This article is the first in a three-part series that applies Edwin Friedman's *A Failure of Nerve*, Gregory Kramer's *Insight Dialogue*, and Karl Weick's *"Small Wins”* to foster cultural competence, effectiveness, and well-being of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) leaders.

A leader inspires people to accomplish a common goal, such as designing a fuel-efficient car, responding to an international military crisis, or fostering racial equity within an organization. Diverse theories have emerged on becoming an effective leader. Some suggest that leaders must possess high intelligence, sociability, access to data, or influential contacts while others say leadership requires developing techniques or skills. For these conversations, a leader is not defined by a designated title or role but by the steadfast leadership in authentically addressing the difficult issues plaguing a group's dynamics.

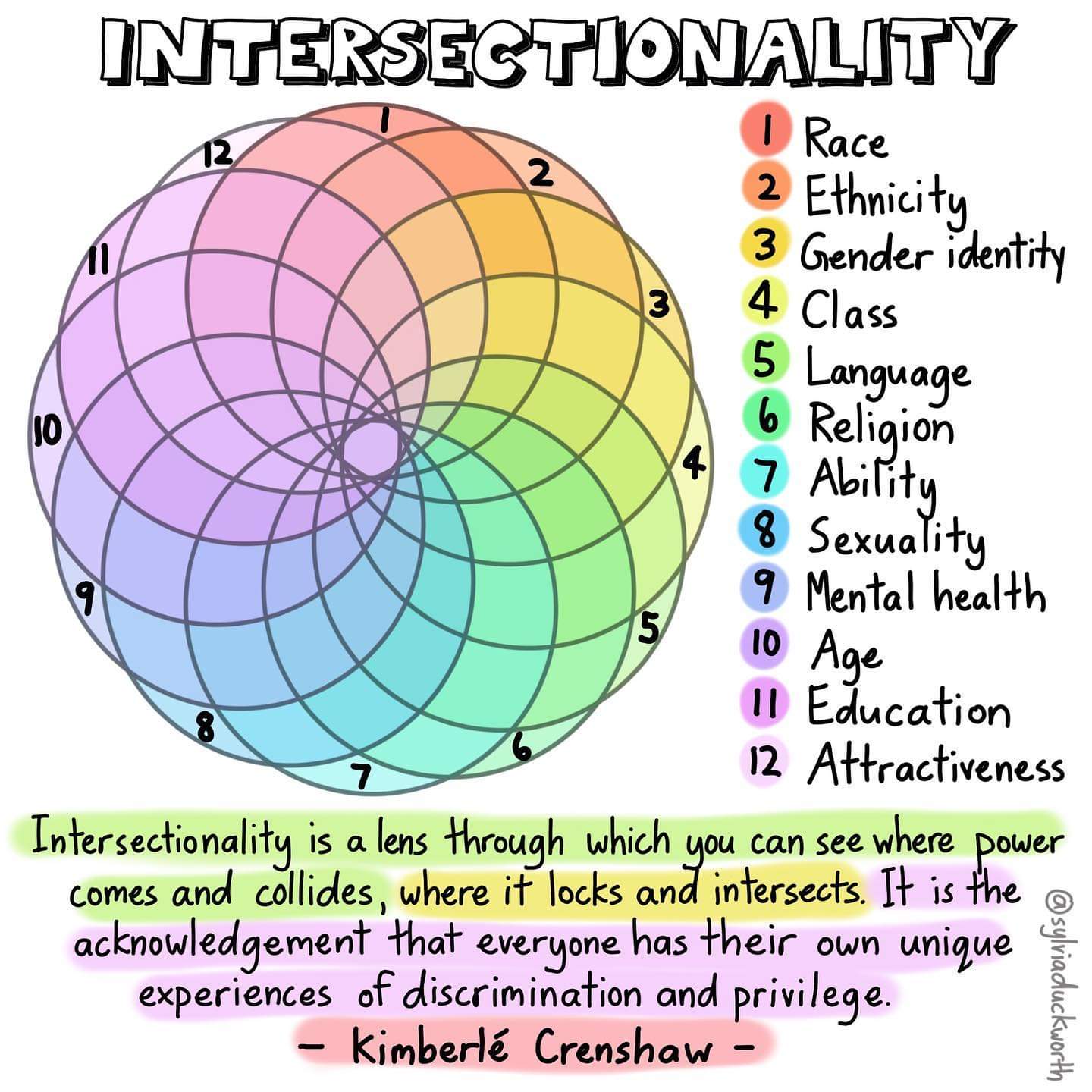
In *A Failure of Nerve*, however, the late Edwin Friedman proposed a controversial theory, suggesting that effective leadership is not as concerned with traits or skills as with the emotional process of regulating one's anxiety. He calls this *self-differentiation* or *"knowing where one ends, and another begins."[[1]](#footnote-1)* Friedman repeatedly stresses that differentiated leaders model self-exploration, personal growth, and calming emotional maturity to hold others accountable for results.

A picture containing text, ground

Description automatically generatedThis article's central theme is that cultural competence, which will be more deeply explained in the second article, also requires a deep sense of calm, self-understanding, and other-understanding. A culturally competent and differentiated leader understands what is unique and special about themselves and can advance their ideas in a steady, undeterred drumbeat. Because these leaders help others understand and cherish their uniqueness, they gravitate to them, attract allies, and deter enemies. Regarding establishing racial equity, differentiated leaders are the balm that improves the whole organization by enabling people to conduct a self-examination of their racial biases and stereotypes.

Race and racism, which are severe stressors for individuals and organizations, are defined below.

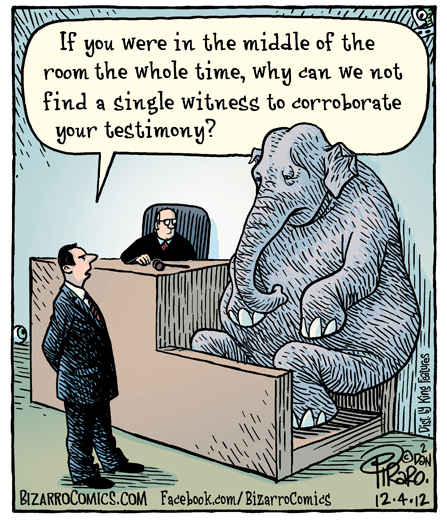
* Race is a grouping of humans based on shared physical or social qualities into categories generally viewed as distinct by society(Wikipedia).[[2]](#footnote-2)
* Racism is "a system of structuring opportunity and assigning value based on the social interpretation of how one looks, race, that unfairly disadvantages some individuals and communities while advantaging other individuals and communities" (Dr. Camara Jones).[[3]](#footnote-3)

Friedman suggests that differentiated leaders can take a well-defined stand and remain meaningfully connected to others across intersectionality. For example, we all have aspects that define our identity. Maybe it is our race, thinking style, personality, or that we are a husband, wife, grandmother, or are not fully able-bodied. Differentiated leaders help us understand these unique aspects of ourselves and how they shape our worldview. Differentiated leaders find strength in self-examination and reflection and can hear and appreciate others' concerns without taking a dimmer view of themselves.

What does this mean in practice? For example, as a man, I can listen deeply to a woman's concerns without justifying men's behavior. As an African American male, I can listen to low-income white males' concerns without equating those experiences to my own. Thus, in addressing race or racial equity, differentiated leaders do not exhibit the negative emotions and behaviors of labeling as "less than" or inferior those individuals who differ from them. Differentiated leaders have a strong, immutable, enduring sense of who they are and their values and principles. Confident in their uniqueness, they are a calming presence through whom others can learn from one another.

Diagram, text

Description automatically generatedMy interpretation of Friedman is that racism is characteristic of poorly differentiated people who do not have the biopsychosocial support to engage in racial self-examination. Biologically, they have not examined the power or privilege that results from their sexual orientation, race, educational level, etc. Psychologically, they have not reflected on how their life experiences impact their attitudes and beliefs. They lack the mindfulness, self-esteem, or emotional control to discuss their racial triggers and blind spots. And socially, they have not had access to the education, relationships, and social support to engage in race-based discussion in a trusting and self-affirming manner.

So, it makes sense that some people in an organization lack an understanding of their uniqueness and act as viruses without a nucleus or core organizing principle. These people can latch on to other poorly differentiated cells (people). This "latching" may look like harmless workplace gossip, insensitive jokes, or unproductive behavior. Still, such people infect the organization with their racial anxiety just as a single cancer cell can slowly overtake and infect critical organs of the host. They may not be able to handle a discussion with another person on race, so they attempt to recruit a third person to lessen their stress.

Friedman calls this emotional behavior triangles. The fundamental law of emotional triangles is that when any two parts of a system become uncomfortable with one another, they "triangle in" or focus upon a third person or issue to stabilize their relationship with each other.[[4]](#footnote-4)

This "latching" or virus spreading is a metaphor for racism within a culture. It results in policies, procedures, and practices that maintain the status quo and lead the organization astray from addressing their individual insecurities regarding race. Thus, cancer spreads.

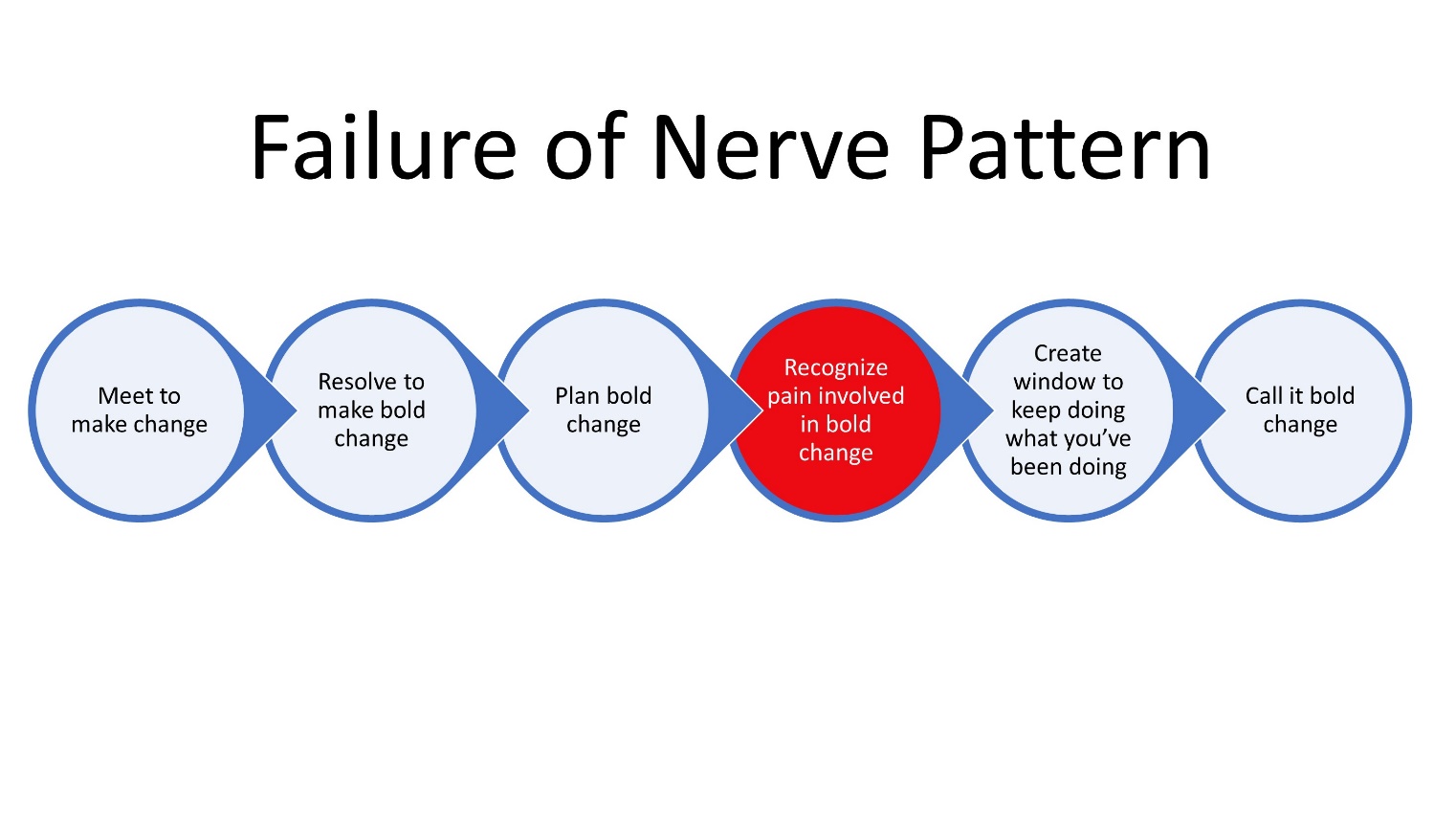
What does this "latching" look like in practice? Instead of a leadership team addressing their personal discomfort or bias with working, or recruiting people different from themselves, or exploring how talent is displayed in ways they are not familiar with, they discuss the difficulty of changing the company’s recruitment strategy to broaden the candidate pool.

Differentiated leaders are an organization's emotional immune system, the non-anxious presence resisting triangulation and holding themselves and others responsible for self-reflection and personal growth and action.

Friedman says that leaders must tolerate others' discomfort because it encourages them to take personal responsibility in the long run. The differentiated leader's presence forces the organization to examine its anxiety, allows it to develop and function truthfully and healthily.

So, instead of being sucked into the discussion about the appropriate recruitment strategy, they call out the elephant in the room – the team’s bias against hiring individuals unlike themselves. And because the differentiated leader can model this behavior, others will follow.

A Differentiated leader prevents a leadership team from engaging in the Failure of Nerve pattern



The differentiated leader models recognizing and addressing the pain of stereotypes, bias, and racism and closes windows to escape addressing these issues. They exemplify the emotional maturity needed to execute a bold plan to foster racial equity.

Two final points. Friedman discusses sabotage. Some organizational systems are chronically anxious, having many people with a poorly differentiated presence. These people sense a threat to the organization's homeostasis when discussing issues of race and racism. Worried people and organizations inevitably turn on the differentiated leader. According to Friedman, however, sabotage indicates that the leader is doing the right thing, and a non-anxious response to it defines the differentiated leader.

Moreover, differentiated leadership is not static. No one perfectly achieves it. It is a direction in life, a path toward maturity that includes increasing your self-awareness and understanding, embracing your uniqueness, and holding yourself and others accountable for personal growth.[[5]](#footnote-5)

So, what is the lesson for DEI practitioners? The task is to cultivate a deep sense of who you are and what is unique and special about you, to advance your ideals to a steady, undeterred drumbeat. Help others to understand and cherish their uniqueness, and people will gravitate to you. You will be a cure that improves the whole organization.

The second article in the series discusses how Karl Weick's organization theory of "small wins" can reduce individual and organizational anxiety (on race and racism) and accelerate personal, professional, and organizational effectiveness. The third article, on insight dialogue, offers an excellent practice to achieve the calmness and mindfulness required to become the differentiated leader described in *A Failure of Nerve*.

1. “Differentiated Leadership,” Top 10 Learning Solutions. https://www.top10learningsolutions.com/differentiated-leadership/ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. “Race (human categorization),” Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human\_races [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. “Racism and Health.” https://www.apha.org/topics-and-issues/health-equity/racism-and-health [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. “Principle 5 of Family Systems: Emotional Triangle.” https://www.jerriebarber.com/principle-5-of-family-systems-emotional-triangle/ [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. “Differentiated Leadership,” Top 10 Learning Solutions. https://www.top10learningsolutions.com/differentiated-leadership/ [↑](#footnote-ref-5)