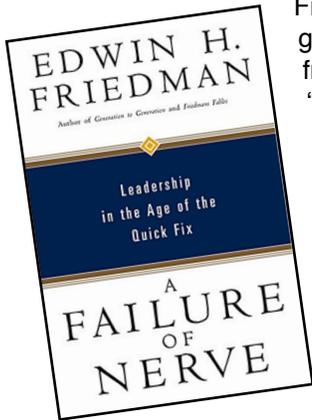


***A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix***  
Edwin H Friedman (2007, Seabury Books)

**A Personal Recommendation**



From the book's opening pages, I felt as though I was sitting in class on the first day of a graduate course on leadership, with a brilliant professor presenting thoroughly original material from a lifetime of research and practice. There were no footnotes referencing popular "leadership gurus" whose books I had read. As the endorsements on the book's jacket suggested, Friedman seems to have been a rare, original voice, drawing insights from marriage and family therapy, medicine, scientific advances, organizational management, and broad cultural trends witnessed from within Washington D.C.'s beltway. *Failure of Nerve* is only 250 pages, but the material is dense. It's not a quick read and, it doesn't provide any simple fixes or pithy keys to success. Rather, Friedman lays a new foundation for thinking about long-term leadership challenges and building toward greater personal health and effectiveness. Every chapter is packed with insights and illustrations Edwin Friedman, now deceased (c. 1996), gathered and tested over a lifetime. The book was actually put together by editors who compiled Friedman's unpublished notes after his death. Consequently, not all the chapters are equally developed.

Books like *Failure of Nerve* provide life-long students of leadership with foundational understanding of emotional and relational processes that should help them, when reading other books (on how to lead a family, a church or synagogue—Friedman spent much of his life as a Jewish rabbi—a business team, or a government), to make informed decisions about why one leadership technique might bring lasting change, while many do not.

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**Introduction: The Problem of Leadership**

Friedman uses this introduction both to present the desperate need for a breakthrough in leadership understanding and to provide a detailed summary of the book's entire argument, so don't skip these pages. Friedman argues that, from home to church, Wall Street to the White House, we're living in a "leadership-toxic climate" in which institutions are stuck in conflict or malaise and, misguided, insecure leaders are looking for solutions in better techniques that produce greater safety and control. Friedman argues that the unending search for better and better leadership data (the next book, the next seminar, the next survey or study) has become a self-defeating addiction among leaders who lack nerve—a form of escapism for leaders who do not understand either their part in the breakdowns that surround them, or the steps only they, as leaders, can take to overcome organizational deadlock. Our real problem is that we've lost sight of the powerful influence of universal emotional or instinctual processes that are always at work underneath our attempts to organize and motivate people. If we understood these basic emotional processes, we'd recognize that a leader's being, presence, and courage (simply being present and standing in the midst of conflict) are much more vital to his or her effectiveness (and happiness) than any new data the latest survey or study, book or seminar might provide. "The way out [of America's crisis of leadership] . . . requires shifting our orientation to the way we think about relationships, from one that focuses on techniques that motivate others to one that focuses on the leader's own presence and being" (p. 4). The ongoing failure of schools and churches, corporations and governments to produce lasting change has less to do with finding the right methods and, more to do with understanding the emotional factors at work in individuals, families, congregations, and society at large. Clearly, Friedman is pointing at me. I want my organization to change and grow. But, a breakthrough will only begin as I change my paradigm—*i.e.*, the way I see myself and my relationships—and exercise the nerve to stand up to the reactivity that probably signals that I am doing the right thing. The answer isn't another book or seminar on leadership technique; I need to refocus on my dream, refuse to become anxious, keep standing for who I am and what is true and good.

## **1. Chapter One—Imaginative Gridlock and the Spirit of Adventure**

Friedman describes this chapter as an extended metaphor for how any organization can succumb to imaginative gridlock, and then, alternatively, break out into a fresh season renewal or renaissance. Describing medieval Europe as suffering under a thousand years of imaginative gridlock, Friedman examines how adventurers like Columbus and other explorers broke through the continent's dominant emotional barriers to discover unknown worlds. Their spirit of adventure and discovery propelled all of Europe into the Renaissance, Reformation, and the modern era. Renewal, rebirth, renaissance in any organization hinges on leaders who are able to separate themselves from the dominant emotional climate in their organization and break through barriers to discovery. Gridlocked systems are characterized by an unending treadmill of trying harder, looking for better answers (data) instead of reframing the questions, and either/or thinking that creates false dichotomies. Friedman believes that contemporary American leaders are being hemmed in (imaginative gridlock) by three generally accepted emotional fallacies: (1) that collecting more data is more important to leadership than being decisive, (2) that expressing empathy toward others helps them mature or become more responsible, and (3) that selfishness is a greater danger to an organization than the loss of integrity that results when a leader has no clear sense of self.

## **2. Chapter Two—A Society in Regression**

Friedman argues that despite America's technological advancement, our culture is now regressing into the kind of imaginative gridlock that characterized medieval Europe. We're living in a regressive emotional climate that is toxic to leadership. Instead of pursuing adventure and discovery, our culture is pursuing ever greater safety and certainty. With a background in family systems therapy, Friedman outlines five aspects of regressive, chronic anxiety that manifest not only in families, but also in large organizations, and even culture as a whole: (1) Reactivity—people react passionately, aggressively, even viciously to circumstances and to each other. Anxious members find it almost impossible to be calm, optimistic or playful. (2) Herding—putting a greater value on sticking together than on making progress. Members become intolerant of individuality and conflict. They pressure the group to adapt to the demands of the least mature members and criticize leaders for hurting or being cruel to these disruptive people. (3) Blame shifting, or living like victims instead of taking responsibility for problems and solutions. As anxiety increases, group members increasingly criticize and blame leaders for failing to provide for their safety and happiness. (4) Searching for quick-fixes—*i.e.*, seeking quick relief from painful symptoms rather than making deep, fundamental changes. Impatience (low pain threshold) is a characteristic of the chronically anxious, so they demand that their leaders move quickly to alleviate their pain. (5) A lack of well-defined leadership—*i.e.*, a failure of nerve. Leaders lose a sharp sense of vision, become reactionary, cave into criticism, and are no longer challenged to grow. A breakdown in leadership is both a cause and a symptom of this kind of social regression. Together, these characteristics of emotional regression pervert growth toward maturity—the kind of maturity expressed in personal discipline or self-regulation, the ability to identify and move toward greater strength, the ability to embrace challenges and respond constructively, patience in allowing time for growth, and the preservation of individuality and integrity (without which, leaders can't lead).

## **3. Chapter Three—Data Junkyards and Data Junkies: The Fallacy of Expertise**

Here Friedman launches into a three-chapter description of what he believes are imagination-limiting, emotional barriers in our culture that erode a leader's confidence, judgment, and decisiveness. This chapter focuses on a regressive, anxious culture's fixation on collecting more and newer data in the belief that newer and better information is always the key to leadership and success, rather than maturity and nerve. "The great myth of our data-gathering era . . . has two sides, 'If only we knew enough, we could do (or fix) anything' and it's obverse, 'If we failed, it is because we did not use the right method'." (p. 98). Friedman labels this a self-limiting, cultural myth, as powerful as the belief, rooted in the Middle Ages, that it was impossible for explorers to sail past the equator. Drawing illustrations from medicine, mental health, parenting, and organizational management, Friedman suggests that our entire culture has become addicted to information-gathering as a strategy for avoiding the stresses of risking and the problems of maturing (in just the same ways alcoholics become addicted to booze when they are overwhelmed by anxiety). Friedman concludes the chapter by suggesting that the newest studies of the human brain's development, function, and relationship with the body can help leaders reorient themselves (away from the cultural fixation on data-gathering) to put greater emphasis on the emotional processes of self-definition, self-regulation, non-reactivity, while staying connected with the people they're seeking to lead. Fascinating insights.

#### **4. Chapter Four—Survival in a Hostile Environment: The Fallacy of Empathy**

Friedman describes our culture's emphasis on empathy or sensitivity to others as a power tool used by the weak and immature to sabotage leaders and to avoid personal responsibility and growth. Leaders who want to see their followers grow and mature, need to focus on *responsibility* rather than *empathy*. Friedman writes, "It has generally been my experience that in any community or family discussion, those who are the first to introduce concern for empathy feel powerless, and are trying to use the *togetherness force* of a regressed society to get those they perceive to have power to adapt to them. I have consistently found the introduction of the subject of 'empathy' into family, institutional and community meetings to be reflective of, as well an effort to induce, a failure of nerve among it's leadership" (p. 133). The chapter divides into two parts. In the first, Friedman argues from biology and sociology that hostile forces in any environment are stirred by people who are invasive and cannot seem to self-regulate their own lives—not unlike viral or even cancerous cells within our bodies. And, most importantly for leaders, empathy in an any combination of sensitivity and support, has no power to change them or help them to become more responsible or mature. Leaders who tilt toward empathy may have an "unreasonable faith in being reasonable" (p. 10). People without the ability to regulate their own lives—*i.e.*, regularly interfere in other's relationships, unceasingly try to force others to their point of view, and are unable to relate to those who disagree with them—"perpetually invade the space of their neighbors" and "cannot learn from their experience". This is why empathetic responses from leaders do not motivate them to change. They remain permanently immature until they themselves are forced to take personal responsibility for shifting to fit in with the rest of the community. In the second part of the chapter, Friedman argues that a leader's survival in a hostile climate has less to do with the threat coming at the organization (or at the leader) from un-self-regulated people, and more to do with the response within the leader. The leader's self-definition, sense of calm (even playfulness), and integrity functions organizationally in ways like the body's immune system. A calm and settled integrity stops the invaders from sickening or even killing the organization. Many leadership battles can be won, simply by not giving up, staying true to one's sense of being or calling, staying in touch with reactive people (without becoming reactive yourself), and finding ways to require reactive people to take personal responsibility for the chaos in their own lives.

#### **5. Chapter Five—Autocracy Versus Integrity: The Fallacies of Self**

This chapter introduces the third emotional barrier to effective leadership in our culture: a profound confusion between selfishness and a strong sense of self. In popular culture, any sense of self-focus is generally seen as prideful, narcissistic, even immoral. But Friedman argues that a strong sense of oneself (individual identity, calling, unique mix of strengths and weaknesses, perspective and vision) is the key to effective leadership. "The twin problems confronting leadership in our society today, the failure of nerve and the desire for a quick fix, are not the result of overly strong self but of weak or no self" (p. 163). A clear and strong sense of oneself provides a leader with ability to initiate and stand alone, to see and step back from emotional binds (triangles), to avoid the foolishness of trying to force others to change, to stay calm and relaxed when experiencing sabotage, and to cease reacting and blaming like one more emotional domino in the system. A leader's sense of self serves to protect him or her from the reactions and sabotage of immature, invasive people and, a strongly self-aware, self-differentiated, self-regulated leader serves as the immune system that preserves the integrity of the entire organization he or she leads. So, self-differentiation is a life-long emotional process (not a static state) by which leaders chart their own course out of their individual, internal guidance system, rather than continually adjusting their decisions, communications, and actions to where others are at, what others are doing or saying.

#### **6. Chapter Six—Take Five**

Friedman describes this as the book's intended 'keystone' chapter. Referring to Columbus and other explorers of his day, Friedman writes, "But for the most part what united those who went first was desire, the capacity to be decisive, and just plain 'nerve' rather than knowledge of data or technique, despite the fact that such knowledge was also useful". Friedman then summarizes five leadership qualities exhibited by these adventurers. (1) "A capacity to get outside the emotional climate of the day". They were men with unusually clear vision. (2) "A willingness to be exposed and vulnerable". They were not afraid of standing out, being held responsible, and being rejected. (3) "Persistence in the face of resistance and downright rejection". (4) Stamina in the face of sabotage along the way". "Mutiny and sabotage are not from enemies who opposed the initial idea, but rather from colleagues whose will was sapped by unexpected hardships along the way". (5) "Being 'headstrong' and 'ruthless'—at least in the eyes of others". If forced, these explorers chose their vision and goals over team-building and camaraderie. Our culture's focus on leadership research, method, data, and technique misleads

leaders in two ways. First, this emphasis (on getting better data before acting) minimizes the vital importance of these five emotional factors. Second, when these emotional factors are ignored, leaders lose confidence in the vital importance and influence of their personal being. Friedman is convinced that leadership that opens up new worlds recognizes “(1) A leader’s major effect on his or her followers has to do with the way his or her presence (emotional being) affects the emotional processes in the relationship system, (2) a leader’s major job is to understand his or her self, (3) communication depends on emotional variables such as direction, distance, and anxiety, (4) stress is due to becoming responsible for the relationships of others, (5) hierarchy is a natural systems phenomenon” (p. 194). This chapter is not as well-developed as previous chapters, so the editors include an outlined list of related principles or emotional processes.

## **7. Chapter Seven—Emotional Triangles**

Friedman believes that all relationships between any two people are inherently unstable. Consequently, we all form relational triangles all the time. “Triangles are the stuff of emotional process” (p. 207) and they function according to universal laws, regardless of gender or faith, race or culture. Friedman is convinced that understanding emotional triangles can free leaders from the stresses and relational binds *that leaders bring on themselves*, and improve their effectiveness and even their physical and emotional health. But this is a complex issue because we form triangles, not only with people, but also with problems (like money or a child’s behavior), organizations (like ‘the office’ or ‘the team’) and even the past (as in unresolved issues with parents). Friedman argues that triangles are (1) self-organizing, (2) strengthened when two parties withdraw or hide truths from the third (as in keeping secrets and gossiping), and (3) is perverse—that is, triangling can give an illusion of intimacy while actually taking the relationship away from healthy openness, directness, and genuine intimacy. We cannot remove ourselves from triangles; they are always present in our relationships, forming and reforming. And, their destructive effect cannot be changed by direct confrontation. Rather, leaders must learn to identify triangles and refuse to take on the stress that exists between the other two partners in a triangle. So we’re back to *self-differentiation* as the key to effective leadership. “The stress on leaders (parents, healers, mentors, managers) primarily has to do with the extent to which the leader has been caught in a responsible position for the relationship of two others”. “The way out is to make the two persons responsible for the own relationship, or the other person responsible for his or her problem, *while all still remain connected*. It is that last phrase which differentiates de-triangling from simply quitting, resigning, or abdicating. Staying in a triangle without getting triangled oneself gives one far more power than never entering the triangle in the first place” (p. 220). When leaders find themselves overwhelmed by the stress of conflict, “Either they have accepted the blame owing to the irresponsibility and constant criticism of others, or they have gotten themselves into an overfunctioning position (that is, they have tried too hard) and rushed in where angels and fools both fear to tread” (p. 221).

## **8. Chapter Eight—Crisis and Sabotage: The Keys to the Kingdom**

This final chapter focuses on crises that are not of a leader’s own making. Friedman believes that effective leadership, expressed through self-differentiation and self-regulation actually elicits reactivity and sabotage among group members. That is, reactivity and crisis are systemic to leadership: they reveal that leadership is effective, not that it is deficient. In our anxious, seat-belt society “the resistance that sabotages a leader’s initiative usually has less to do with the ‘issue’ that ensues than with the fact that the leader took initiative” (p. 3). This awareness is the key to the kingdom! A leader’s job is not complete until he or she has brought about a change and endured the resulting reactivity and sabotage. And, Friedman is convinced that most crises cannot be fixed (at least not by any direct or forceful action on the leader’s part; they must simply be managed until they work themselves out. It’s a mistake for leaders to make crises the center of their world. When there is a conflict of will in any system, the leader is most effective when he or she continues standing in ways that are well-defined, non-anxious, and that challenge others to take personal responsibility. Still, even the most effective leaders must be realistic about the unavoidable costs of leadership—*i.e.*, the pain of isolation, loneliness, personal criticism, and loss of friends.

## **9. Epilogue—The Presence of the Past**

This short, undeveloped epilogue draws attention to an emotional process that Friedman has referenced throughout the book: we are all still connected via emotional triangles with past generations. Hence, a mother who had unresolved difficulties with her own mother is more likely to have problems with her daughter and, those problems with her daughter

are mostly like to be resolved when the mother addresses her own unresolved difficulties with her own mother, rather than focusing on breakdowns she's experiencing with her daughter. "Individuals who are cut off from their families generally do not heal until they have been reconnected" (p. 8). This is the reason that families and institutions often do not change as generations change. Nothing is more important to a leader facing multi-generational issues in a family or an organization than to remain calmly self-differentiating and self-regulating.

