



30 UNIVERSAL SOURCES OF ANXIETY

Some anxiety sources are unique to us based on wiring, assumptions and upbringing etc. These sources below are universal to us all. We use this list with its brief descriptions to help a team or leader 'diagnose' the anxiety dynamics going on. Frequently, as someone shares a case, we listen for these sources and find that the team is in 7 or more of these dynamics. No wonder they are anxious. Diagnosing and then de tangling these sources can bring quick relief and freedom.

Internal Sources of Anxiety:

These sources are 'first space' sources - the anxiety in you. They are common to us all and will generate anxiety as long as we are in their grip. Naming and moving out of them is the path to freedom.

Double bind: On the surface, it is a lose-lose situation. On a deeper level, a pure double bind is two conflicting messages where by succeeding at one means you fall at another. If you struggle to make a decision, even about simple matters, and often regret the decision you made, you may be prone to double binds.

Giants on your shoulders: The people in your life, past or present, who you believe are condemning you and your actions. When meeting with someone, you are trying to please the giants, rather than connecting with the real person.

Values violation: You often know your unspoken values by your over reaction when someone violates one. The goal is not to lower your values, it is to name your value and move through the violation to stay connected with the person.

Judgement: You cannot judge someone and be present to them at the same time. Make a list of the types of people you judge. You will be surprised at how petty some of the traits are. Judgement is the most obvious evidence of self righteousness.

Imposter Syndrome: The belief that someone better and smarter will come along and expose that you don't belong in your role OR the belief that you actually are not fit for the role you are in.

Doubt in God/Faith shift: Deconstructing faith can be scary, especially if you are a faith leader where people's faith depends on yours. You feel pressure to represent belief in God, regardless of the state of your own.

Isolationism: The need to feel alone in order to receive pity or feel self pity. An insidious form of self righteousness.

Exceptionalism: The belief that no one can do it better than you. If you are always the smartest person in the room, you are prone to exceptionalism.

Blind spot knowledge: Knowledge everyone around you has about you that you do not have about yourself. Often, you learn it in a public setting and sometimes, as soon as you are told it, you know it is true, but have never known it before. You feel exposed and often move into shame.

Making a mistake in public: All leadership is vulnerable and almost all mistakes are made in public. The ability to recover from a mistake in public and put yourself out there again is paramount for ongoing health.

Being stuck: Applying 'more of the same' or 'try harder' to any scenario with waning results.

Inner Critic: The inner voice of condemnation that often holds us to an untenable expectation.

Not Knowing What To Do/Having To Do Something: Especially for a leader whose mistakes are often public, this will always generate anxiety.

Scarcity: lack of time, money, people. But we must proceed. Long term scarcity can move you into a 'scarcity mindset.'

New (location, job etc): While 'new' can be exciting, it can also be lonely as you adjust to the place/culture/people and as you build relationships etc.

Grief: Many leaders struggle to allow themselves the grieve loss. Grief has its own agenda and timeline and radical acceptance and self kindness are required.

Ambiguity: Unclear situation, unprecedented circumstance, unknown timeline.

External Sources of Anxiety

These sources come not from within us, but often between us. Naming them, sometimes even to the person you are anxious about, and then moving out of them is the path to freedom from their grip.

Rigid Communication: Some personalizes sound more certain than they feel. You can notice absolutes, superlatives and force of language in yourself and others and attempt to keep communication more fluid.

Thought-Terminating Cliches: When a person 'declares reality' in a way that ends the conversation and paints a nuanced topic with a simplistic broad brush.

Phantom Strike: A criticism coming from someone representing an unnamed mob of unknown size that you do not have access to. It is some form of, 'Me and a bunch of people have been talking and we think...'

Cognitive Dissonance: When you and another person has the same set of objective facts, but hold radically different interpretations of them. You attempt to 'think your way to seeing it their way.' You are unable to make sense of their interpretation and behavior. More insight is rarely the answer.

Paradox: A literal impossible situation. A common complaint of a parent, 'I don't want my children to clean their rooms, I want them to want to.' That is a paradox. A child can clean a room, but making them want to want to clean their room is impossible.

Mixed Message: Two opposite messages at the same time. Most sarcasm and passive aggression is a mixed message. It generates anxiety because you do not know which message to receive and which to reject. Choosing one and ignoring the other is typically the path forward.

Relational Double Bind: On the surface, it is a lose-lose situation. On a deeper level, a pure double bind is a paradox and a mixed message - a literal impossible situation. The person sends you two conflicting messages where if you succeed in one, you fail in the other. These can be difficult to spot. Beware people who keep shifting the target on you, people who argue in a circular fashion or people who never let you 'win.'

Leadership Landmine: Unwittingly causing offense with a group. You are in a meeting leading an exciting initiative and someone suddenly is hurt. You are changing something you did not know is precious to them. You have stepped on a landmine.

Triangulation: A relationship with three or more people that should only have two people in it. Gossip is always triangulation, for example. Beware people who want you to keep a secret against another. Just by listening to them, they may triangle you against another person.

Imbalance of power and responsibility: You are required to do something you are not empowered to do. You have responsibility but no authority or resource to accomplish what you are responsible for.

Under Functioning/Over Functioning Dynamic: a pattern between two people where one drops a ball and the other picks it up. The over functioner feels self righteous, the under functioner feels shame. When the over functioner reaches a limit and stops, the under functioner feels abandoned because the over functioner is the one who changed the dynamic.

Sabotage: Most groups resist change and will resist a leader. Sometimes a veteran leader sabotages the fresh ideas of a newer leader.

Shifting a Clear Target: When you meet with someone believing they want to resolve, but they keep shifting the target on you. Some people don't keep track of their word, or because they are people pleasers, shift the target between meetings. Anxiety ensues.

Same Species Syndrome: A previous leader wounded me, so anyone like that previous leader is suspect and not to be trusted because they are the 'same species' as the wounder.

Second Hand Criticism: The impact on a spouse when the leader is criticized. Because the spouse is not in the arena fighting directly, they are impacted.

