

Equanimity: An Essential Leadership Practice in Challenging Times

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As economist Daniel Kahneman's¹ research reveals in *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, humans are hard wired to choose cognitive ease over strain, to look for the familiar and find comfort in it. Instead of having the discipline to rigorously challenge assumptions leaders may instead associate familiarity with past experience, give it more power than is warranted and potentially create bias in their thinking.¹ When this inherent human tendency to seek familiarity instead of truth surfaces in the uncertain, turbulent health care



environment, susceptible leaders are tempted to go solo for the quick fix. In his book *Team of Teams*, General Stanley McChrystal² sounds the alarm on decision-making in a rapidly changing combat environment. Overreliance on expertise does not work when faced with the unknown, uncertainty or a crisis; in fact, trying to use expertise in a crisis will surely impede or short-circuit our ability to see what is actually happening. When it is the leader's default position to make decisions solely based on knowledge and past experience objectivity will be lacking and most likely the input of others will be ignored.² In the field of battle, as in our health care systems, one cannot afford to revert to command and control leadership, rely solely on past knowledge or experience, or to allow biased thinking to over-shadow objectivity. Henry Mintzberg famously said, "Setting oneself on a pre-determined course in unknown waters is the perfect way to sail into an iceberg."³ A leadership practice that can help nurse leaders navigate the whitewater of health care is the practice of equanimity.

EQUANIMITY DEFINED

In her lectures and workshops, cultural anthropologist Dr. Angeles Arrien presented principles of equanimity as a guide to responding effectively in uncertain or stressful situations (Arrien, personal communication, February 5, 2001, and October 15, 2007).

With her encouragement, a colleague, Jim Hassinger, and I used these principles to develop a framework for the practice of equanimity.

Equanimity is the capacity to see something (self, others, circumstances) exactly as it is. It is a mindset, a choice to approach life in a calm, grounded, and unflappable way. Although others are proposing draconian measures after dismal quarterly financials or lunging at the first suggestion to solve overcrowding in the emergency department, the leader in equanimity puts emotions aside and asks questions to widen the perspective in order to see the full picture. Leaders who make decisions and take actions from a place of equanimity

reduce fear and instill confidence. Because they are not caught up in drama, they are less stressed and able to conserve energy. They more accurately read the people around them. They conclude, “It is what it is,” not with helpless resignation, but with acceptance of the reality of current circumstances. In every diagnostic process, the critical first step is to make the correct assessment so that the right course of action can be taken. Leaders who practice equanimity are more effective and, in the long run, more efficient, because their strategies and decisions are aligned with truth.

EQUANIMITY FRAMEWORK

There are 3 components to the Equanimity Framework: objectivity, curiosity, and emotional neutrality.

OBJECTIVITY

Most leaders consider themselves to be objective in their thinking. Yet there are innumerable factors that can distort the truth. Leaders who are conflict averse may repeatedly underestimate problems with their boss, colleague, or favored direct report, leading to deeply entrenched problems, far more difficult to resolve. Additionally, a past history of distrust with someone can lead to making false assumptions based on the past instead of a clear understanding of the actual issue. When leaders are prone to needing to look good in the eyes of others, they might exaggerate how well a project is going, or how positive the morale in their department is. By disregarding what is true and creating a distorted scenario that aligns with their self-image, leaders can potentially jeopardize their work and their credibility. It is human nature to want everything to go well, but wishful thinking (getting stuck on how we want things to be) restrains leaders from taking action. Leaders who excel at equanimity are able to stare a situation right in the face, call it what it is, and trust that with a clear picture or diagnosis, right action will become apparent.

CURIOSITY

The best leaders are curious by nature. They are solid in their beliefs and opinions, but always open to seeing something in a new way. They seek perspectives of others; they welcome challenges to the status quo. A curious person is open to learning.

Criticism and blame is omnipresent in our culture. Leaders who practice equanimity have the ability to stay in curiosity when something goes wrong. They avoid the blame game. It sounds something like this: “It’s fascinating to me that our perspectives on this topic are polar opposites.” “I’m surprised how upset I was by my boss’s criticism. Why am I feeling so insecure?” “I usually hold my ground on my opinions, but I tend to give my truth away with this particular colleague.” With intense and immediate demands for change, leaders must guard against taking action too quickly while foregoing reflection and input from others. Recalling Kahneman’s research about our natural tendency to drift towards what is comfortable, it is useful to understand that curiosity is an antidote to expediency, the inclination to bring premature closure in uncertain times.

EMOTIONAL NEUTRALITY

Remaining emotionally neutral is undoubtedly the most challenging aspect of the equanimity practice. Emotional neutrality does not mean without emotions. Genuine emotions, distinct from reactivity, should be embraced as an essential part of our very being. Wise leaders gain credibility when they align thoughts, feelings, and actions to lead with integrity. A calm, unemotional voice can open the door to creative solutions for the greater good. The enhanced emphasis on transparency in quality and safety is a positive movement in health care but can challenge leaders to stay in equanimity. Leaders can choose to approach suboptimal results with emotional neutrality. A matter-of-fact tone in asking questions for deeper understanding demonstrates to others that a voice of reason fosters getting to the root cause, and does so with compassion. Leaders can choose to delay responding to a disrespectful email until their anger subsides. They can choose to search for more information before assigning blame. Research demonstrates emotional neutrality can be enhanced even with 10 minutes of mindful meditation, resulting in less stress and anxiety.

Leaders who practice equanimity are committed to reflection, self-responsibility and humility. Their calm, grounded, unflappable approach offers reassurance to those who rely on them that they are in the hands of a clear-eyed leader. They have confidence that regardless whether the decisions are the correct ones, they at least are driven by objectivity, not by pressure for expediency.

EQUANIMITY PROCESS

The equanimity process guides leaders to more clearly understand what needs to be addressed at the core. It is composed of 4 steps that can be readily adopted and internalized for practical application. The 4 steps are:

1. This is the situation.
2. This is how I may have contributed to the problem.
3. This is what I am learning.
4. This is what I will do next time.

1. This is the situation:

The fastest route to a poor decision or interaction is misunderstanding the essence of what occurred. The best leaders excel at getting to the heart of the matter in a clear, succinct, matter of fact way. When leaders have clarity, regardless how difficult the challenge, they are able to objectively state, “It is what it is.” This is the truth of the situation. From there, the pathway for right action often unfolds effortlessly. When leaders feel confused or stuck about how to handle an issue, it is frequently an indication they have not zeroed in on the real problem. For example, a senior leader has a director who is forming coalitions to support his agenda, is overtly unsupportive of the senior leader’s decisions and withholds information on critical initiatives. The senior leader, who places a high value on inclusiveness and collaboration, responds to these behaviors by repeatedly engaging with the director to debate ideas and try to improve the relationship. Nothing changes. The senior leader tends to avoid conflict and likes to

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