



Leading an Anxious Church

Adapted from the book, Canoeing the Mountains
by Todd Bolsinger

PART II

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Part II: Regulate the Heat of Anxiety by Creating a Sense of True Urgency

The human default for anxiety-response is to revert to more primitive ways of being. We fight, we flee, we freeze. Worse yet, we run from danger and leave others to face the lions alone. Instead, effective spiritual leadership comes from the fruit of calmness and the cool peace of good spiritual discernment. Knowing what triggers a leader's anxiety over survival, acceptance, competence and control can help us to attain or preserve this fruit of calm leadership. With this, we, as leaders, can regulate the heat of anxiety by creating a sense of "true" urgency.

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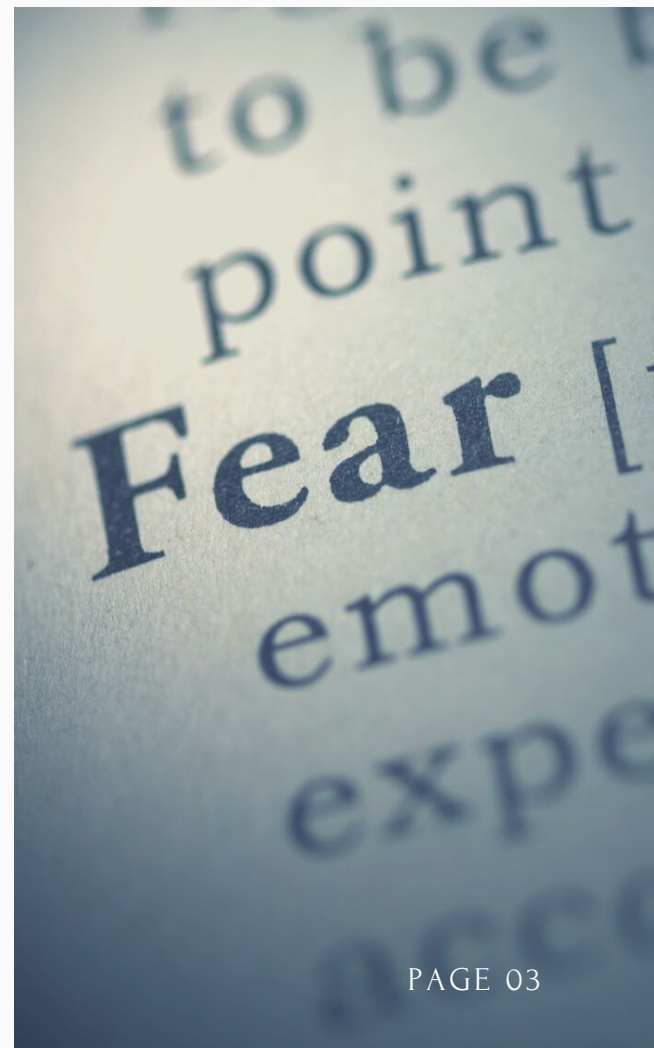
Know the Value of Staying Calm

A significant part of staying calm and regulating the heat is in understanding that most often the heat that hinders organizational systems from moving toward their aspirations and goals is anxiety. Anxiety isn't a bad thing; it's a creaturely thing. We feel anxious when we are reacting to a threat, whether real or imagined. In fact, anxiety is neither functional nor dysfunctional. It is a state of readiness to do something or other that may or may not be appropriate in response to a threat that may or may not be accurately perceived. Chronic anxiety lingers in a person, family or system even after the threat is gone. This is when anxiety becomes dysfunctional.

Avoid Being Motivated by Fear

For leaders the point of calming down is not to feel better; it's to make better decisions for furthering the mission. When people are too hot, they don't further the mission. At this point, a few important questions to ask is, "Is there a lion or not? Is there a threat, or are we making this up? Is this true urgency or false urgency? Do we need to run, or should we stay here, get water, then calmly continue our journey?" If we are motivated by fear, decision-making becomes problematic. Indeed, people who are overly or chronically anxious do not make good decisions. When anxiety spikes, we revert to more primitive ways of being. We fight, we flee, we freeze. Worse yet, we run from danger and leave others to face the lions alone. We turn on each other instead of working together. We jump to quick fixes; we look for technical solutions to adaptive issues.

"Effective spiritual leadership comes from the fruit of calmness..."





Attend to Your Own Anxiety

Missional conviction requires that we stay calm. To stay calm is to be so aware of yourself that your response to the situation is not to the anxiety of the people around you but to the actual issue at hand. Staying calm means so attending to our own internal anxiety in the heat of a challenging moment and the resistance around us that we are not tempted to either cool it down to escape the heat or to react emotionally, adding more fuel to the fire and scorching the stew we are trying to cook.

Operate out of the Blue Zone

There is a Red Zone-Blue Zone model for looking at conflict and resistance. Using this model, the best decisions come out of the Blue Zone. The Blue Zone is about serving the mission. It is further marked by consistency and is focused on effectiveness. If we do not intentionally operate in the Blue Zone, then our natural default will be to react from the Red Zone. Leaders in the Red Zone operate out of a high emotional reactivity, based on one or more of four core issues: survival, acceptance, competence and control. If any of these four core issues are threatened or questioned, leaders react.

In the Red Zone, people expect the organization to operate like a family; they often assume family roles and replicate the unresolved issues from their family of origin. When a conflict or challenge we are facing triggers one of these issues, instead of making decisions based on what is best for the mission, we tend to make decisions based on what is best for me.

"The Blue Zone is about serving the mission."





"As the Father has loved Me, so have I loved you; abide in my love. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you."
(John 15:9,12)

Make Decision Based on Mission

Think of how many ministry decisions have been made in order to not hurt the feelings (acceptance) or threaten (survival) or challenge (control) a leader, a group, a big giver or a significant part of the congregation. Think how often the deciding factor was not mission but what will anger the least amount of people. Blue Zone decisions, on the other hand, come from the calm, cool peace of good spiritual discernment, not urging or thrashing out.

Leverage the Sense of Urgency

Regulating the heat is the delicate work of adaptive leadership. We need our people feeling the urgency and healthy enough to overcome complacency. At the same time, we need our people to calm down enough to get beyond technical fixes, false urgency and work-avoidance scrambling. The truth is that the pastor serves as the system's thermostat, which regulates the heat. Pastors, as well as, other church leaders, should pay attention to the issues that trigger their own anxious reactivity and thwart their ability to make and help others to make Blue Zone decisions. Once we can recognize the kind of issue that creates a Red Zone (responses triggered by survival, acceptance, competence and control) we can intentionally attend to it, give it to the Lord, and pray for peace and clarity.



BLUE ZONE

- VALUES ARE IN CONFLICT
- ABOUT ISSUES
- SELF-AWARENESS IS KEY
- PROPORTIONATE INTENSITY
- CONFLICT IS SOLVABLE
- THE CONFLICT IS ALWAYS ABOUT THE MISSION

RED ZONE

- EMOTIONALLY CHARGED
- PERSONALIZED CONFLICT
- UNRESOLVED ISSUES IN SELF
- DISPROPORTIONATE INTENSITY
- CONFLICT IS UNSOLVABLE
- THE CONFLICT IS ALWAYS ABOUT ME

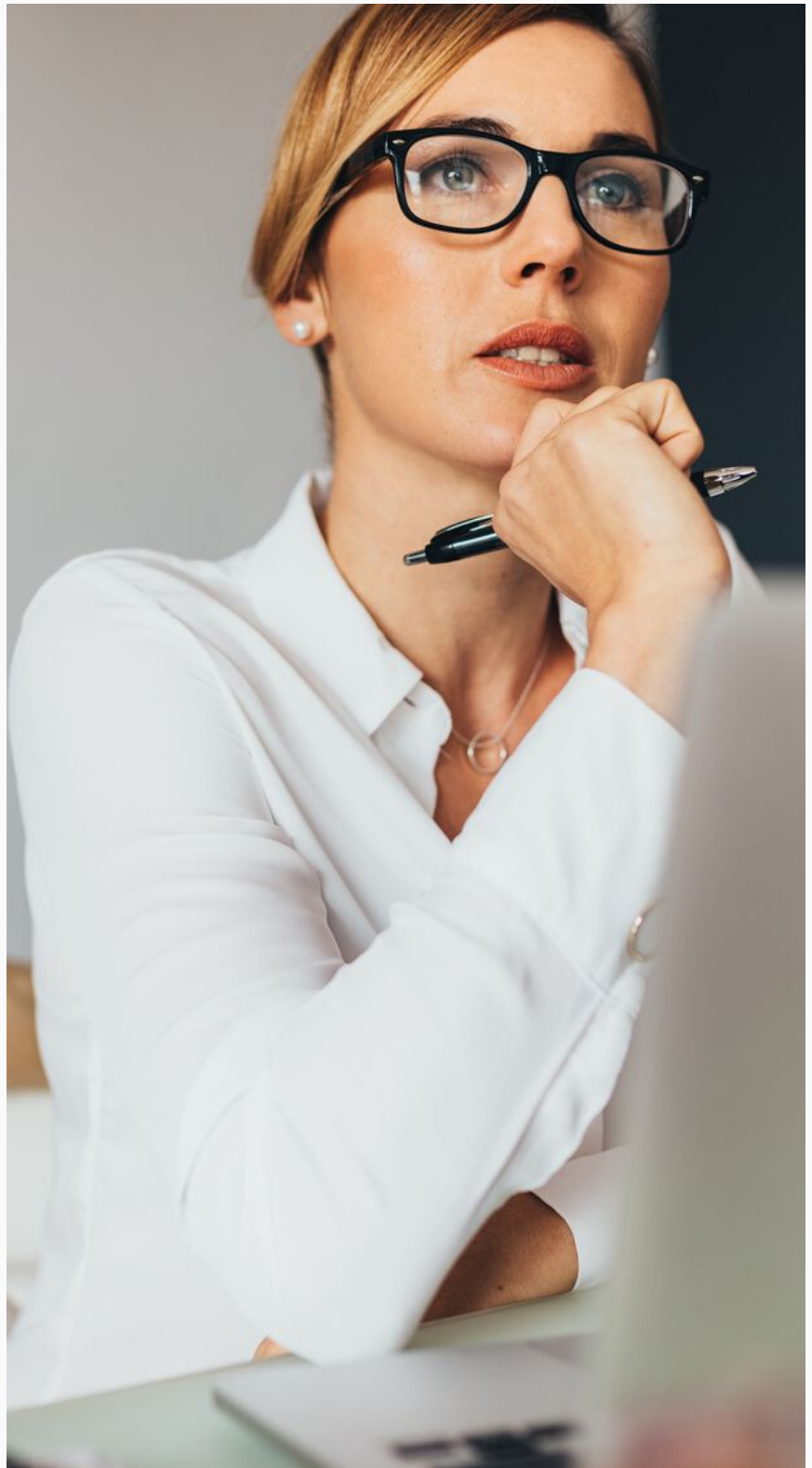
Self-Talk

A simple process of self-talk can literally slow the brain processes down. This can begin by acknowledging the anxious, angry or fearful feelings; and then to breathe slowly until your heart rate comes down and you are able to hear and respond instead of lash out reactively. Reflecting on the characteristics of the Red Zone and Blue Zone is also helpful.

"To lead means to have some control of our anxiety..."

Regulate Yourself

Regulating the heat is a delicate art built around one crucial leadership skill: regulating ourselves. Remember - we don't act like a thermostat - we are the thermostat. We monitor the heat by monitoring and regulating ourselves in the middle of the stew. Congregational systems expert Peter Steinke wrote, "To lead means to have some command of our anxiety and some capacity not to let other people's anxiety contaminate us; that is, not to allow their anxiety to affect our



thinking, actions and decisions."

Trying to be perfectly calm can create its own stress and anxiety. The last thing most of us need is to put more pressure on ourselves to calm down when we are getting anxious. Perhaps, a more modest goal is to be just a bit less anxious than everyone else. All we should want is for our presence to turn the anxiety thermostat down one click on the dial so we can focus on the urgency of our mission. After all, when it's all about the mission, good decisions are possible.