



**PATRICK TOMLINSON ASSOCIATES**

**EMOTIONAL CONTAINMENT (RELEVANT FROM FAMILIES TO PRESIDENTS)  
PATRICK TOMLINSON (2018)**

**Patrick Tomlinson Brief Bio:** The primary goal of Patrick's work is the development of people and organizations. Throughout his career, he has identified development to be the driving force related to positive outcomes - for everyone, service users, professionals, and organizations.

His experience spans from 1985 in the field of trauma and attachment informed services. He began as a residential care worker and has since been a team leader, senior manager, Director, CEO, consultant, and mentor. He is the author/co-author/editor of numerous papers and books. He is a qualified clinician, strategic leader, and manager. Working in many countries, he has helped develop therapeutic models that have gained national and international recognition.

In 2008 he created Patrick Tomlinson Associates to provide services focused on development for people and organizations. The following services are provided,

- ✓ Therapeutic Model Development
- ✓ Developmental Mentoring, Consultancy and Clinical Supervision
- ✓ Personal and Professional Development Assessment for Staff Selection and Development

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<https://www.facebook.com/groups/1269338589867954/?fref=nf>

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Edwin H. Friedman (1999) in, 'Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix', made the point that leadership qualities are necessary for all walks of life, from "Families to Presidents". He discussed how self-differentiation is the key quality required of leaders at home, work and in society. A well-differentiated person achieves a healthy balance between the needs for individuality and togetherness. The emotional containment provided by this is essential for healthy functioning, whether we are thinking about the leader as a parent or president.

.... a leader functions as the immune system of the institution or organization he or she 'heads'. (p.182)

So, what does this look like? A secure sense of self, self-confidence, ability to relate well with others, the ability to tolerate difference? An insecure person tends to need sameness, agreement, and compliance to affirm their fragile sense of identity. A secure person is more able to hold onto their own identity, opinions, views, self-worth, while allowing others to be different and even directly challenging. They tend to remain calm and thoughtful when challenged, rather than become defensive and reactive. They are able to be separate and close in relationships at the same time.

Being clear without being certain, recognizing that for the most part, views and beliefs are opinions rather than absolute truths. Any truth is usually truth with a little t. Whereas insecure people tend to act as if their views are the Truth. This is an anxious defence, as the thought of not knowing or being wrong is too threatening. These initial thoughts begin to show how we might develop ways of identifying whether a person has a secure, but not a rigid sense of self.

A secure sense of self develops through attachment to others, primarily parents and other caregivers during the formative years. Such a person tends to have a coherent narrative of their life history. A coherent narrative that might include serious difficulties, is a more reliable indicator of healthy development, than the absence of difficulty on its own. It is the coherence that is most important. This most likely means that the person has been able to integrate their life experiences. It is not difficulty or adversity that is the issue, but the person's ability to make sense of and integrate experiences. We can only make use of experiences that have also been integrated into our personality.

That which is not integrated is split off and unavailable. These split off and unconscious parts of our history can also disrupt and inhibit healthy functioning. The reason that experience is not integrated is usually to do with it being overwhelming. Not that the event itself was impossible to integrate, but it overwhelmed the person's capacity at that moment in time. Capacity is related to the combination of individual resource + support available. Trauma is in the system,

not the event. The event cannot be experienced and that is why disassociation is a common reaction to trauma. Disassociation can be thought of as putting the event outside of the self as if it is not happening to the person. The response to the event becomes a bigger long-term problem than the actual event. Back in 1893 Freud and Breuer said that,

Psychological trauma or more precisely the memory of the trauma – acts like a foreign body which long after its entry must continue to be regarded as the agent that still is at work.

Contemporary trauma research by neuroscientists such as Bessel van der Kolk, Peter Levine, and Bruce Perry confirms this. This does not mean that trauma always prevents adequate functioning in life, relationships and work. It does mean that psychic and physical energy may be taken up, as a result, depleting an individual's energy and mental space.

When life around us is challenging, it is more likely that we become overwhelmed. This also correlates with the quality of support available. Given the environments that many people live and work in, where challenges are great, and support is little, unresolved trauma can be a significant difficulty. Therefore, it makes sense to recognize this and build in ways of supporting people.

Events that can lead to trauma may not have increased over the years, they may have even reduced, but our collective capacity to cope with these events has reduced. For example, by the fragmentation of family, industry and community life. Frank Furedi (2004) also argues strongly that cultural changes in perception of trauma have also weakened our resilience. This is what has led to an increase in trauma. Solutions need incorporating into many spheres of life, including the workplace. Leaving trauma simply as a 'medical' issue to be taken up only when symptoms become unbearable is not adequate. In the workplace, the consequence is often a workforce unable to carry out its task efficiently, prone to its symptoms of dysfunction. Leaders and managers must be healthy in their functioning, and able to maintain and grow their abilities. They must have a strong support network - family, colleagues, friends, mentors, consultants, etc. Friedman (1999, p.234) goes as far to say,

That all leadership begins with the management of one's own health.

A secure person is more likely to stay reasonably calm in challenging and threatening situations. Staying with and being able to think about a difficult situation is more likely to have a positive outcome. Reacting, which by nature is thoughtless does not bode well for finding constructive solutions. Acting firmly and decisively in an informed manner is different from reacting. However, there may be a fine line between the two and it is a matter of judgment to know when one may be reacting. Not reacting does not mean being indecisive.

The ability to set clear boundaries that are not too rigid is a crucial skill. One way of dealing with anxiety and risk is to create tight restrictive boundaries. To give a simple example – someone not allowed to get out of bed for a day risks little chance of injury. If a child is not allowed out of

sight, an accident may be less likely. Anxiety led environments tend to focus on the immediate rather than the longer-term bigger picture. Too much control may reduce risk in the short-term but can have negative long-term side effects. What starts as risk-reducing and survival enhancing if it is prolonged becomes life-limiting and risk producing. Again, the balance between the two can be a fine line and a matter of judgment.

In the case of the over-protected child, development will be stifled, with possibly serious consequences to potential and well-being. An anxious environment will not be too concerned about this as the main priority is to survive the next minute, hour and day. Once an individual, family, team, organization or any system becomes locked into this state, effective decision-making is compromised with potentially disastrous long-term consequences.

The ability to think about complex issues, in the short and long-term is particularly important. Many decisions and interventions that might seem appropriate in the short-term can have negative consequences down the road. For instance, an appropriate boundary is one that allows enough space for consistency and exploration, but not so open-ended that it leads to a lack of safety. The skill is in the judgment, supported by processes of assessment and risk management. To some extent, this skill can only be demonstrated. The 'proof is in the pudding' as the saying goes. And because each situation is new and unique, what was demonstrated to work before, is not a guarantee of success now or in the future. This is one reason why we might be surprised by a leader who achieved great success in one situation, only to fail in another.

A person who can set appropriate boundaries will also recognize that those boundaries need to change and adapt over time. Effective boundary setting will facilitate development, and development will push the boundaries. For example, a parent does not usually have the same boundaries with a five-year-old as with a teenager. At each point of growth/change, where the boundary needs to adapt, there is always the uncertainty of 'by how much'. This means anxiety is inevitable. Being able to manage anxiety is an essential task of parenting and leadership in general.

The easy and unhelpful solutions are 1) have rigid and unchanging boundaries, or 2) have none. In other words, to be overly authoritarian or overly permissive. Both are likely to produce fear and not promote development. As can be seen with this issue of boundaries, the environment needs to be interconnected and integrated. For instance, an insecure person is likely to struggle with changing boundaries, with all the new territory, risks and uncertainty involved. The fear of things 'falling apart' both internally and externally is great. Awareness and consistency of everyone involved are essential.

Understanding and conceptualization can inform the way we think about everything we do. Kurt Lewin's (1943) view, that there is nothing so practical as a good theory, rings true. For instance, we can look at how we understand a child's needs and how this will then inform a chain of connected matters.



Clifford-Poston (2001, p.89) in her book 'Successful Parenting', stated that the foundation of child development is a secure base and the permission to be curious. If our view is that children need understanding and encouragement, as well as clear boundaries to develop curiosity – what kind of people do we need for the child?

In the workplace if we know the qualities needed for a specific task - how might we look for these qualities in the process of staff selection and development? Do we have the right process, are we asking the right questions, looking in the right areas? If we are confident about our selection process, how do we then support development?

While I have referred to child development, the principles apply widely. People tend to do better and grow, in well-led and organized environments – which provide emotional containment.

## References

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