



PATRICK TOMLINSON ASSOCIATES

**LEADERSHIP AND FACILITATING ENVIRONMENTS
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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Patrick Tomlinson Associates Group (Private) - Facebook
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(Donald Winnicott)

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Often what is desired today - is a step-by-step guarantee to success. How often do we see and get attracted to an article heading something like the '9' things you need to do to become an outstanding (or even world-class!) manager. It seems that putting a number in there is part of the appeal. Maybe because it alludes to the finite and quick fix, rather than the infinite and ongoing. The same formula is applied to all aspects of life – parenting, cures for health problems, diets, healthy living, etc.

Having guiding principles may be helpful, but every situation, including everything within it is a unique moment in time. People and the dynamics between them are less predictable than the laws of gravity. In life and work, we need to hold onto a balance of knowing and not knowing. In general, too much certainty tends to be an unhelpful position when working with people. There is an irony if we take that too far too – like the only thing certain in life is that nothing is certain. Warning against the potentially destructive nature of certainty, McNamee and Gergen (1999) go as far to claim that,

Certitude walks hand in hand with the eradication of the other.

And Adam Phillips (2013) talking about child development says that,

.... the parents, the authorities, are at their most dangerous when they believe too militantly that they know what they are doing.

Confidence is important, but real confidence includes having an open mind. An open mind includes the ability to doubt, question and not know. Learning from experience is powerful. Mentors and Gurus are most useful when they help mentees make sense of and learn from their own experiences. This might include taking something useful from the mentor but not being instructed. Instruction has its place but can be unhelpful where development is the task. People, teams, organizations cannot be instructed to grow, change and develop.

These are processes that take place within what can be called a facilitating environment. Where under the right conditions people learn and grow from their own experience. In my working life, this concept has its roots in the work of child psychiatrist and pediatrician Donald Winnicott. He developed the concept in his work on child development and treatment of developmental disturbances. A facilitating environment is a place from which things unfold, emerge and evolve. Winnicott (1963, p.228) captures the essence of it, which I think can be applied to many diverse settings,

...it has as its aim not a directing of the individual's life or development, but an enabling of the tendencies which are at work within the individual, leading to a natural evolution based on growth. It is emotional growth that has been delayed and perhaps distorted, and under proper conditions the forces that would have led to growth now led to a disentanglement of the knot.

Increasingly I come across concepts like this being applied in business organizational settings. What I mean is that rather than focus on fixing and managing people, there is a shift to creating environments in which the capabilities of people will emerge. Back in 1996, the organizational consultant and executive coach, Lionel Stapley argued,

...what Winnicott refers to as 'A Facilitating Environment' one which encourages (or facilitates) the development of the child - seems to be the sort of organization holding environment that is required in today's organization. (p.211)

Winnicott's work which spanned the 1920s-1970s was focused on the issue of change. What change is possible? And what might make it possible? Much of the 20th Century work environment was dominated by the manufacturing industry and the means of production that went with it. Instruction and repetition were central to this. Now that the pace of change in the world is rapid, constant innovation and adaptation are vital for success and survival. In this environment, curiosity and thinking outside the box are increasingly important.



These qualities can be facilitated, encouraged and supported but not instructed. They require freedom rather than restriction of thought. Instruction by its nature is confining and limiting. If the above qualities are important when do people feel at their best to work in that way? What are the ingredients of a facilitating environment? Firstly, safety and security are essential. This is why John Bowlby (1988) in his work on attachment theory, defined a 'secure base' – i.e. a caring and reliable parent, to be the starting point for human development. And after that, the

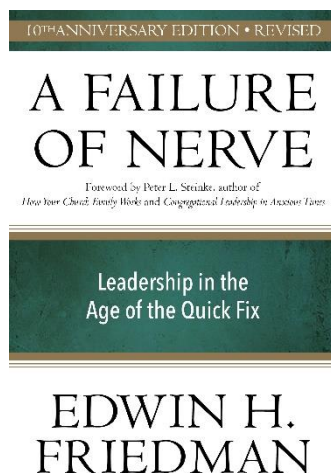
permission to be curious is the second vital ingredient, just as the secure infant begins to discover and explore the world around her.

In the workplace this means that people must: feel connected in relationships; feel safe and trusted; be encouraged to be curious and innovative; be listened to; be encouraged to express themselves. There also needs to be boundaries. A lack of boundaries is generally not containing and does not feel safe. The challenge is working out where the boundaries should be. For instance, what is safe and clear, but not too restrictive? What is the line between innovation and recklessness? Working this out is a matter of judgement. And once it is worked out it won't stay the same for long. Systems that are working well, grow. The boundaries need to adapt accordingly, or the next stage of growth will be hampered. So, the process of boundary setting is one of continual review and negotiation.

Unfortunately, what many people experience at work is the opposite of what is needed. They experience constant disruption of relationships, reactive cultures and decision making, a lack of communication and trust, and an autocratic leadership style that puts people tightly in their little box. Of course, this is not universal, but it is common. The primary reason is that the rate of change among other factors has inevitably raised societal anxiety levels. We have not simultaneously raised our ability to live and work with increased anxiety.

Edwin H. Friedman (1999) wrote about this in his book, 'A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix', when he claimed that society had become riddled with anxiety. Since then it has only got worse! It could be argued that we now live in a culture of alarm. Going back to the false solution of '9' steps, it can be argued that what is needed more than ever, is a focus on the containment of anxiety. For example, a leader who can do this effectively provides the beginning of a facilitating environment. Just as a parent's ability to think about, make sense of and respond to an infant's anxiety provides the beginning point of human growth, emotionally and physically.

If we agree with this, the next question is to consider what it looks like? How do we identify the qualities and skills involved? In an already anxious system, this task might feel too challenging. For instance, when it comes to recruiting a suitable person, ticking a few easily measurable boxes might seem an attractive method, however much we know it doesn't work. How do we strive towards what will work and create environments where it is safe to use our judgement?



As Friedman said with the title of his book, the biggest problem of leadership from families to presidents, is a failure of nerve. He also pointed out that those leaders who do hold their nerve can expect to be derided and attacked to an extreme level. Exactly as we now see daily in the media. These are symptoms of a chronically anxious society or system. Friedman saw these attacks on a 'self-differentiated' leader as a natural response when he or she makes a stand. He referred to it as sabotage and a sign that the leader was probably doing a good job. As long as the leader survives these attacks in a non-reactive manner the system will begin to regulate itself and function better. As with Winnicott's facilitating environment, the leader must be able to make a stand and accept that being tested is part of the work.

For these reasons leadership in the modern age is extremely difficult, whether we think of it at the level of family, organization or society. It is also why the concept of the facilitating environment is so important and relevant.

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