

White Paper

From Reactive to Creative Leadership

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REACTIVE TO CREATIVE LEADERSHIP

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REACTIVE TO CREATIVE LEADERSHIP

All leaders will experience two major movements.

Two major movements happen in the self (in its inner game) as it transforms from Reactive to Creative Leadership. The first movement has to do with a shift in how we optimize the tension between purpose and safety. In the second parallel movement, identity shifts from the outside-in to the inside out.

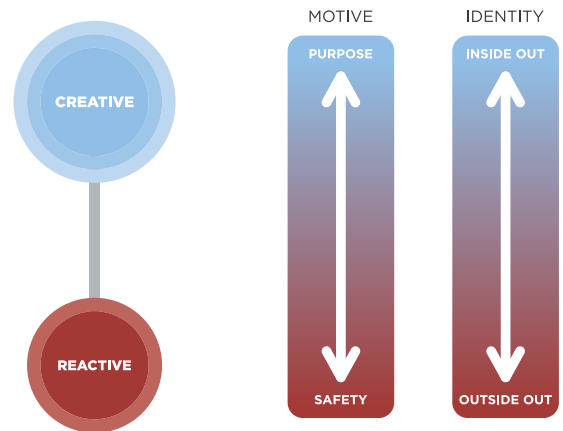
Movement 1: Purpose and Safety, Love and Fear

8.2 Two Primary Movements color-01 The primary tension in life and leadership is the tension between purpose and safety, between the part of us that wants to be about something great, make a difference, and demands our deepest commitment—and another part of us that simply is not up for that much risk. This tension is inherent. It lives in all of us, all the time. How we habitually resolve this tension defines which internal operating system (inner game) we run—Creative or Reactive.

In the face of this tension, we make choices that define our lives and our leadership. As we orient on what we most want, we face what we most fear. Always our purpose and passion await our commitment. Always fear lurks inside, cautioning us not to move toward them—it seems too risky. But if we do not live at the edge of our creativity and passion, we become toxic to those around us and to ourselves. Each time we step up in life or leadership to a new aspiration or vision, we face fear. Our biggest wants are met with our biggest fears. We either move through fear toward our passion, or we slowly and inexorably die.

Each of us is unique. With that uniqueness comes a passion for a contribution that only we can make. Each of us has a vision, if we distill it, of what that contribution could look like. Leadership is the act of creating outcomes that matter most. If we had our druthers we would orient our lives and our leadership on that which seems to want to come through us. We would birth that which most matters into the world. We work, in part, to fulfill these aspirations.

And yes, we need to pay the mortgage. We work to provide a safe and stable life for ourselves and our families. We want to establish a financial safety net for the future of those we care about. To accomplish this we strive to move up, because moving up expands our influence, pays more, and makes it easier to finance and secure the future we want. However, moving up has its own risks because as we rise, the stakes get higher, the stakeholders get bigger, and the fall is further.



And so, we are in a dilemma: If we want to move up and do it safely, we need the approval of those around us and especially those above us. Do we advocate for what we want and what we think is in the best interest of the business, risking the disapproval of key stakeholders, or do we keep our heads low and live to fight another day?

Most of us are looking for a safe path through—a safe place to be great. There isn't one. There is no safe way to be great, and, there is no great way to be safe. The safe paths have all been taken. The paths left to us require courage. Leadership is inherently risky.

If we orient our lives on safety, we remain constantly insecure. If we chose to orient on that which seems to want to have its way with our lives, we live into the futures we were born to create. And that brings with it its own security. It is counter intuitive. Caution is not the safe path. In leadership positions, more people get fired for their caution than for their courage. If we play for purpose, we accept the inherent risk of leading, of living full-out, and that brings with it a sense of security. This security is not rooted in powers outside ourselves, upon which our future seems to depend. It is rooted in our capacity to create the future to which we aspire. To lead is to live at the edge. There is no safe path. That's the deal.

If we orient primarily on safety, we live and lead reactively. If we orient on the pull of purpose and vision and accept the inherent risks, we evolve the Creative Mind. The core of the Creative operating system is a Play-on-Purpose game based on love. In this inner game we orient on what we love enough to risk for. It is designed to create the future to which we aspire.

Movement 2: From Outside-In to Inside-Out

The second movement is a shift from an ego/identity configured from the outside-in, to one that is lived from the inside-out. The Reactive Self is oriented on living up to, or living out of, all the messages it has adopted. It is defined by others—by what they have said we must be in order to be worthy, good and successful. In the Reactive Stage of Development, the self does not have a self. Key people, institutions, cultural values, and important affiliations hold and define the self.

In the Creative Stage of Development, the self discerns its own internalized self-definition and identity. It is self-validating and can act independently or autonomously. It can march to the beat of a different drummer, whether or not others approve. This movement enables the shift from a, Reactive, Play-Not-To-Lose to a Creative, Play-on-Purpose game—a shift from a life lived out of the fear of not meeting expectations to a life lived on purpose.

As this happens, a different voice emerges—the voice that always knows the answer to the question, “What would you do if you could?” This voice leads the show in the Creative Mind. We are no longer being authored by the dictates of old beliefs. We are becoming independent of past conditioning—to author our own life and lead from the emerging vision.

Creative Leadership

The kind of organizational cultures we are moving toward today (innovative, creative, engaging, agile, adaptive, high-involvement, high-fulfillment, etc.) require Creative Leadership. Reactive leadership is incapable of ushering in these futures. Reactive Leadership is too defined by past conditioning (and habitual responses to fear) to stand autonomously in the midst of the current culture and change it. Creative Leadership is the life-stance of continuously focusing on a desired future and in the midst of the current culture (with all of its mixed messages and political risks) taking authentic action to bring that vision into being over time. Which game are you playing?

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Excerpted from *Mastering Leadership: An Integrated Framework for Breakthrough Performance and Extraordinary Business Results*, by Robert J. Anderson and William A. Adams (Wiley, 2015)

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