



Avoiding Avoidance

**Expanding our Leadership
Capability; Increasing our
Emotional Agility**



THE NATIONAL FORUM
on FAMILY PHILANTHROPY

October 21, 2022

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Rebecca Trobe, Psy.D.

Impact Coaching & Consulting

www.impactcoachingandconsulting.com

Welcome + Setting Context for Today

- Today is about introducing useful and emerging strategies for 'Avoiding Avoidance' and other related ***tips, tools and techniques for managing, mitigating and addressing familial/board conflict.***
- In this session we will review and explore 1-2 situations, specific to each of you, where we can exercise our "avoiding avoidance" muscles.

Topics/Flow of Session:

Avoidance
Systemic Conflict & Repair
Emotional Agility
Psychological Safety

Each of you has a set of materials in front of you to take notes and to reference throughout the session



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Key Objectives

- **Reflect on & discuss common situations** where family dynamics play out in the governance and management of a family foundation.
- **Learn about how to expand/engage our AGILITY** when challenging family dynamics are at play. Family Dynamics are inevitable, therefore, to be expected. We will be diving into some self-reflection to help us be constructive and **AGILE** in the face of difficult situations.
- **Offer practical tools and techniques for addressing or managing these situations** - both for non-family CEOs that work with families, as well as for family members working together.
- *We will be engaging in intervals of reflective exercises and pair/table discussion throughout our 90 minutes together.*



Avoidance; Understandable yet Problematic



"Thanks for asking. Everything's going great!"

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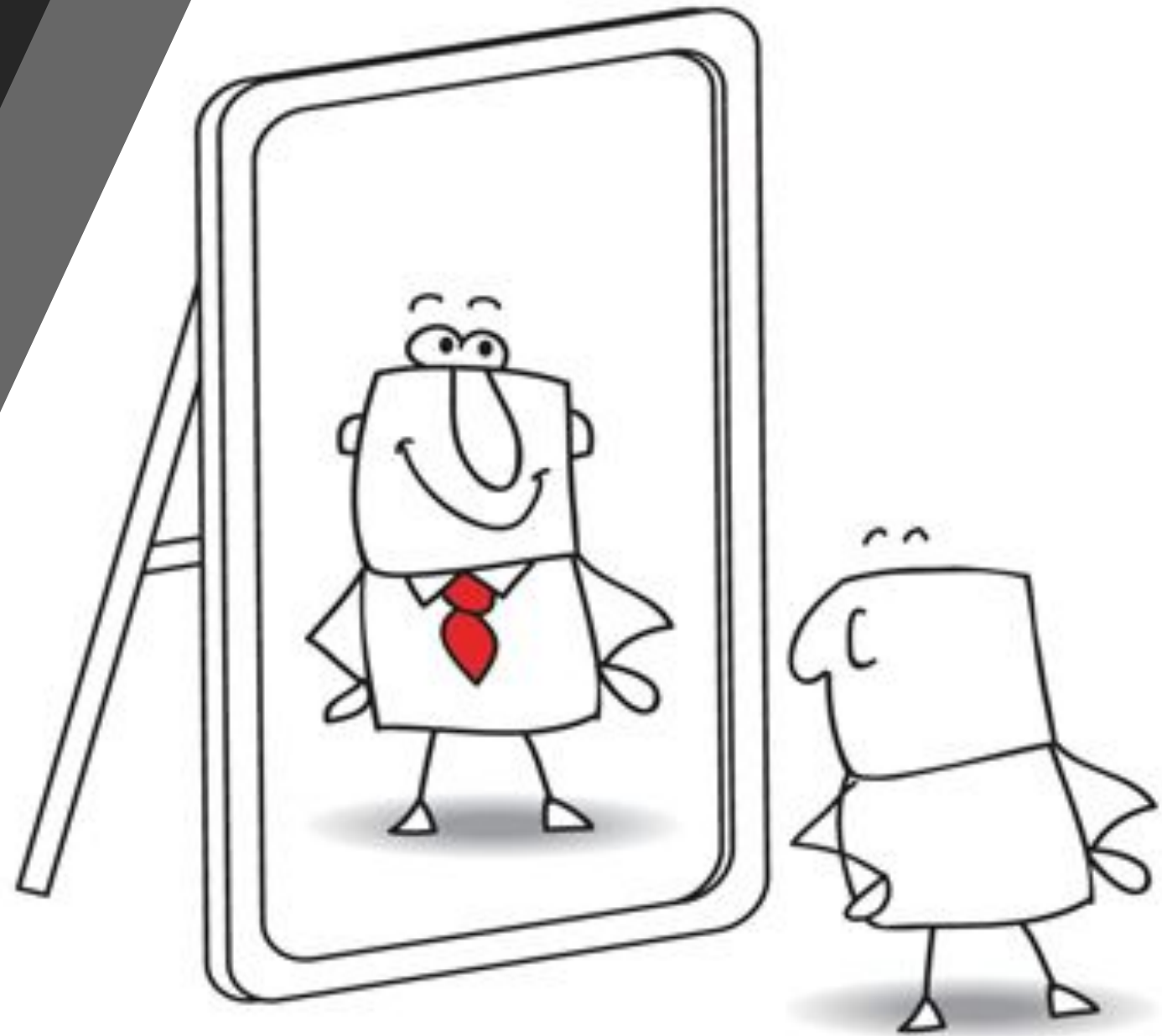


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Self Reflection

Avoiding Avoidance involves “leaning in” not away.

The willingness to engage in self and group inquiry.



Defining Avoidance

Avoidance is the attempt to minimize and avert perceived threat, danger, or anxiety. To minimize stress and self protect.

The act or a means of getting or keeping away from something undesirable – (*Merriam Webster*)

Today is not about trauma levels or clinical avoidance (PTSD, OCD, Anxiety etc)**



Avoidance: Synonyms & Antonyms

Synonyms:

cop-out, dodging, ducking, eluding, escape, eschewing, evasion, bypassing, circumvention, runaround, sidestepping, skirting, averting, deflection, obviation, shunning, non-participation

Antonyms:

approval, allowance, abidance, endurance, toleration, enactment, legislation, legitimization, validation, ratification, sanction, acceptance, openness, frankness, welcome, admission



Cognitive Avoidance

- **Cognitive avoidance** refers to actively turning your mind away from distressing thoughts, experiences or memories. This may include consciously telling yourself, “Don’t think about those things.”
- It could also take the form of **distracting yourself, dissociating, fantasizing, or even toxic positivity and/or wishful thinking.**
 - **Toxic positivity** can creep in wearing all manner of disguises, but it often begins as an earnest desire to favor the good over the bad.

Refusing to acknowledge a problem prevents you from exploring possible solutions.

Does this resonate with you? Take a minute to reflect.



Healthy Positivity vs. Toxic Positivity

Healthy Positivity is the frequent experience of **pleasant emotions**:

Examples: joy, hope, gratitude, interest, serenity, pride, amusement, love, inspiration, and awe.

Positivity is NOT an absence of negative emotions or bad events.

What is the difference between **positivity** and **toxic positivity**?:

- While positivity can help people in dealing with difficult times, toxic positivity does the exact opposite. **Toxic positivity leads to people's emotions being dismissed, ignored or invalidated.**

What is the root of **toxic positivity**?

- **It comes from feeling uncomfortable with negative emotions.** It is often well-intentioned but can cause alienation and a feeling of disconnection.



Toxic Positivity – Indicators/Examples

- a false projection of life as perfect
- a refusal to discuss problems or concerns
- suggestions that people shouldn't mention or dwell on bad things that happen
- a tendency to blame people for their own circumstances
- difficulty experiencing and expressing emotions
- the belief that pain and distress happen only to those who don't try hard enough or are somehow flawed
- a habit of turning away from unpleasant thoughts and feelings
- Toxic positivity denies the reality of life's challenges and pushes the notion that you have total control over your emotions and experiences as the author of your own story.



“Negativity is normal. It is simply part of the human condition. Organizations have a long history of sidelining messy emotions.”

*Susan David, Ph.D. - **Emotional Agility***



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Why is Toxic Positivity Problematic?

- **It's shaming:** When someone is in pain, they need to realize that their feelings are **legitimate** and that despite the pain they will find comfort and love in their friends and relatives. **Toxic positivity**, on the other hand, tells people that **their feelings are incorrect**.
- **It causes guilt:** It sends the message that **you're doing something wrong** if you can't find a way to be happy, even in the face of disaster.
- **It avoids authentic human emotion:** serving as a defense mechanism to **escape/avoid** uncomfortable interpersonal/group situations. We **underestimate, ignore, and reject** troublesome feelings as they arise.
- **It prevents growth:** It helps us to escape uncomfortable emotions while still **denying us the opportunity to confront difficult feelings that can lead to important growth, understanding and increased cohesion and trust.**



Why is this Relevant?

- If these dynamics exist and go unattended or unacknowledged there is increased potential and high likelihood that they will **interfere with, delay or hijack** the work – the **PHILANTHROPY**. Avoidance usually leads to dramatic and prolonged outcomes. This is emotionally expensive and often distracts everyone from the work of collective impact = the core inspiration/motivation.
- It does **the opposite of fostering a culture of safety** and will inevitably threaten family unity, cohesion and engagement.



Wishful Thinking vs. Optimism

- People relying on wishful thinking often interpret a fact or reality according to what they wish or desire it to be.
- Sounds like optimism, doesn't it? The difference is that *positive thinking allows you to recognize facts, adapt, and change behavior for the best results*. You see a challenge, you plan to meet it with a sound strategy, and then you work to achieve results.
- Wishful thinkers may ignore facts and give in to delusion. There's no planning or action, only passively hoping that things will work out for the best.

Reflective Exercise – Part 1: Let's take a moment to examine our leadership culture/ behavior.

- Have you experienced/do you see any elements of **Avoidance, Toxic Positivity or Wishful Thinking** in the group dynamics of your organization and in your leadership?
 - If so, please make note of them.



Avoiding Avoidance requires: Courage

*“It’s really important for
leaders to recognize that there
can be no organizational agility
or adaptability without
emotional agility.”*

*Susan David, Ph.D. –
Emotional Agility*

Courageous leaders have
double vision. They see the
world as it is and as it could be.

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**Conflict: Normal, Inevitable &... Challenging.
Resolving it/Repairing it requires – Agility**

Emotional Agility paves the way for Leaders to:

- **Lean into challenge/discomfort** instead of leaning away (Avoidance)
- **Respond** instead of React
- Foster & Build **Psychological Safety**
- Recognize/identify/**name Conflict early**
- Identify opportunities/pathways/**potential for Repair**
- **Facilitate Repair** if/when/as needed

All of the above contributes to trust and group cohesion

Rinse/Repeat

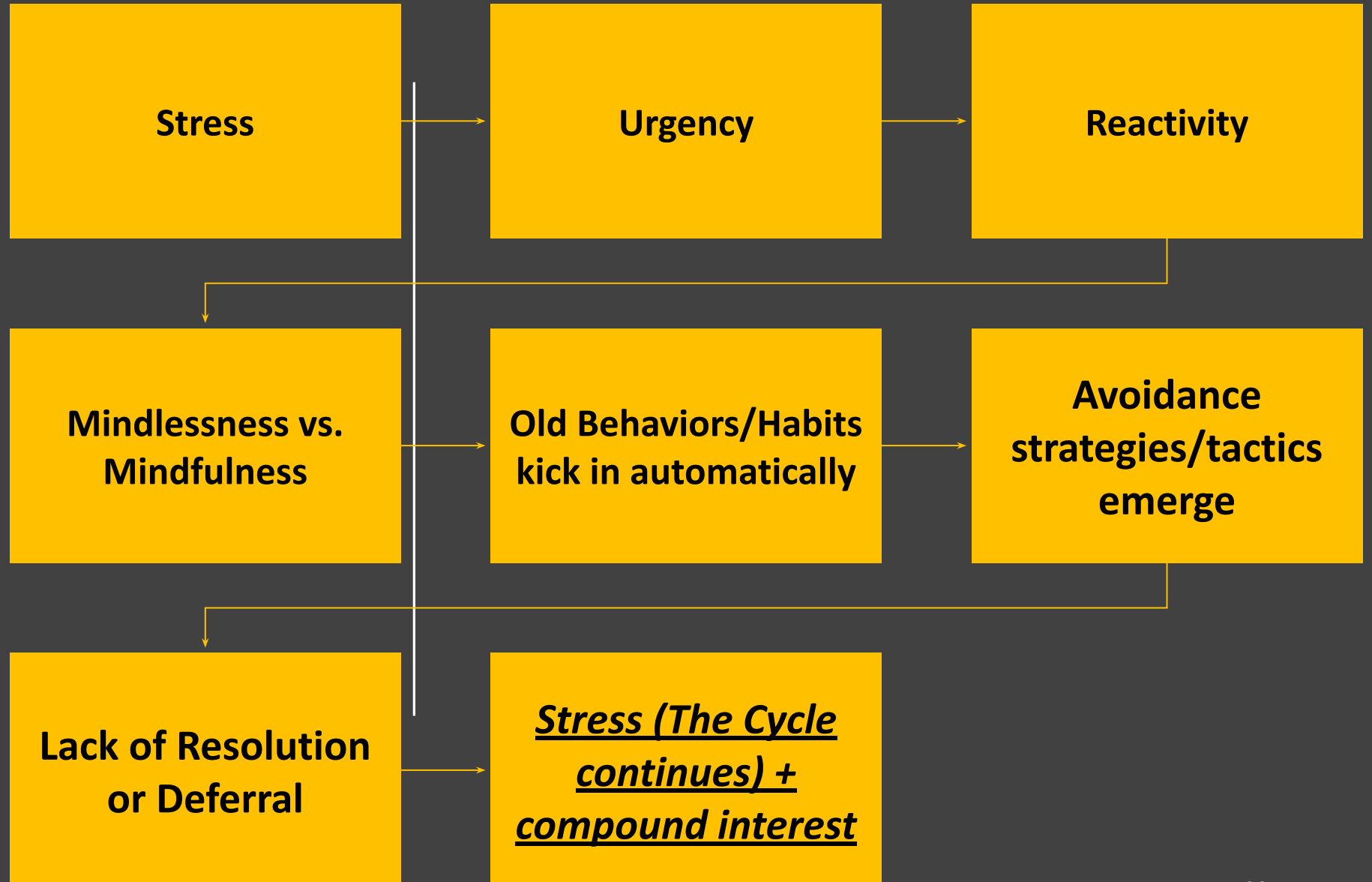


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**The Slippery
Slope of
Avoidance**



The Avoidance Pathway/Cycle



Leaning In...



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It is only when the mind is
open and receptive that
learning and seeing and
change can occur.

*Full Catastrophe Living - Jon Kabat-Zinn
(founder of MBSR)*



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The 9 Attitudes of Mindfulness; The Road to Agility

- Nine attitudinal factors constitute the major pillars of mindfulness practice as taught in the Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction Clinic.
- They are not independent of each other. Each one relies on and influences the degree to which you are able to cultivate the others.

1. **Non-judging**
2. **Patience**
3. **Beginner's mind**
4. **Trust**
5. **Non-striving**
6. **Acceptance**
7. **Letting go**
8. **Generosity**
9. **Gratitude**

Jon Kabat Zinn – founder of MBSR



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Mindfulness guides us to become more emotionally agile by allowing us to observe the thinker having the thoughts.



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S.T.O.P. – Mindfulness Tool/Technique/Practice

- **S – Stop** what you are doing, put things down for a minute.
- **T – Take a breath.** Breathe normally and naturally and follow your breath coming in and out of your nose. You can even say to yourself “in” as you’re breathing in and “out” as you’re breathing out if that helps with concentration.
- **O – Observe** your thoughts, feelings, and emotions. You can reflect about what is on your mind and also notice that thoughts are not facts and they are not permanent. Notice any emotions that are there and just name them.
- **P – Proceed** with something that will support you in the moment. This is a “mindful moment” to choose an action that will be constructive.



.....

The Opportunity to Change Direction



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Reflective Exercise – Part 2

Practice leaning in - not away:

- Let's revisit the **Avoidance** events/behaviors you made note of in Part 1.
- Let's employ the **S.T.O.P.** technique; revisit how it unfolded. Notice feelings/behaviors/habits.
- How could the the situation you identified happen differently in hindsight/retrospect using **S.T.O.P.**?

- Stop
 - Take a Breath/Make space
 - Observe your emotions/reactions
 - Proceed – take a constructive action
-
- **Let's take 2-3 minutes for Reflection/Writing**



Surfing the Waves of Family Dynamics/Conflict

“Wiping Out is an Underappreciated Skill.”

- Laird Hamilton

**Surfers aspire to be Masterful in their Agility*
- always respecting the power of the Ocean/ the Waves*



Life is a series of mismatches, miscommunications, and misattunements that are quickly repaired and then again become miscoordinated and stressful, and again are repaired. This occurs thousands of times in a day, and millions of times over a year.

Dr. Ed Tronick & The Greater Good Science Center



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Deconstructing Conflict: Systemic Causes & Levels

Common Causes of Conflict:

- Personality differences
- Misunderstandings
- Non-compliance with rules and policies
- Communication challenges (ineffective, style etc.)
- Competition
- Embedded/generational family dynamics and fixed positions/stances
- Lack of clarity – roles/responsibilities
- Decision-making styles

Systemic Levels of Conflict:

- Intrapersonal (within an individual)
 - Interpersonal (between individuals)
 - Intragroup (within a group)
 - Intergroup (between groups – siblings, generations, board committees etc.)
 - Intraorganizational (within organizations, across the spectrum above)
- ***Take 2 minutes now to identify some core causes and levels operating within your family/board/system.***



Learning from Conflict: Case Example

- Please identify a single impact conflict event **OR** a recurring point of conflict/disagreement in board meetings or within your system in general
 1. *Identify the “Anatomy” of the conflict; **Cause + Level***
 2. *Is this situation a **pattern or not**? If so, why?*
 3. *Did you have a **role** in this conflict? If not, who is/was involved and why?*
- Was there any **toxic positivity** or wishful thinking involved?
- Any other **avoidance strategies/tactics**?
- What are your **learning opportunities and ongoing challenges** regarding your leadership and/or the board dynamics, based on all of the above?
- **Time: 10 minutes: 5-6 minutes for reflection/writing. Then Pair sharing; each partner will share for 2 minutes + Group/table discussion. Large group sharing + Q&A**



Repair; Finding the Gold in Conflict



Repairing Rifts; Deepening trust and connection

- *Everything we know from developmental science and research on families suggests that rifts will happen—and **what matters more is how you respond to them.** With many families spending more time together than ever now, there are ample opportunities for tension and hurt feelings. These moments also offer ample invitations to reconnect.*
- ***“Relationships shrink to the size of the field of repair,”** says Rick Hanson, psychologist and author of several books on the neuroscience of well-being. “But a bid for a repair is one of the most vulnerable and important kinds of communication that humans offer to each other,” he adds. “It says you value the relationship.”*



The goal of repair is to understand what went wrong, and how to make your next conversation/meeting more constructive.



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A Reparative Stance: Attunement vs. Avoidance

“ATTUNE”

an acronym to identify the six basic responses to foster successful repairs

- *Awareness of emotions*
- *Turning toward emotions*
- *Tolerance of emotions*
- *Understanding of emotions*
- *Non-defensive listening to emotions*
- *Empathy toward emotions*

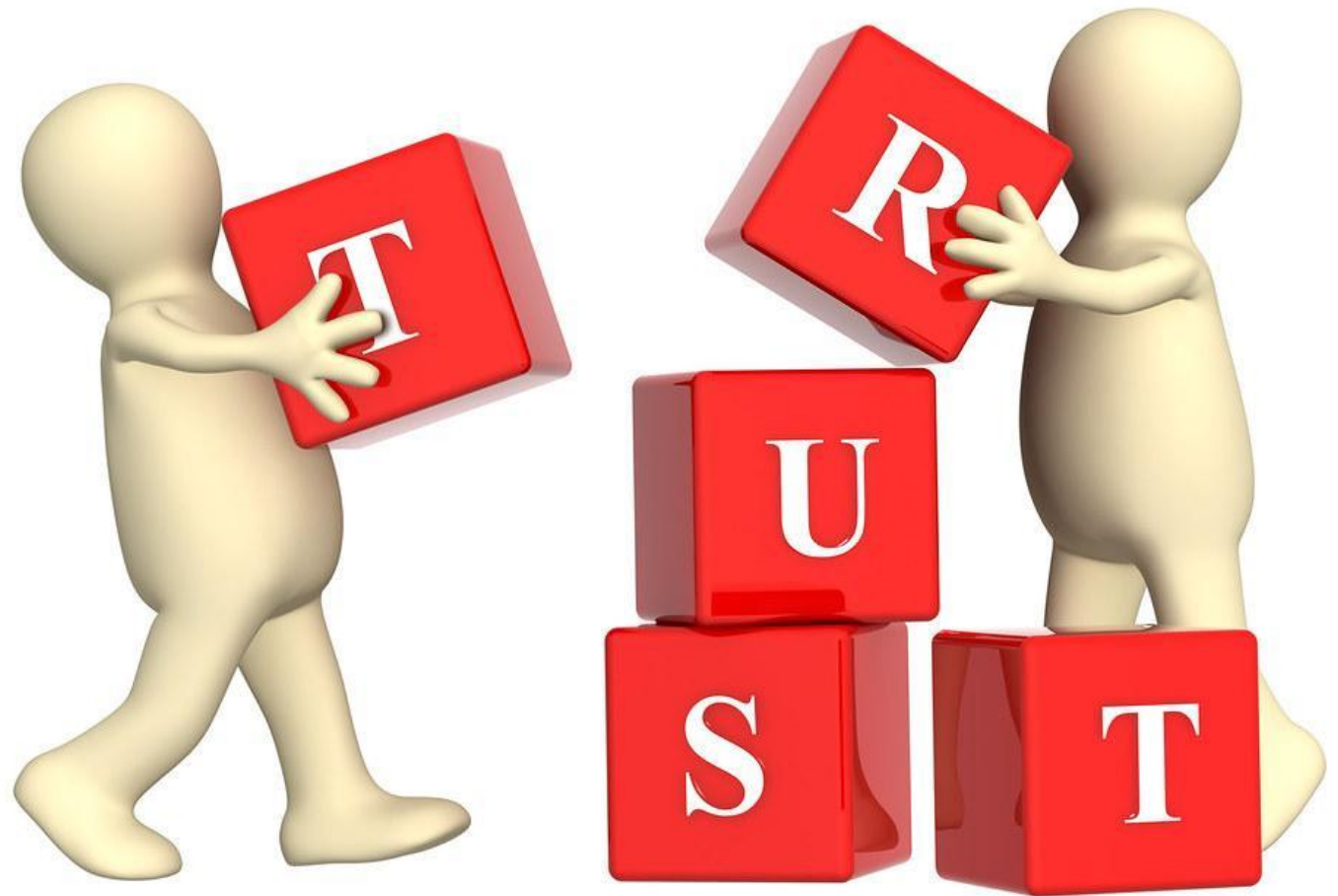


The Steps/Guide to Facilitating Repair (Self/Other):

- ✓ Acknowledge the conflict/Name it in the moment. - “This is happening_____”
- ✓ Listen with an Open Stance. (Limit defensiveness, de-escalate)
- ✓ Identify the real needs (the source of the conflict) that lie beneath what was said/done and state those directly. “What went wrong here and why?”
- ✓ Name feelings without directing them at the other – “I’m feeling/noticing _____”
- ✓ Take Responsibility for one’s role/participation in the conflict. - “I can see that my role here is_____”
- ✓ Express appreciation for the other and understanding of the circumstances. “I can see/understand that you_____”
- ✓ Acknowledge what was learned and the opportunity for growth via the conflict. “The growth opportunity here is_____”
- ✓ Opportunity for apology and alternative ways to approach in the future. “Perhaps in the future we can approach this in a different way, do you have suggestions?”



**Repair
builds Trust**



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Individual Reflection Questions:

- *What are my **individual learning edges** around systemic conflict?*
 - *What might I be afraid of when faced with conflict – Am I **avoidant at times**?
When/where/why/who?*
- *Can I **attune** more to my team/my board/my family?*
- *What **levels or causes (the “anatomy”)** of conflict are most challenging for me, as a leader? Why?*
- *What is the impact of any **recurring conflict** on the work/the family/the meetings?*
- *Do I see **opportunities to facilitate repair** (past/present/future)? And my role in repair?*





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It's all about Agility

Emotional Agility paves the way for Leaders to:

- **Lean in** instead of leaning away (Avoiding)
 - **Respond** instead of React
 - Foster & Build **Psychological Safety**
 - Recognize/identify/**name Conflict early**
 - Identify opportunities/pathways/**potential for Repair**
 - **Facilitate Repair** if/when/as needed
-
- All of the above contributes to trust and group cohesion

****An ongoing cycle - Rinse/Repeat****



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The Core Elements of Emotional Agility

Showing Up:

- Face your thoughts/feelings with curiosity and acceptance. Even though you may be tempted to ignore or **AVOID** the uncomfortable ones, face them anyway, this clears the way for positive change.
- As a leader, try to **listen** to people's concerns without labeling them as a negative person.
- This acknowledges the reality of our emotional range and can help you to focus on positive change more effectively.

Stepping Out:

- Detach from your emotions (for the moment, purposefully).
- This detachment will enable you to feel far more autonomous over your actions and decisions.
- See them for what they are, simply emotions, not who you are.
- In doing so, identify/label them as accurately as possible, this will help you to better understand their causes and what to do about them.



Core Elements of Emotional Agility (continued)

Walking Your Why:

- Use your **core values** (*have you identified them??*) to drive you forward.
- When deciding on what action to take, ask yourself whether this decision reflects your core values and longterm goals.
- For example, if you value fairness, you may **choose to have a difficult conversation, rather than avoiding it** because doing so reflects fairness to the individual, yourself and your team.

Moving On:

- In moving forward, make small, purposeful adjustments to **align your mindset, motivation and habits with your core values.**
- Make sure that these tweaks are connected to who you want to be (values aligned) as a leader.
- Don't perseverate or get paralyzed – **practice moving on and normalizing conflict.** This will set an important example.



“The skills of emotional agility allow you to recognize what you’re feeling, understand what it is, not be driven by it, be more intentional and, ultimately, close the gap between the things you’re trying to do and the outcomes.”

Susan David, Ph.D. –Emotional Agility



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Increasing our Agility - Building our Capacity

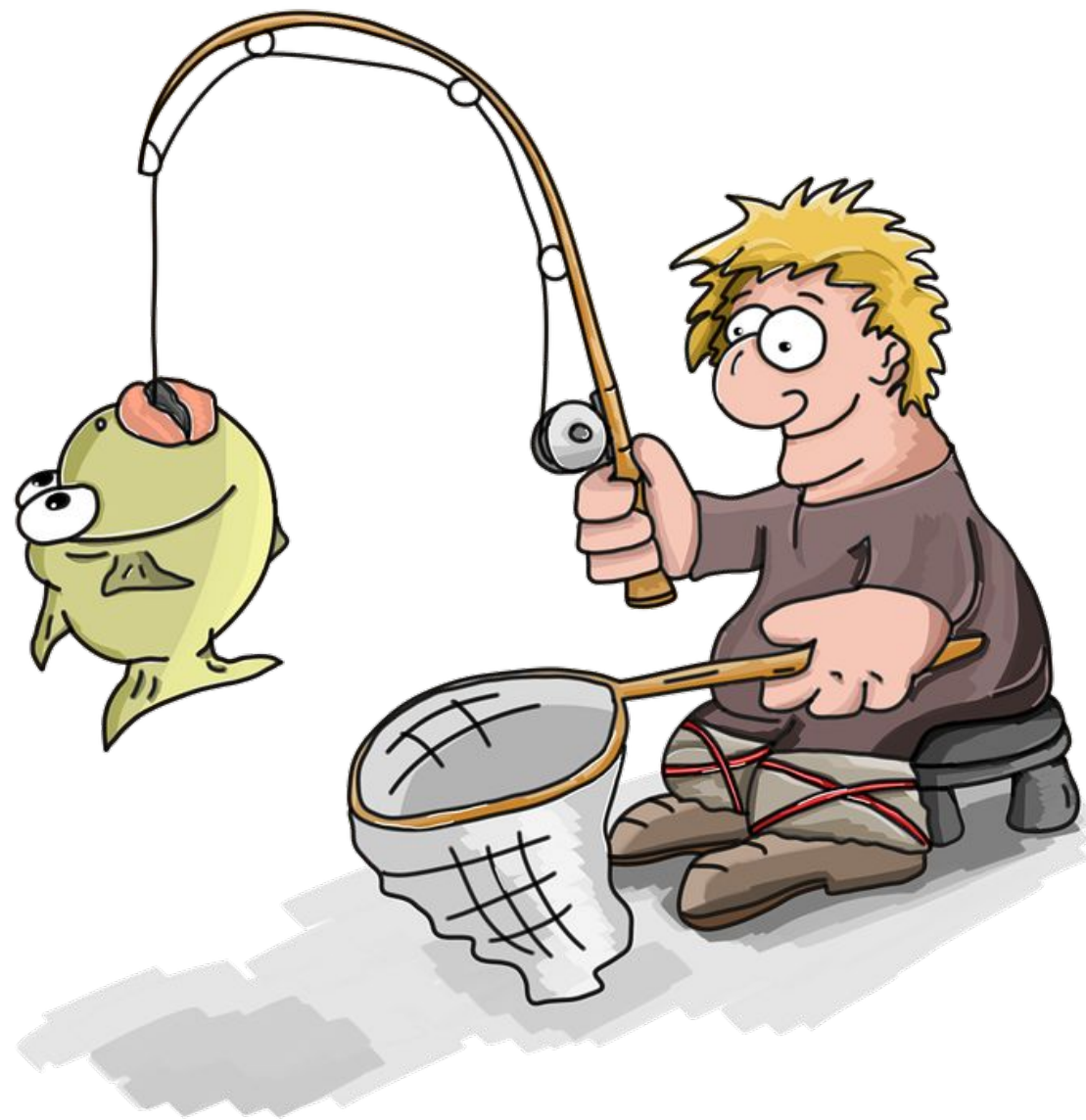
Having fixed beliefs about 'good and bad' emotions can lead us to be judgmental, and reduce our compassion for ourselves and others, thus ***making us less resilient in the face of life's challenges.***

Whereas having emotional agility allows us to ***navigate through our emotions with curiosity*** and compassion without holding onto judgement, and beliefs of our past.

Emotional agility can help prevent us from becoming **'hooked' by an emotion.**

Rather than being compelled in negative ways by an emotion, we make decisions with clarity, support inclusivity, enhance collaboration, and strengthen innovation.





Emotional agility means having any number of troubling thoughts or emotions and still managing to act in a way that serves how you most want to live and lead.

That's what it means to step out and off the hook.



Emotional Data; Invaluable learning for Leaders

- How do all **emotions** contribute to the workplace?

They give us vital information.

- *In an organization, strong emotions **INDICATE** the things people care about. (needs & values)*

□ Is our organizational culture one of psychological safety?

□ Do we believe and behave as if feelings/emotions are data?



Recognizing Your Emotions as Data, Not Directives

- Your feelings reflect your emotional response to the world. However, it's important not to confuse your feelings with reality itself, or to let them dictate your actions.
- Think of them as one **data point** among many to consider as you move forward.
- ***When your feelings threaten to take the wheel, how might you handle them more productively?***
- ***Situation:*** *Imagine you're in a board meeting. You're trying to make an important point about an upcoming project, but a colleague cuts you off and undermines you, moving on to another topic.*
- ***Reaction:*** *You feel disrespected, and depending on your mood and personality, you might sulk, lash out or withdraw (you fill in the blank here).*
- **Result:** You've been hooked by your emotions. They're running the show, pulling you along after them.



Examples of Emotional Data:

- **Someone's opposition (anger/frustration/rejection)** to a project timeline may indicate that they are concerned that quality will be compromised, or fear of failure.
- **Someone who is feeling detached/exhibiting detachment** may be signaling that their value in the system is unclear - they may not see how they can contribute, grow or develop themselves, the group or the work itself.
- **Someone who is constantly asking for more time (demanding/needy)** from you or from others may be signaling that they are concerned about being confused, lost or unclear or scared/intimidated.

Let's take a minute to do a Reflective Exercise:

- *What is some recent Emotional Data being communicated within your board/family/team/organization?*



Shift your Perspective



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Emotional Agility in Action: Switch POV's

Getting outside of your own head can provide you with a different vantage point on the situation and put your initial response in perspective.

Hypothetical meeting continued:

- Just because you felt disrespected doesn't mean the colleague set out to be disrespectful.
- Perhaps the meeting was running long and they were trying to get through the agenda for a number of reasons.
- Maybe you were inadvertently repeating a point someone else had already made and they were trying to move on.
- Or it's possible that they were just distracted and thought you'd finished.



Engaging our learning: Exercising our Emotional Agility

- *Let's take a few minutes and apply our emotional agility and repair tools to the circumstance, in retrospect:*

How could things have gone differently in that conflict circumstance/situation?

Time: 16 minutes (8 for reflection + 8 for discussion in pairs)

- Was there an **Emotional Hook**? What was it?
- What **Emotional Data** were you receiving?
- Now **switch POV's** for a moment. Take a different vantage point on the situation. How does that inform you?
- Is there/was there an **opportunity for repair** here? Walk yourself through the stages of repair.
- What else is there to **learn about your leadership agility**?



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Agile People & Leaders Create Agile Organizations

Since the practice of emotional agility is largely internal, how can we support it within the workplace?

- **By creating Psychological Safety within the workplace/boardroom.**

When things get intense, our performance is more likely to suffer. We become transactional, feel stressed, make rash decisions, hold fixed beliefs, and communicate poorly. The very opposite to what agility drives within us. **We often become AVOIDANT. Stress drives habitual AVOIDANCE.**

Unintended Result: We compromise Psychological Safety for everyone



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Remember the Cycle of Avoidance?



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When leaders ATTUNE to the information/Emotional DATA being relayed rather than steering clear of or AVOIDING so called 'difficult' emotions, we have an opportunity to grow and strengthen our team and our workplace.



Fostering a Culture of Psychological Safety

What is it?

It's a shared belief held by members of a team that others on the team will not embarrass, reject, or punish them for speaking up.

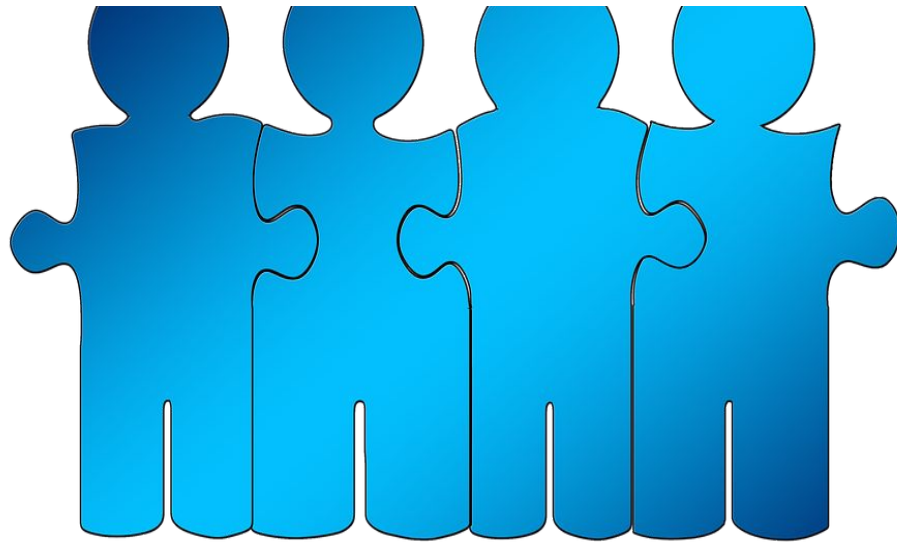
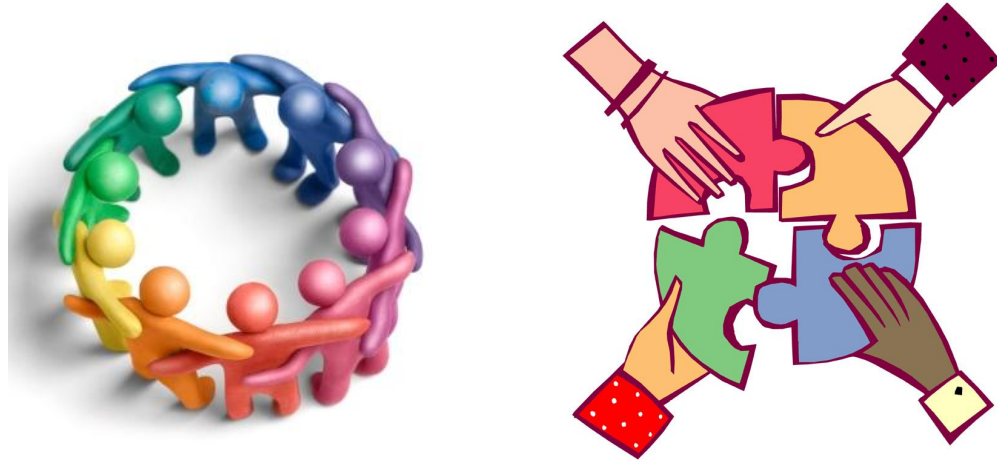
“Psychological safety at work doesn't mean that everybody is nice all the time. It means that **you embrace the conflict and you speak up, knowing that your team has your back, and you have their backs.**” By creating a greater level of openness towards the range of emotions that people experience we support psychological safety.” - *Center for Creative Leadership*



The 4 Stages of Psychological Safety: A Path to Inclusion & Innovation

- **Stage 1 — Inclusion Safety:** Inclusion safety satisfies the basic human need to connect and belong. In this stage, **you feel safe to be yourself** and are accepted for who you are, including your unique attributes and defining characteristics.
- **Stage 2 — Learner Safety:** Learner safety satisfies the need to learn and grow. In this stage, **you feel safe to exchange in the learning process** by asking questions, giving and receiving feedback, experimenting, and making mistakes.
- **Stage 3 — Contributor Safety:** Contributor safety satisfies the need to make a difference. **You feel safe to use your skills and abilities to make a meaningful contribution.**
- **Stage 4 — Challenger Safety:** Challenger safety satisfies the need to make things better. **You feel safe to speak up and challenge the status quo** when you think there's an opportunity to change or improve.





Leaders Pave the Way for:

- ✓ Inclusion
- ✓ Learning
- ✓ Contribution
- ✓ Challenge

= A Safe, Constructive Culture fostering Healthy Engagement

Conflict will always be there, but this provides an environment of trust and cohesion because safety, respect, and repair are in the mix

5 Ways to Foster Psychological Safety

1. Make psychological safety a Priority
2. Facilitate EVERYONE speaking up
3. Establish norms for how failure is handled
4. Create space for new ideas
5. Embrace productive conflict – promote dialogue and debate

**** What are your leadership learning edges around all of the above??****

Guiding Questions to take with you:

- How will team members communicate their concerns about a process that isn't working?
- How can reservations be shared with colleagues in a respectful manner?
- What are our norms for managing conflicting perspectives?



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Comfort feels
good, but courage
contributes to greatness.



Fostering Psychological Safety: Reflective Exercise

1. How can I/We incorporate and raise the level of psychological safety within our organizations (family) and board?
2. What steps do I want/need to take?
3. What work will it require in the short, mid and long term?
4. What obstacles or resistance might I encounter in the short, mid and long term?
5. How do I/We need to customize our experience/guidelines to increase Psychological Safety?
6. Can I/we see the potential of not only mitigating conflict but maximizing engagement and fulfillment if we incorporate/integrate these principles into our work experience and organizational ethos?



Recap: Emotional Agility paves the way for Leaders to...

- **Lean in** instead of leaning away (Avoiding)
- **Respond** instead of React
- Foster & Build **Psychological Safety**
- Recognize/identify/**name Conflict early**
- Identify opportunities/pathways/**potential for Repair**
- **Facilitate Repair** if/when/as needed

All of the above builds Trust & Group Cohesion

Work the cycle - Rinse/Repeat



Short Review + Time for Q &A

- Today was about introducing useful and **emerging strategies for 'Avoiding Avoidance' and other related tips and tools** for managing family conflict.
- In this session we reviewed and explored 1-2 situations, specific to each of you, where we exercised our "avoiding avoidance" muscles.

Topics/Flow of Session:

Avoidance

Systemic Conflict & Repair

Emotional Agility

Psychological Safety

Each of you has a set of materials in front of you to take notes and to reference throughout the session



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Next Steps

- What are you taking away from today?
- What resonated most?
- What **specific actions and next steps** will you take to help increase the emotional agility of your organization and your leadership?



Thank You

