



SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES

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Pride-Based Leadership Series – Part II Mastering Influence: Identifying the Five Levels of Tension

by David C. Miller

REVIEW OF PART I

In Part I of this leadership series, we began looking at some key leadership principles of the ChangeWorks and MasterStream systems developed by T. Falcon Napier. These principles help us understand what drives human behavior and change. Specifically:

Principle #1: People are not by nature resistant to CHANGE. In fact, change is the central activity of the human experience.

Principle #2: People will only change in order to gain or maintain CONTROL (i.e., avoid losing CONTROL).

Principle #3: Because there is dysfunction in the world, the promise of greater CONTROL still doesn't guarantee people will change.

Principle #4: TENSION is the critical ingredient which determines what changes will be made and when those changes will take place.

These principles are discussed in detail in Part I of this series in the April 2009 issue of *The Stepping Stone* (available online at <http://soa.org/library/newsletters/stepping-stone/2009/april/stp-2009-iss34.pdf>).

In Part II of this series, we'll be looking at the five levels of tension. It's not enough just to understand the concept of tension. If you want to lead, you must understand how someone responds at different levels of tension.

THE FIVE LEVELS OF TENSION

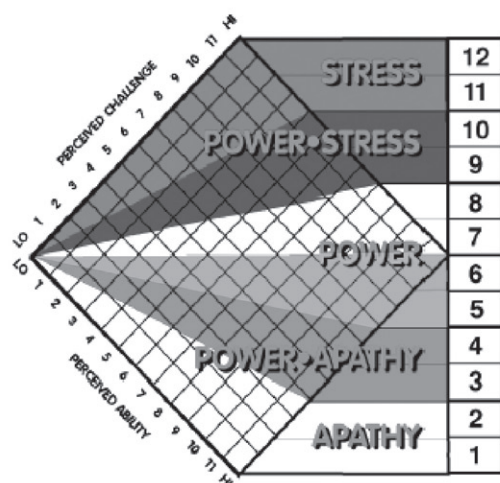
In Napier's ChangeWorks system, he defines five levels of tension. From the highest level of tension to the lowest, these are: STRESS, POWER-STRESS, POWER, POWER-APATHY and APATHY. These are all represented on The Change Grid (pictured below). You want to become familiar with these five levels of tension so that you'll know them when you see them and you'll know what to do to manage the tension in yourself and others.

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It's important to note that while too much tension is undesirable, too little tension is just as counter-productive. Try influencing someone who is in APATHY about a situation—it's virtually impossible.

The level of tension that someone is experiencing results from the interaction of two perceptions they have about the situation they're in: 1) how challenging they find the situation, and 2) how capable they feel to handle the situation.



THE CHANGE GRID

For each level of tension we'll have insight on certain characteristics about someone, such as:

- their perceived level of control,
- their decision-making abilities, and
- their level of productivity.

Let's get a snapshot of these five levels of tension and their associated characteristics.

STRESS

Stress is the highest level of tension. Stress occurs when the level of perceived challenge of a situation greatly exceeds the level of perceived ability. Picture yourself being given an assignment that you think is way over your head. You're going to feel stressed out!

Stress is the place where *"I know I need to do something, but I don't know what to do! Just tell me what to do and I'll do it."*

Key Word: *Panic.*

Level of Control: *Out of Control.*

Decision-Making Abilities: *Highly Reactive.* Someone in Stress will definitely make decisions, but it's doubtful they'll be good ones. They'll pursue the first course of action they feel will give them control, but will quickly abandon that course of action if they stumble across another alternative or two.

Overall Productivity: *Counter-Productive.* Productivity is poor because of the reactive decision-making and the many false starts.

POWER-STRESS

Power-Stress is the next highest level of tension.

Power-Stress is the place where *"I know I need to do something. I know exactly what I'm going to do, and I'm going to do it now!"* It's in Power-Stress that someone will take immediate, definitive action.

Key Words: *Change, Buy.*

Level of Control: *Seizing Control.*

Decision-Making Abilities: *Active.* Someone in Power-Stress is very decisive about the action they are taking. The potential danger is if they haven't adequately evaluated this option to see if it is the best alternative.

Overall Productivity: *Very Productive.* Immediate, definitive action is being taken. Little time is wasted on hand wringing and little time is spent on analysis.

Someone in Stress will definitely make decisions, but it's doubtful they'll be good ones.

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POWER

Power is the middle of the five levels of tension. In Power someone's perceived ability closely matches their perception of how challenging a situation is.

Power is the place where *"I know I need to do something. I just haven't decided what to do yet, so I'm looking at options."*

Key Words: *Evaluate, Shop, Consider*

Level of Control: *In Control.*

Decision-Making Abilities: *Highly Proactive.* Someone in Power is in an aggressive information-gathering mode and seeks to explore and understand as many alternatives as possible.

Overall Productivity: *Generally Productive.* Someone in Power takes their time to make a decision. But when they do make a decision, it's likely to be a good one. The productivity is great, as long as the person doesn't get stuck in Power by delaying making important, time-sensitive decisions.

POWER-APATHY

Power-Apathy is the next lowest level of tension. Here someone's perceived ability starts greatly exceeding their perceived challenge.

Power-Apathy is the place where *"I know I need to do something, I just wish someone else would do it."*

Key Word: *Delegate ("Toss" or "Dump" may be more accurate).*

Level of Control: *Assumed Control.*

Decision-Making Abilities: *Passive.* In Power-Apathy, everything becomes routine, a system or on automatic pilot.

Overall Productivity: *Somewhat Productive.* Productivity still exists here, but is lower due to the lack of urgency and the passive decision making.

APATHY

When tension is at the lowest level, we describe that person as being in Apathy. Apathy occurs whenever perceived ability grossly outweighs perceived challenge. You might find the senior management team of a mutual insurance company that has a huge surplus to be in Apathy. There is no urgent need to change anything.

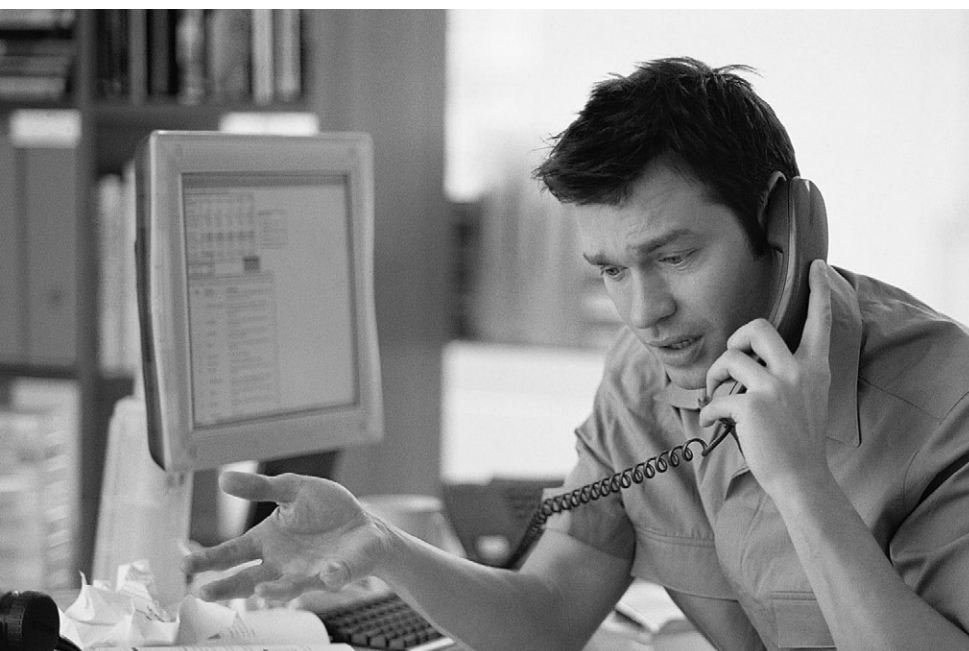
Apathy is the place where someone says, *"Do something? I don't need to do anything. Things are fine the way they are."*

Key Word: *zzzzzzz*

Level of Control: *Illusion of Control.*

Decision-Making Abilities: *Highly Inactive.* Someone in Apathy doesn't feel a decision needs to be made. Everything is fine.

Overall Productivity: *Unproductive.* The irony here is that Apathy is the unavoidable side effect



of mastery. Because mastery has been achieved, a person in Apathy has a tendency to believe the world has stopped changing. They tend to overestimate their abilities and underestimate the challenges and, as a result, stop adapting. They may not be as powerful, prepared, protected or productive as they think they are. But try convincing them of that!

TENSION CUES

In order to manage tension, we need to understand how to read physical, tonal and verbal cues of the five levels. We need to know what each level looks like.

Stress Cues

Someone in stress is pretty easy to identify. They tend to move around a great deal, finding it hard to be still. Their gestures are large and wild and their facial expressions show the intensity of their emotional state. In Stress, someone will speak faster, louder and at a higher pitch. They tend to communicate in random thought fragments—without pause or punctuation.

Power Cues

Physically, someone in Power is the perfect picture of balance. They tend to sit or stand in an upright and poised manner—back straight, shoulders squared, head held high and eye to eye. Their gestures are deliberate and controlled, strongly emphasizing whatever point they're making. Their facial expressions indicate pride and self-confidence.

Everything about their tonal quality is best described as moderate: rate of speaking, volume and pitch. Someone in Power uses carefully chosen words in well-formed sentences.

Apathy Cues

Someone in Apathy tends to sit somewhat draped on the furniture. Everything about them seems heavy and slow. They tend to lean away from you or withdraw. Gestures are few and small. Their facial expressions convey a lack of enthusiasm.

Their speech is slow, pitch is low, volume is soft and inflection is a monotone.

Power-Stress Cues

These cues are a blend of the cues from Stress and Power.

Power-Apathy

These cues are a blend of the cues from Power and Apathy.

SUMMARY

One of the most important skills in leadership is tension management. In this article we covered a fundamental skill of tension management: *identifying someone's level of tension*. Once we've identified someone's level of tension, we'll have a clear pathway as to how to respond to them as a leader. *In Part III of this series* (October 2009 issue of *The Stepping Stone*), *we'll look at how to manage another person's level of productive tension. This is one the most critical skills to being an influential leader.* ●

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