation* (Chicago: Moody, 2020).

Attune to Nonverbal Communication

Often we are not aware of our own implicit emotions because they occur below consciousness. Yet these emotions are not fully hidden. They appear in facial expressions, gestures, posture, and voice tone.¹¹⁸ Attuning to others involves attending to these nonverbal cues in order to see, hear, and understand their internal experiences as well as their spoken words, helping them “feel felt.” Attunement is a foundational skill for affect regulation and empathy. Attunement is also the first step toward creating a holding environment that feels safe and truly includes the whole self that each person brings into the adaptive process. Attunement allows people to recognize and process unspoken emotions. It begins to bridge the implicit and explicit layers, moving an individual’s internal experience into the shared space and opening the way (eventually) for reflection on existing and new emotional, cognitive, and behavioral responses.¹¹⁹ Attunement, or careful listening, is an outcome of secure attachment and an adaptive leadership capacity.

In a leadership context, intentionally practicing attunement might involve taking time to allow people in the group to name their fears, lament their losses, and articulate their angers without needing to provide a logical defense for any of these emotions. As they share, they need to sense that leaders and others in the room are feeling with them. One way leaders and groups can develop their ability to “feel with” one another is by telling nonverbal stories.¹²⁰ People form pairs, and one of them acts out the story of something that happened to them during the day using only nonverbal signals and movements without words. After the story is complete, the partner who was watching the story then repeats the story back to the storyteller, first without words and then with words that include naming the storyteller’s emotions at various points in the story. Then the partners switch roles. Nonverbal storytelling often generates smiles and laughter, building joy, which is the next type of capacity-growing interaction.

¹¹⁸ See, for example, the work of Paul Eckman and John Gottman.

¹¹⁹ Wallin, 194–196.

¹²⁰ For more detail on this skill and how to develop it, see Chris M. Coursey, *Transforming Fellowship: 19 Brain Skills That Build Joyful Community*, 139–147.

Build Group Joy

In its interpersonal sense, joy is the experience that others are “glad to be with me,” that their eyes light up to see me.¹²¹ Over time, experiences of interpersonal joy develop emotional resilience, giving individuals and groups the capacity to handle painful emotions.¹²² Interpersonal joy also fosters a sense of group identity, strengthening the bonds that help people stay connected even when big emotions and significant differences arise. The relational connectedness fostered by joy is both a secure attachment outcome and an adaptive leadership capacity.

Groups can develop joy in many ways: being intentional about sharing authentic smiles and eye contact when greeting each other, expressing appreciation for one another (and for God), and non-sarcastic humor.¹²³ Another way to build joy is by inviting people to share stories of past times when they experienced joy and gratitude, especially if they express authentic emotion on their faces and include words for their emotions and body sensations (e.g., “I pumped my fist in the air,” “I felt light-hearted,” “I felt the knot in my stomach relax”).¹²⁴

Recognize Overwhelm

Recognizing when individuals or the group as a whole are becoming emotionally overwhelmed is the first step toward regulating the distress. Some signals of overwhelm will depend

¹²¹ Schore, *Repair*, 7–12; Wilder, Khouri, et al., 7–9. For a theology of this kind of relational joy, see Evelyne A. Reisacher, *Joyful Witness in the Muslim World: Sharing the Gospel in Everyday Encounters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), chapter one.

¹²² Schore, *Repair*, 15–22.

¹²³ Although the appropriateness of eye contact might depend on the culture, eye contact is one of the main ways infants and their caregivers develop secure attachments. This is evident in a typical joy-building process between mothers and infants as they make eye contact and smile for a while (perhaps making happy noises), look away when tired, and make eye contact and smile again when ready (Schore, *Repair*, 7–12).

¹²⁴ Chris and Jen Coursey describe and model joy stories in this YouTube video from March 23, 2020: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W4WMmkt5B-w&list=PLPuz2DrX-jX1VpQ80WNVS971N5pJ0DWc5&index=47>. For more detail on building joy, sharing appreciation, and telling joy stories, see Coursey, *Transforming Fellowship*, 49–55, 77–86, and 139–147.

greatly on the group and the cultural context. Others are evident from what seem to be universal nonverbal cues, such as widened eyes, blinking or squinting, crossed arms or legs, or pulling the head or body backwards away from others. More dramatic reactions, such as explosive anger, tears, or withdrawal, occur when leaders do not recognize the initial signals of overwhelm and keep trying to engage people.

One way to develop acuity in recognizing overwhelm is the “hand in your face” partner exercise. Partners sit facing each other, knees almost touching. Partner A moves his open palm closer and closer to Partner B’s face, but stopping as soon as he notices Partner B’s nonverbal overwhelm signals. If the early signals are missed and Partner B feels too distressed, she can say “stop.” Next, partners debrief what they each felt and noticed, such as what signals Partner A did or did not notice that indicated Partner B’s overwhelm, and how B felt as A’s hand got closer to her face. Then the partners switch roles. Repeating this exercise two or three times helps grow awareness and accuracy in reading and responding to others’ nonverbal signals of overwhelm. Debriefing after each round fosters reflective function. Debriefing with this particular exercise is particularly important because developing accurate recognition of others’ overwhelm requires feedback from them.¹²⁵

Self-Quiet and Group Quiet

Once overwhelm is recognized, the next step is to moderate it. When allowed to continue too long, big emotions, such as those provoked by adaptive change, can desynchronize the rational and emotional functions of the brain so that they no longer function in tandem. Desynchronized people are more likely to be defensive, to rationalize, and to overreact, and they are less likely to be able to listen to and attune with others or “get on the balcony.”¹²⁶ In intense moments, pausing for self-quieting or group quieting can restore synchronization and emotional balance, allowing people to

¹²⁵ Coursey, *Transforming Fellowship*, 191–201.

¹²⁶ Schore, *Science*, 77–84; Goleman, 18.

face adaptive distress with full access to the resources of the lower and the higher brain, including empathy, calm, reason, creativity, flexibility, and morality.¹²⁷ Like Heifetz and Linsky's practice of "finding sanctuary," self-quieting involves calming big emotions and receiving rest that renews and sustains. Besides preparing leaders to repair relational ruptures, quieting helps leaders internalize the calm needed for being a non-anxious presence and creates the neural synchronization needed for integrative reflective thinking. It also helps leaders maintain the distinction between self and role.

Individual exercises for quieting might include taking a walk, talking with a friend, snuggling with a pet, journaling, or reading a book. If the group as a whole is feeling strong emotions, the leader could offer a short break or guide a corporate quieting interaction such as a guided stretching or breathing exercise.¹²⁸ In a religious context, corporate quieting might include singing a calming hymn or worship song, or pausing for a few minutes of silence or prayer. The goal of group quieting is not perfect peace but downshifting intense emotions into a more manageable range so they can be handled more productively.

Conclusion

Focusing on implicit interpersonal interactions might feel awkward, dispensable, or self-evident, depending on one's background and capacities. The shift to intentionally using implicit, intersubjective practices for growing emotional capacity is an adaptive change that takes time and exploration. Such exploration necessarily will include asking questions, experimenting, sharing ideas and discoveries, failures as well as successes. My own experience with these exercises through Thrive training, and the experience of many colleagues in church and parachurch leadership, suggests

¹²⁷ Schore, *Science*, 95–109.

¹²⁸ Coursey, *Transforming Fellowship*, 57-65, 129-138, and 191-201. If the group emotions are too intense, taking a break might leave desynchronized people with lower emotional capacities in the difficult position of trying to calm themselves without help. If such people are in the group, it might be better to calm down together before taking a break.

they are effective. At this point, the argument in this essay is mostly theory, supported by only a small amount of informally gathered qualitative data.¹²⁹ I will continue this research to help religious leaders adapt in more faithful and effective ways.

¹²⁹ My dissertation research, currently in progress with the oversight of Fuller Seminary's Dr. Scott Cormode and Rosemead School of Psychology's Todd Hall, pursues the quantitative elements of this theory by exploring statistical correlations between adaptive leadership and attachment-related capacities such as emotional regulation, emotional resilience, and differentiation.

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