Attachment in the Workplace

As if being a leader is not hard enough. The pandemic has raised the bar on leaders in an unexpected and uncertain way. There is no business as usual anymore, and the way things look right now, business will not be returning to a normal state any time soon. With all the uncertainty and chaos, there are no simple strategies to navigate the current situation.

Many articles have been published about how to step up to the challenge of leading remote workers, improve communication, and be a better leader. Social media is loaded with advice focused on ideal leadership traits and behaviors. Leaders have been called to put their people first as fear runs rampant and followers are distracted with their own survival. But, what if the people-side of leadership is not where your strength lies? What if the lens through which you perceive relationships has a clouded view? This reduces leader effectiveness and undoubtedly will make leading during a pandemic or anytime much harder.

History of Attachment Science

All humans have a personality and an attachment style. Our attachment style is the lens through which we perceive relationships. Attachment theory, first developed by Bowlby (1958, 1959, & 1960) and Ainsworth and colleagues (1978), is based on our relationship with our earliest caregiver, often a parent. The attachment system is a biologically based desire for proximity to meet humans' relational needs. We have a biological drive to develop and sustain relationships to meet security and survival needs, according to Hazan and Shaver (1990). We are relational beings from birth to death, according to Bowlby.

Fraley and Shaver (2008) argued that the need for security is best met in social relationships. Cozolino (2014), a neuroscientist, noted interpersonal neurobiology assumes our brain is a social

organ that is developed through our relational experiences. Every living system depends on others for survival. If we have adequate parenting with adequate genetic programming, we may expect our brain to develop in an adaptive way. Our brain may also adapt to unhealthy environments and caregivers to survive; challenging relationships may impact how our brain develops to interpret and understand interpersonal relationships.

Over the last 70 years, attachment theory has been found to contain facets of evolutionary biology, ethology, developmental psychology, cognitive science and control systems theory. Fraley and Shaver (2008) argued attachment theory could be considered a grand theory, as it is related to individual differences, personality organization and dynamics, individual development and experience of emotions, relationships, love and loss, personality, nature and nurture, development, and psychological defense as studied in social psychology, developmental psychology, behavioral neuroscience, psychobiology, animal behavior, and clinical and industrial/organizational psychology.

Attachment Styles Defined

Attachment styles have been defined as stable or systematic patterns of relational expectations, emotions, thoughts, and behaviors based on an individual's specific attachment history (Mikulincer, et al., 2000; Mikulincer, et al., 2009). There are three attachment styles: secure, avoidant or dismissive, and anxious or ambivalent. In infancy, if our caregiver was responsive to our needs, nurturing, supportive, protective, and created an emotionally and physically safe environment, we tend to have a secure attachment style. If our caregiver was distant, cold, emotionally unavailable, neglectful, had an addiction or was mentally ill, or our caregiver died and no other attachment figures were available, we tend to have an avoidant attachment style. If we had a caregiver who was sometimes available, attentive, and created safety and security in the relationship but sometimes was intrusive, absent, or unsafe, we tend to have an anxious attachment style. Insecure attachment styles (i.e., avoidant or anxious styles) do not always involve extreme parenting situations. These styles may develop if we were raised in a large family with many children vying for our caregiver's attention, a family that prioritized work over children, or we just didn't get the attention and responses we needed from our caregiver to feel valued, secure, and get our emotional needs met. These relational patterns become imprinted in our brain and will remain consistent unless a new attachment figure is found that creates a secure bond (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2018).

Research over the years has shown we can get our relational needs met through attachment figures besides our infant caregiver. Grandparents, teachers, coaches, therapists, intimate partners, best friends, and

bosses may be attachment figures that impact our sense of emotional and physical safety, security, and well-being. That is correct, Brave Leader, you are an attachment figure.

Leaders become attachment figures, because they are perceived by followers to be authority figures or parent-like. Followers often must seek permission or get approval from their boss to pursue their goals, take time off, or ask for a raise. Leaders assign work, measure progress, and give feedback to followers that may or may not be positive. Bosses determine what is acceptable behavior in the workplace, and they accept or reject their followers through their emotions, attitudes, and behavior. Leaders are attachment figures, because work situations tend to activate the attachment behavioral system of their followers. When a threat or uncertainty arises, followers seek attention, responsiveness, and approval from their boss to regain a sense of emotional safety and security. The workplace is filled with threats and uncertainty, but this pandemic has increased the sense of threat and uncertainty to excessive levels. Now, more than ever, your attachment style matters at work.

Adults have relational needs that promote or hinder healthy function. Attachment needs must be met for workers to have a secure base or felt relational security that empowers exploration behaviors of their environment, some risk taking, and mastery in their role. Research has shown that securely attached individuals tend to have a secure orientation to work (e.g., high ratings of work success, lower performance fears and worries, less concern about coworker evaluation, and work habits that do not negatively impact health or relationships). Anxiously attached individuals have been associated with an anxious orientation to work (e.g., prefer to work with others rather than alone, over-obligate themselves due to pleasing people, often feel underappreciated, fantasize about success and admiration, are less content with the level of recognition they receive at work, have lower satisfaction with coworkers, higher work-related anxiety, tend to allow work to interfere with friendships, and experience fear of failure and loss of esteem (Hazan and Shaver, 1990).

Individuals with avoidant attachment have been associated with an avoidant orientation to work (e.g., use work to keep busy and avoid uncomfortable interpersonal relationships). Those with avoidant attachment also are reluctant to stop working, finish projects, or take vacation; they use work to avoid anxiety due to unmet attachment needs, and compulsively work through vacations, have higher dissatisfaction with coworkers, undervalue their work performance, experience anxious feelings when not working, and allow work to negatively impact health and relationships (Hazan & Shaver, 1990). In addition, Hazan and Shaver found that secure attachment was associated with higher levels of physical and psychological health, and study participants with insecure attachment styles reported more loneliness, depression, anxiety, and irritability, as well as more colds and flu.

Attachment Styles at Work

Traits of attachment styles that have been found in the workplace include:

- Secure attachment: Workers have a positive model of self and others; they are comfortable with intimacy and autonomy; they tend to have low levels of overreliance and avoidance; they often see others as available and receptive and see themselves as capable of being loved (Boatwright et al., 2010).
- Avoidant attachment: Workers have a positive model of self and a negative model of others; they are predisposed to avoid close interpersonal relationships; they value their independence rather than closeness in relationships; they are highly self-reliant and reject their attachment needs; they tend to repress their physiological stimulation and deny feelings of vulnerability; they appear to distance themselves from others when experiencing stress (Boatwright et al., 2010).
- Anxious attachment: Workers have a negative model of self and a positive model of others; they are overly dependent on others; they tend to become anxious when relationship closeness and support are absent; tend to remember negative career development histories; they often have low levels of trust and relationship satisfaction; they present poor constructive, collaborative communication skills and unstable emotional states; they tend to be prone to stress; they are easily overwhelmed by negative emotions and rely on others to manage their emotional arousal (Boatwright et al., 2010).

Past research indicated there is a fourth type of attachment called fearful or disorganized attachment. This type of attachment was defined as a combination of avoidant and anxious attachment styles which presents in behavior as one who seeks relationship with others in an anxious style but pushes them away in an avoidant style when the individual feels vulnerable in relationship (Paetzold, 2015). Currently, there is not a valid or reliable way to measure fearful attachment, because it is a mix of anxious and avoidant attachment traits and features.

There are two schools of thought regarding fearful/disorganized attachment. One argument is fearful attachment is anxious or avoidant attachment layered with a personality disorder (e.g., narcissism, borderline, avoidant, dependent, and/or histrionic personality disorders) (Brennan & Shaver, 1998). The other argument is individuals with avoidant or anxious attachment have experienced trauma that is unresolved (e.g., adverse childhood experiences, a victim of abuse or violence, or another significant event that interfered with the caregiver bond) (Levy, Ellison, Scott, & Bernecker, 2011). Research has shown there are behaviors associated with fearful/disorganized attachment that include workers have a negative model of self and others. They often avoid close relationships to protect themselves. They tend to be afraid of

rejection, appear to be overly sensitive to criticism, and they are inclined to see themselves as unlovable people (Boatwright, K. J., Lopez, F. G., Sauer, E. M., VanDerWege, A., & Huber, D. M. (2010).

Leadership, Attachment, and Emotional Intelligence

Popper and Mayseless' (2007) research has suggested that a leader's development begins in childhood. Building blocks of leadership include self-confidence, prosocial orientation, proactive optimistic orientation, openness, and high motivation to lead. Development of leaders begins in infancy due to the influence of one's attachment style on their capacity to lead, and secure attachment style influences one's potential to lead (Popper & Amit, 2009). In the workplace, the leader-follower relationship is a category of an adult close relationship that is influenced by individual attachment styles (Popper, Mayseless, & Castelnovo, 2000).

The superior-subordinate relationship may be identified as an affectional bond that evokes attachment dynamics (Keller & Cacioppe, 2001). As noted earlier, followers may perceive their leader as an attachment figure. Research indicated this affects leader motivation, function, and mental health as well as follower emotional and behavioral function (Davidovitz, Mikulincer, Shaver, Izsak, & Popper, 2007). Followers' attachment style impacts their preference of relational leadership behaviors (Boatwright et al., 2010). Attachment style affects how individuals perceive their own ability to lead, and peers tend to perceive individuals with secure attachment style as emerging leaders (Berson, Dan, & Yammarino, 2006). Attachment style is an important precursor of interpersonal relationship quality and psychological well-being that affects organizational behavior (Harms, 2011).

Mikulincer and Shaver (2018) in their edited book *Attachment in Adulthood* cited studies that examined attachment and leadership (Davidovitz et al., 2007; Johnston, 2000; Popper, 2002). Findings indicated avoidant attachment was correlated with lower levels of socialized leadership (i.e., leadership focused on others) and higher levels of personalized leadership (i.e., leadership focused on self), anxiously attached leaders tend to use a personalized style of leadership, and insecure attachment in leaders increases narcissistic behaviors and less nurturing, other-focused leadership behaviors.

Insecure leaders tend to delegate authority, power, and responsibility less and create centralized authority organizations. Motives to lead are also impacted by leaders' attachment style. Leaders with anxious attachment were found to have self-enhancing, control-related, and self-reliance motives. Leaders

with avoidant attachment tend to have higher self-reliance and lower prosocial motives. Anxiously attached leaders tend to focus on their needs and have a dictatorial style where they belittle followers while doubting their own ability to lead effectively. Avoidant leaders tend to pursue leadership to increase their self-reliance, avoid depending on others, ignore developmental and supportive characteristics of the leadership role, and doubt their ability to deal with followers' emotional needs (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2018).

Attachment Science in the Workplace

Because the attachment behavioral system functions in the subconscious, we may be puzzled by our own or others' behavior when distress related to attachment dynamics is activated. It is important to remember, leaders and subordinates each have an attachment style. The dynamic that occurs in the leader/follower relationship will be significantly affected by each person's attachment style. There will be misunderstandings, miscommunication, and potential conflict between leaders, followers, and peers who have a mix of secure, anxious, or avoidant attachment styles. The lens of attachment colors our perception of others' emotional and behavioral reactions.

Research that examined attachment styles in organizational leaders and its relationship with trait emotional intelligence was conducted in December 2019 (Veech, 2019). Results indicated there is a statistically significant relationship between secure attachment and trait emotional intelligence in adult leaders who work in the United States with any number of direct reports. The correlational study of organizational leaders' attachment style and trait EI was significant to decrease some of the mystery surrounding relationship dynamics in the workplace. The study contributed to understanding why some leaders are able to form healthy relationships and maintain them even in difficult situations.

Other research has shown that secure attachment, emotional intelligence (i.e., self-awareness, other-awareness, self-management, and relationship management), and transformational leadership are linked. Transformational leaders have been shown to have individualized consideration of their followers' needs to be their mentor or coach, actively listen to subordinates' distress and needs, give empathy and support; effectively communicate, respect, and honor followers' achievements; and challenge direct reports to aspire to greater performance. They provide intellectual stimulation by challenging assumptions, stimulating creativity, cultivating independent thinking in followers, and they value learning. Effective leaders are inspirational motivators who are able to articulate a vision to inspire subordinates. They have high standards and challenge followers to rise up, remain optimistic about future goals, create meaning related to current tasks, and stimulate follower engagement by communicating a clear, defined, powerful, and appealing

vision. Leaders with transformational skills also lead with idealized influence by modeling ethical behavior that increases pride, trust, and respect in and from followers (Kelloway & Barling, 2000).

Attachment science may provide insight into the meaning of data from annual leadership surveys in which employees rank their perceptions of their leader's behavior and employees' engagement. Engagement surveys collect data without truly understanding what the data means or why an employee may feel the way they do. As Boatwright et al. (2010) noted, employees' attachment style affects what they perceive about their leader and their preference for leadership style. A leader's attachment style impacts their behavior and perception about employees. Increasing awareness of the subconscious flow of thought related to relational experiences that precedes behavior will inform leaders of how they can change their attachment style to improve their effectiveness.

The feedback from employee engagement and leadership surveys and 360-degree evaluations lays the groundwork for attachment in the workplace coaching and training. Increasing awareness and understanding of one's attachment style and how it presents could improve leadership coaching outcomes and provide meaningful feedback from 360-degree evaluations. Leadership development specialists and coaches could use the findings of attachment research to explain attachment styles, emotional intelligence, and how they impact one's leadership style and behavior. Understanding the benefits of developing secure attachment gives leaders tangible behaviors to pursue, value to the coach-coachee relationship, and predictable outcomes based on research of secure attachment, emotional intelligence, coaching, and transformational leadership (Baron & Morin, 2009; Popper & Mayseless, 2003, 2007; Popper et al., 2000).

The overlap between secure attachment, emotional intelligence, and transformational leadership is apparent. These styles, skills and abilities, can be developed or improved through training, coaching, long-term mentoring with a secure attachment figure, or counseling. The beauty of attachment and emotional intelligence is that we are not stuck in the emotional and behavioral patterns we have experienced as adults. With self-awareness and self-management, we are able to develop secure attachment and increase emotional intelligence.

How to Develop Secure Attachment to Lead Effectively

To develop secure attachment and increase emotional intelligence to cultivate a transformational leadership style, first, learn what your attachment style is. We have a handful of people who are attachment figures (i.e., people who impact our well-being, physical and emotional safety and security, and contribute to nurturing, guiding, and supporting us). We may feel "attached" to friends and colleagues, but in general,

those people do not have the substantial influence a parent/caregiver, sibling, intimate partner, child/children, or boss has on our ability to think, feel, and function. If the relationship with your attachment figure(s) is not the best, accept that their attachment style may be impacting their ability to meet your relational needs. Seek the support of a securely attached, trained coach, mentor, or therapist to begin to experience what a secure relationship feels like.

Second, increase your self-awareness and other awareness. Tune in to your feelings. Learn what they are telling you about how you feel in important relationships. Pay attention to what others are saying and doing. What do their words, attitudes, and behavior tell you about their attachment style and level of emotional intelligence?

Third, slow down and be curious about yourself and others.

- If you have an avoidant attachment style, step into your relationships. Listen more attentively. Use your words carefully to build your relationships. Express your needs and wants, and let others meet your needs and wants. Allow others to give emotional support, appreciation, and validation to you.
- If you have an anxious attachment style, step back from your relationships. Give your important people space to participate in the relationship, reduce your neediness, clinging behaviors, and emotional reactions. Focus on others' words, needs, and desires. Do your best to meet them where they are and not demand your needs come first.
- For those with an insecure attachment style (i.e., avoidant and anxious attachment), feel that anxiety and distress that comes out of nowhere and know it is not your fault. Your attachment behavioral system was activated due to a subconsciously perceived threat or uncertainty. You developed your attachment style based on how you were treated as a young person. You are an adult now with experience and wisdom, and you have the power and intelligence to choose a different pattern of emotional and behavioral responses.

Fourth, use priming to tell yourself what you feel and need and what you can do to relieve the relational stress you feel. Priming is psychological-speak for self-talk. Talk to and comfort yourself. Give yourself what you may not have gotten at crucial points in your development. Allow yourself to learn from your perceived mistakes rather than be self-critical. Remember mental images, patterns, schemas, or specific memories of interactions with a human or non-human attachment figure (e.g., pets or spiritual beings), or by using self-soothing techniques learned from an attachment figure. With priming, you are rewiring the relational parts of your brain to create new neural pathways that produce changed thoughts, emotions, and behavior.

Finally, practice, practice, practice. The road to secure attachment is not smooth or straight. It will be bumpy, winding, and, occasionally, we will crash. Let yourself learn and grow. Be vulnerable, daring, and courageous. Without a doubt, your emotional intelligence will increase, your fear and uncertainty with significant people will reduce, and your effectiveness as a leader will soar.

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