

No Safe Path to Leadership

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The Leadership Circle®

There Is No Safe Path to Leadership

The Leadership Circle Profile is unique in that, unlike other 360 degree assessments, it packs a lot of theory and leadership framework into the architecture of the results you receive. In fact, some are now saying that it is a thorough integration of the best leadership research, theory, and framework to come out of the leadership development field over the last 50 years. The purpose of this article is not to overview all that research and theory, but to introduce a few of the key frameworks that form some of the architecture of the Leadership Circle Profile. You can continue reading here or click on the link to watch a video presentation of Bob Anderson presenting what is in this article.

The core tension that we manage as adults, in my opinion, and especially as leaders, is the tension between purpose and safety. Each of us is oriented toward a purpose that desires to come through our lives. Leaders, especially great leaders, are moved by a deep sense of personal purpose. They discern it. They distill it. They stand for it. When we see great leadership, we see someone standing for something that's vital to them—something that matters more than anything else, that they build their life and their leadership around. They create organizations that reflect that purpose. They distill it into vision of contribution and a vision of what they want their lives to be about.

I don't know about you, but when I orient my life toward bold purpose, I quickly understand that this is inherently risky. I have long wished for a safe way to go about this, but I haven't found one. The natural inherent tension in clarifying and focusing on purpose is that it immediately raises the possibility of risk. I'm an entrepreneur with a growing global business, so I understand pursuing purpose puts me at risk all the time.

Part of the reason we work, is to manage our need for safety. In other words, we work in order to pay the mortgage. We work to provide financial security for ourselves and for our loved ones. I know this pressure well. My kids are not yet through college, I a mortgage to pay, and my financial retirement is still not completely secure. And so, I am working, in part, for safety and security.

If I work inside a large organization, then I am likely to believe that my security is tied to moving up within the organization. Not only is there more income if I move up, but I also have a broader scope and a greater sense of importance, which seems to place me at a more secure position. This is because my sense of caution increases as I climb higher up the pyramid. The higher I go, the bigger the stakes, the larger the stakeholders, and the further the fall. If we want to move up, and we want to do that safely, then we need to win, gain, and maintain the approval of people around us. This is especially true of the people above us—bosses and key stakeholders. To fall from grace, to lose favor, to lose credibility with key stakeholders and people above us is not a good thing for our career. And so, inherent to leadership, is this tension. We manage it all the time. We manage it strategically. We're managing it financially. We manage it politically. Each of us wants to be part of something great while wishing for a safe way to do it. There is no safe way to be great. That's the deal.

How does this tie into the Leadership Circle Profile? When you receive the results of your Leadership Circle Profile, you get data that is actually organized around this core tension. In other words, the extent to which you orient your leadership toward purpose or safety will show up in your Leadership Circle Profile. For example, if you are oriented toward purpose, vision, and contribution, you are likely to see stronger scores in the top half of the circle but, if you are oriented more toward safety, then you're going to receive stronger scores in the bottom half of the circle.

Creative and Reactive Structures of Mind

When we orient our life and our leadership toward creating what matters most, and that is the primary driver, we are in what I call, Creative Structure or Creative Structure of Mind. When our primary focus is oriented toward staying safe, then we are more likely to live and lead out of a Reactive Structure of Mind—running the behavioral strategies that you run when you get threatened.

Let me explain the difference between these two structures. I like the notion of structure because in system dynamics, the structure of something determines its performance. My dad was an engineer and I grew up learning at an early age that the design of something predetermined its patterns of performance. My car is not going to race at NASCAR. By the same token, a NASCAR is not going to get 60 miles to the gallon. So, the structure of something determines its performance. When we are in a Reactive Structure,

we get a very different pattern of our leadership performance than when we do in a Creative Structure.

Let's begin by looking at Reactive Structure. Let me tell a story that illustrates Reactivity in action. I was once asked to speak at a life insurance convention hosted by one of the top life insurance salesmen in the country. He was there to train people to sell life insurance. After I finished speaking, a man came up to me and said, "You were talking about my life!"

I said, "Yeah. I try to do that."

"No, no. I need to talk to you. Can we have lunch?"

"Sure. Let's have lunch."

When we sat down to have lunch, this is exactly what he said—and it was a clear example of Vintage Reactive Structure. I said, "What do you want to talk about?"

He said, "I have a problem."

Now, I know that Reactive Structure starts with a problem, so I ask him, "What's the problem?"

He says, "I'm not learning anything here."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I know how to sell life insurance and I'm really good at it."

"So other than the fact that you have spent a week of your life and wasted some travel expense, what's the problem?"

"My results don't show it."

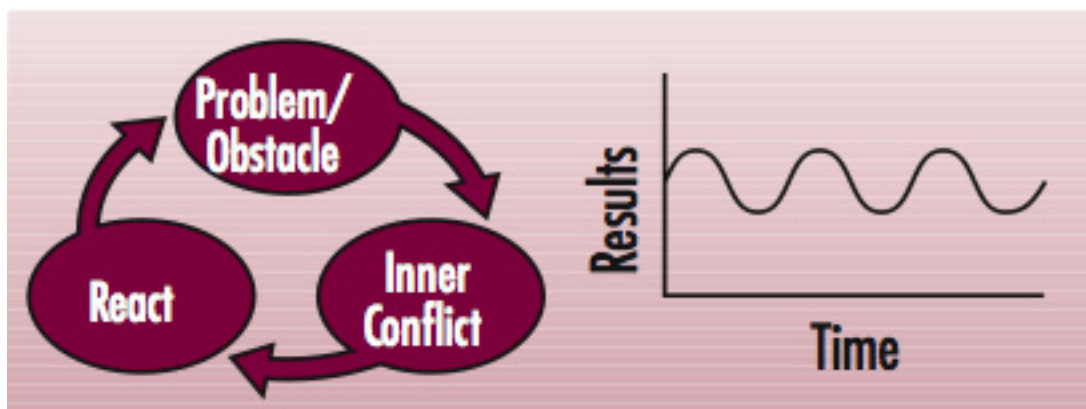
"Tell me about your results."

"Well, I look at my results and they're really bad. I know I can do better than that. I know I'm putting my financial future at risk and furthermore, I'm disgusted with myself. And so, I swing into gear, and I'm really good at it. I do all the stuff they are telling us to do here and it works. So about six to nine months later, my results are right on track."

"So what's the problem?"

"Nine months after that, my results are back where they were, and I'm doing it all over again, and that's been my career. It hasn't really gone anywhere. It's just been up and down."

This is Vintage Reactive Structure. Let's take a look at it.

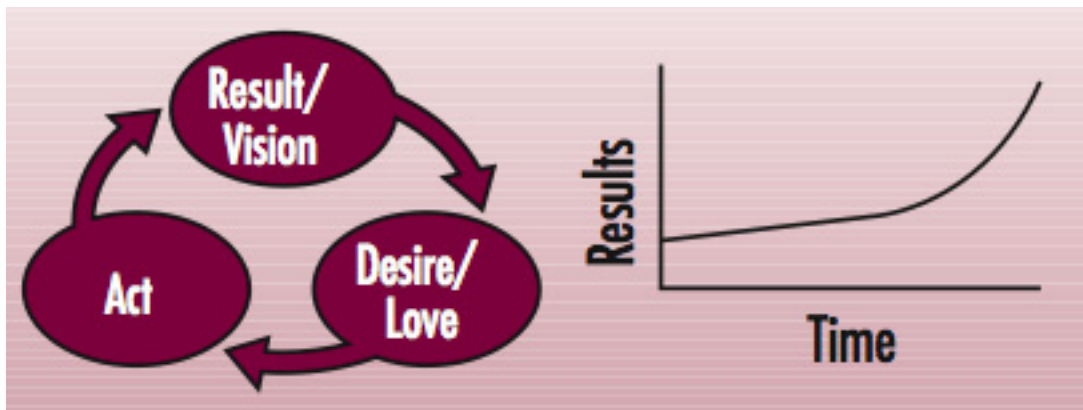


First of all, one of the biggest clues to his reactivity is that he never talked about his sense of purpose and vision. It was obvious by its absence. This is because, what galvanizes his attention is some threat to his sense of safety and security. When he feels threatened, he mobilizes. We all do this and we all have our own strategies for doing this. In his case, when the problem grows (low sales), he feels fear. Due to the threat he feels in regards to his financial future, he swings into gear. He reacts, and as he reacts, because he really is good at what he does, he tends to solve the problem. If this were the end of the story, everything would be fine. But it is not.

If we are looking at the results of his performance over time, the pattern of performance in a nutshell, goes like this: When things in the workplace are good and he is successful, he relaxes and his productivity decreases. However, as fear increase and results are low, he swings into gear and the problems go away. He's solving the problem.

Now, let's look at what happens from a Reactive Structure point of view. This is represented by a decrease in problems. What's happening to his fear? It's going down. So, what's happening to the tendency to continue his reaction? It too, is going down. So, as we see the next loop in our example, he regresses to poor results. That's the pattern of Reactive Structure. Every time he goes around the loop, results in switching direction and going the other way. Reactive Structure oscillates. The reason it oscillates is because his reaction is designed to make his fear go away. It is designed to reduce his internal conflict. It is not designed to create what he wants. It is designed to make him feel safer. Since fear is the motivator, his feeling safer actually reduces the tendency to keep taking action.

Reactive Structure tends to maintain equilibrium about a normal "safe" state. It is not a bad structure; it is a structure, in system dynamics terms, designed to oscillate. It is an oscillating loop that seeks equilibrium. Just like a thermostat on a wall, when it gets too hot in the room, the blowers come on, and the temperature goes down. When it gets too cold in a room, the blowers kick off, and the temperature goes back up. Like a thermostat, Reactive Structure is designed to maintain status quo and to get back to normal when things are threatened.



Creative Structure is very different resulting in very different patterns and performance. The starting place in this structure is not threat or risk. Creative Structure fundamentally focuses on what I am trying to build and create with the knowledge that there is inherent risk to doing so. In this structure, fear is not running me; purpose and vision are running me. I have to manage the part of me that gets scared, the part of me that knows I have to bet the farm in order to create what matters most. To the extent that I stay focused on what really matters, the natural motivating energy is passion, love, commitment, intrigue, excitement, etc., out of which I take action to being what I care about. I am focused on the future that I want and the organization I believe in. In this loop, every time I go around, everything increases. In other words, the closer I get to the vision, the more passion I have, and therefore, the more action I am likely to take to create what I want. Capable action brings me closer to the vision, which increases my passion. Therefore, the natural tendency in this structure is for growth. In system dynamics language, Creative Structure is a growth loop designed to create a correspondence between my current reality and the vision that I am holding. This is leadership.

In the top half of the Leadership Circle Profile, are key Creative Competencies. These kinds of leadership competencies show up on any well-researched 360 assessment. Leadership Competencies do not boot up well on Reactive Structure. They only boot up well and consistently well, in the Creative Structure, life stance, and mindset.

The Leadership Circle Profile can be used as a thorough competency assessment; it also provides an indication of how much of your life energy and orientation is in either the Creative or Reactive Structure. If you are more focused on safety, you will be acting in a way Larry Wilson called, "Playing-Not-To-Lose", and you will be more likely to operate in a Reactive Structure. These behaviors are the Reactive Tendencies which appear in the bottom half of the circle in your Leadership Circle Profile. You can also use the assessment to get a clearer sense of how you're performing as a leader. Contrarily, the top half of the circle indicates the extent to which your leadership is oriented toward forming your purpose into a vision that is both strategic and lofty: strategic because it sets a direction in which the organization will thrive, and lofty because it captures your imagination and that of others.

The Leadership Circle indicates how you are leading as measured against a battery of well key Creative Competencies. You also obtain insight into your behavior when you react. This gives you clues as to which structure of mind you are living in—what life stance are you operating out of. It also allows you to see the interplay between the two, that is, how your Reactive tendencies may be impeding your Creative competency.

The Leadership Circle Profile also provides a clue as to the underlying assumptions that are running behavior. What do I mean by this? Let's go back to my life insurance salesman story.

I said to this him, "Okay, I know what happens to you when your results are low. You get disgusted with yourself and you swing into gear. What happens to you when your results are going well?"

I no sooner finished the question than he had a look come over him that often goes across someone's face when they are having an epiphany.

I asked, "What was that? What just happened?"

He said, "I thought of my dad in the church."

I said, "Tell me about that." And then he got this deer-in-the-headlights look.

He said, "My dad tried all his life to be successful and never was. You don't think I'd be worried about what my dad would think of me if I were more successful than he is."

I said, "I don't know. How does it feel to you?"

He said, "That's in there."

I said, "Well, tell me about the church."

He said, "Well, I've been taught all my life that it's bad to have money."

I said, "So let me see if I got this right. When your results are low, you're disgusted with yourself, and when your results are good, you're a bad person because your dad is going to hate you and you're going to hell. Is that about it?"

In the Reactive Structure, whether we are aware of it or not, we are actually reacting to threats to our sense of self-worth and security that we may not even be aware of. In his case, he was threatened by success and by failure. He had assumptions in him that put him at risk if he was successful and if he was unsuccessful. This was a revelation for him.

At the Leadership Circle, we think you get much more leverage on behavior change, if you can see the assumptions that are running the behavior you want to change. Some of us back off when conflict enters the meeting on key issues with key stakeholders. Others, responding to the same risk take over, stop listening, or get controlling. We all have our own way of reacting to perceived risk. To the extent that we tend to be habitual and predictable in the way we react to certain threats. You can bet that those behaviors are being run by internal assumptions of a nature similar to this salesman. The Leadership Circle Profile will give you a sense for the internal assumptions that are underneath your behavior. Change the habit of thought and the behavior changes much more readily.

You can use the Leadership Circle as a strength map. Certainly, any strong scores in the top half of the circle are well-deployed

strengths and remember not to think of the bottom half as weaknesses. Rather, strong scores in the bottom half are strengths being run in a Reactive Structure. Strengths used reactively get overused or used in the wrong situation—when another strength might be more useful. Strengths overused or used in the wrong situation have liabilities associated with them. For example, there's a place for control, but if you use it too often, if you are constantly using control to protect yourself from perceived threat, control is going to be a liability. Our data suggests that the overuse of control impedes the effectiveness of leadership. So, use the Leadership Circle Profile as a strength map. Strong scores in the top and bottom half represent strengths. Strengths in the top half can be leveraged, and strengths in the bottom half, if they are freed from the reactive assumptions causing them to be over or inappropriately used, emerge as Creative Competency.

Finally, you can use the Leadership Circle Profile as an energy map. How are you expending your life's energy? We only have so much energy capital to expend. What we know about Creative Structure is it tends to generate energy. The more we are focused on purpose and vision, the more energy we actually have and generate. When we are living and leading in Reactive Structure, it is energy draining. Reactive Structure puts a drag on our capacity.

In summary, the Leadership Circle profile will give you a map that allows you to reflect on how you are living and leading. It provides powerful feedback against a battery of key competencies. It indicates the life-stance or Structure of Mind out of which you are leading. It indicates the way you are navigating the tension between purpose and safety. It provides pointed feedback on the reactive strategies when safety is threatened. It points to the underlying assumptions that are running the pattern of results you are creating. It shows the interaction between Reactive Tendencies and Creative Competencies suggesting that if you are living and leading in a way that generates or drains energy—for you and for the organization.