

UPPING THE INNER GAME OF LEADERSHIP

In this volatile, uncertain, and complex world many of us struggle to express - and act on our true feelings and needs. Our basic human need to feel secure and our (often-subconscious) anxiety that we are not, may result in non-productive behavioural patterns. These impede the unfolding of our full potential and the quality of our relationships. In this paper I reflect on the underlying mechanisms and offer thoughts on how to consciously choose our interpersonal moves and responses in any relationship flexibly, fitting the particular situation, while remaining true to our inner self. These reflections are based on the psychology of K. Horney applied in the context of my work as executive leadership coach. She is a true source of inspiration, stating:

“Man, Freud postulates, is doomed to suffer or to destroy. The instincts which drive him can only be controlled, or at best ‘sublimated’. My own belief is that man has the capacity as well as the desire to develop his potentialities and become a decent human being, and that these deteriorate if his relationship to others and hence to himself is (...) disturbed. I believe that man can change and go on changing as long as he lives. And this belief has grown with deeper understanding.”

K. Horney M.D. in “Our Inner Conflicts”

Let's start at the beginning, our moment of birth. Compared to the complete security of the womb, every new-born child is immediately exposed to three instinctual anxieties: being helpless, being isolated and being vulnerable. These anxieties trigger the biological development of coping mechanisms and defense strategies to achieve a sense of security and protection against hurt. These strategies develop further in reaction to behavioural patterns in our caretaker, in our community and in our culture as a whole. After months and years these ad-hoc defenses become character traits and are called reactive tendencies. Because they are born out of an existential state of survival stress, these reactive tendencies are charged with subconscious anxiety and become compulsive drives that we are not aware of.

Our reactive tendencies or coping mechanisms are both internally experienced as tensions and outwardly expressed through interactions with people with whom we are in relationship. According to Horney we express these compulsive drives in three different styles in which individuals can move interpersonally. These styles are all motivated by the same basic human need to feel secure, and the often-subconscious anxiety that we aren't:

1. **Moving Toward Others**, also called the *complying* or self-effacing style originates from the need for connection, affection and approval to reduce the fear of isolation and not-belonging;
2. **Moving Away From Others**, also called the detached or *protecting* style originates from the need for independence and self-sufficiency to reduce the fear of vulnerability (to hurt);
3. **Moving Against Others**, also called the aggressive or *controlling* style originates from the need for self-assertion, power and control to reduce the fear of helplessness and failure.

The primal urge to use these coping mechanisms has the benefit of making us feel temporarily secure. But they come at the cost of impeding the full development of our inner self, and hence the unfolding of our full potential. I will explain in more detail how these coping mechanisms impede our development when we remain unaware of their dynamic and how we can learn to free ourselves from their compulsive nature.

Because humans are complex beings often our reactive tendencies play out simultaneously and create an inner conflict, which Horney calls the basic conflict. What was originally formed as contradictory attitudes towards others, over time develop into contradictory attitudes toward the self and into contradictory sets of beliefs.

For example, you may agree to a proposal by someone in your team although you are not really convinced and at the same time silently make a decision to go another way and tell her later. Or you may find yourself in a meeting raising your voice and ‘pulling rank’ when opposed by a majority of your team on a certain investment decision, only seconds later followed by you cracking a few awkward jokes and suggesting to go for drinks. In the first case your needs for approval and independence create inner friction. In the second example your needs for control and affection clash. They are both charged with subconscious anxiety and therefore create emotional disturbance. This is felt by the people around you, which triggers their own reactive tendencies, aggravating the situation and ultimately leading to a deterioration of the relationship. This is especially tragic because all three reactive tendencies appeal to the same basic need for security, however based on different ideals and believe-sets:

1. Moving Towards Others is motivated by the ideal of seeking **affection**, based on the believe that being loved and accepted provides security;
2. Moving Away from Others is motivated by the ideal of seeking of **autonomy**, based on the believe that being independent and self-sufficient provides security;
3. Moving Against Others is motivated by the ideal of seeking **agency**, based on the believe that being powerful and in control provides security;

When feeling secure, which for effective leaders is most of the time, we are perfectly capable of integrating and balancing these ideals. But when we are triggered by an unconsciously perceived threat or when we are under pressure it is hard to actualize these ideals simultaneously because they are driven by mutually exclusive aims, goals, and images of ourselves. In such an inner state one tendency predominantly comes out and is contradicted internally by another tendency driven by a competing need to be fulfilled. This triggers tension and a state that costs a lot of energy which can be called ‘reactive mode’. In reactive mode we compulsively utilize one of our reactive tendencies (complying, protecting or controlling) indiscriminately of what we really wish or what is required in the situation, without flexibility. Worst case, we become alienated from our genuine inner self, reducing the basic conflict to incompatible human relationships. To keep that from happening our psyche uses four attempts at solution of our inner conflicts:

1. Eclipsing one style and raising its opposite to predominance: Take the example of Peter, Business Line Leader and member of the Executive Board of a large corporation, who suppresses his tendency for taking control in a board meeting, going along with the rest of the team to appear ‘easy going’, even when he disagrees.
2. Moving away from people by maintaining an emotional distance which sets the conflict out of operation; moving away is a reactive tendency in itself but also represents an attempt at solution. In the previous example Peter disengages completely from the conversation in that same board meeting because both going along while disagreeing and taking control to push his point don’t feel safe. So he shuts up thinking “I am above this, and I am right anyway”
3. Transfiguring conflicting parts of the self in such a way that they no longer appear to be in conflict but as various aspects of a rich personality. This means denying the inner conflict and creating artificial harmony by forming an idealized self-image. Only in this idealized image of ourselves we are able to simultaneously move against, towards and away from people, which in reality is impossible. So, we create an artificial self that combines these drives in a grandiose way. In the example of Peter, he is an overbearing and controlling leader in his own business line leadership team, but tells himself that he is just sending clear assertive messages which is why his people love him. And he believes that they are dispensable anyway and that he is independent of their cooperation.
4. To keep this false sense of self intact we rationalize (structuring logical explanations for our compulsive behaviours) e.g. “I didn’t really want to overpower my colleagues, but it is in their best interest” and externalize (experiencing inner processes as going on outside the self) e.g. “the circumstances forced me to take a tough decision alone, I had no choice”.

These attempts all fail to resolve the basic conflict and actually worsen it.

For a true resolution we need to learn to consciously switch out of our reactive mode and purposefully alternate between the three interpersonal orientations (seeking affection, seeking autonomy, seeking agency) to foster self-realization. In this unbiased, creative mode, we recognize our anxiety, we are consciously in touch with our inner drives and conflicting needs and learn to accept their existence and contradictory nature. By introspecting, raising our inner awareness and accepting our flaws and inner contradictions without judgement, we create the freedom to choose, and remain true to our inner self. We then consciously choose our interpersonal moves and responses in any relationship flexibly, fitting the particular situation and relationship.

Imagine that we are perfectly capable of integrating and balancing these ideals: moving against then becomes asserting, moving towards becomes adapting and moving away becomes reflecting. We would use them interchangeably and switch fluently between them to create productive and joyful relationships in our professional and private lives. Thus, living up to our true potential in human interaction, so well described by another psychologist and Horney contemporary, Victor Frankl: "Between stimulus and response, there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom"

Jeroen Hilberts, 2021