

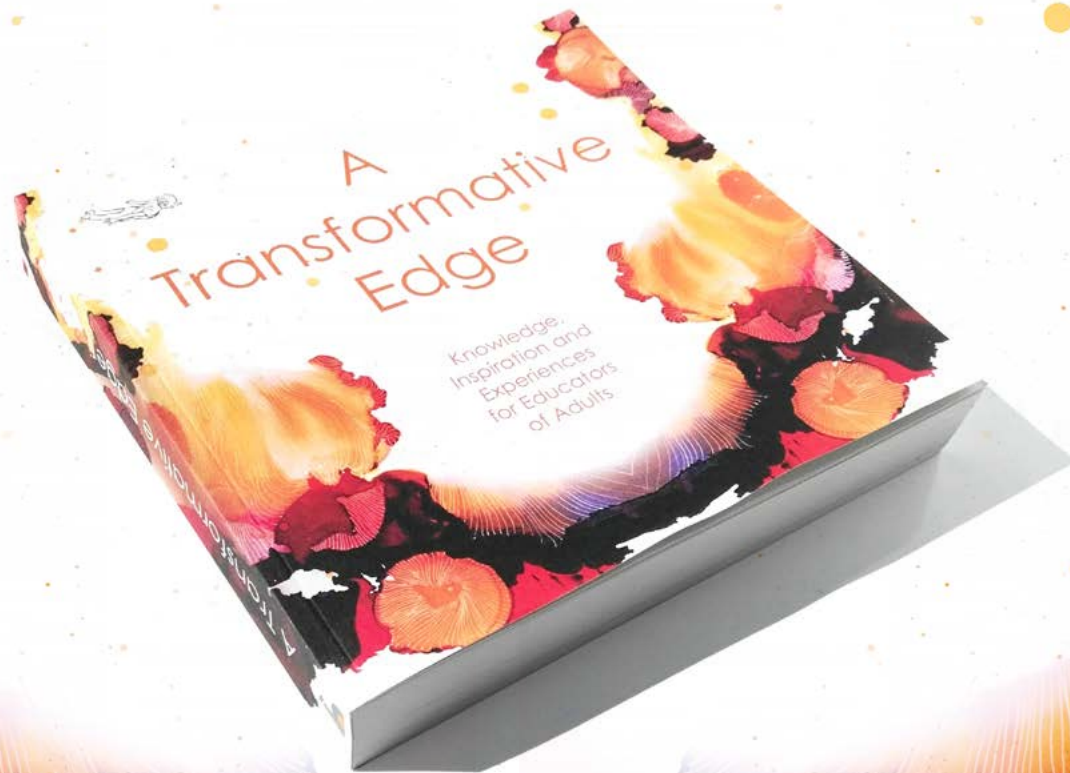
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Reactive vs. Creative

by Nils I. Cornelissen

an excerpt from the book



Reactive vs. Creative



NILS I. CORNELISSEN

There are tons of great tools and interventions out there for transformations and transformative learning, but the success of them depend - in my experience - on the mental state of the person applying these tools and the mental states of the relevant stakeholders. And even though we are all endlessly complex - to (over-) simplify things we can reduce our inner states to two poles: reactive versus creative.

Even though others might use different words, there are many people who have subsumed inner states into two poles. The Arbinger Institute (2009) talks about “being in the box” and “being outside the box” (Leadership from Within), Carol Dweck (2008) differentiates a Growth from a Fixed mindset, Argyris (2004) talked about learning versus protection. And even though there are certain differences in the details of these descriptions of the two poles there is also a large common ground which I refer to as reactive vs. creative.

The Creative State

In short the creative state describes a state of learning, openness and curiosity. Also of feeling able to be creating one's own destiny. That is also where the term is derived from - it stems from the Latin *creare*, to create - and having the feeling I have ownership of my life rather than being a victim of circumstances. Part of being in a creative state also means feeling connected to others, being in touch with one's own emotions, often taking oneself and life not too seriously. In this state we can focus on creating new transformative and creative solutions and we take ownership of our actions and feel accountable for our feelings. In a creative state we accept the past and current state of affairs as is, which does not mean we say “yes” to everything, it simply means acceptance in a psychological sense, meaning we accept that we cannot change things that have already happened. This actually gets us more into a

The Reactive State

solution-oriented mindset than staying in resistance to what is. A growth mindset also is part of the creative state, meaning we believe people can adapt and develop. There is a sense of mastery and flow combined with an awareness and consciousness of who and how we are.

On the other hand, the reactive state is one in which we might feel defensive, protective, often we have a tunnel-vision, feel fear or anger, we see ourselves as a victim or we feel like attacking others. Also, it is a state in which we can shut off mentally and no longer listen, nor do we feel connected with those around us.

The reactive state has a neurobiological correspondence: If we feel threatened, the amygdala - a part of our brain - triggers a fight, flight or freeze response which enables fast responses but often knee-jerk responses (Goleman, 1998). Often when we are in a reactive state, we do not realize that we are in one, our resistance kicks in and protects our egos.

REACTIVE

- Judgement, resistance, self-righteousness (“I know better”, “everyone else is an idiot”)
- Protection, fear, doubt (“I fear the worst”)
- Rage, anger, attack (“I will show you why you are wrong”)
- Problem orientation, tunnel vision, control, blaming attitude (“whose fault is it”)
- Isolation and retreat, victim mindset (“no one understands me”)

CREATIVE

- Learning, openness, curiosity, observation (“learners mind”, “I do not take myself too seriously”)
- Acceptance, appreciation, (self-) confidence (“it will work out”)
- Understanding, compassion, liveliness, collaboration (“let me understand”)
- Solution-orientation, broad perspective, accountability (“what can I change to improve”)
- Connection with others, accountability, mastery, vulnerability (“I am part of a bigger whole”)

Dynamic

So what do we do with these two states? The point here is not that we aim to never again get into a reactive state. It happens many times a day no matter what we do. The point is to become more aware of our inner state, realize sooner that we are in a reactive state. And also get faster out of a reactive state into a creative state.

Being in a reactive state does not necessarily mean being nasty, nor does being in a creative state equate with being nice. Quite the opposite for harmony-addicted people - like myself. Through working with the two states and reflecting on them and various therapies I have learned to become more honest - even if this means I create conflict. But I do this from a creative state (and I try to stay in the creative state even when others get into a reactive state).

I believe that for any TL facilitator it is helpful (maybe even

imperative) to become aware of one's own state and either stay in a creative state or get quickly back into it even in a challenging environment. In a creative state so-called "difficult" learners or "difficult" situations become fascinating learning opportunities for facilitators.

This awareness not only helps the TL facilitator, it might also be helpful for the Learner to become aware of their own state while learning because we are only able to learn while we are in a creative state. So, in transformative workshops I often do a 45 minute session in which I co-create on two flipcharts what a reactive and then what a creative state is with participants, and then reflect on what they can do to stay in a creative state or get faster back into one. This makes participants more aware and helps to keep them longer in a creative learning state.

My own Transformative Edge

One of my favourite stories about the reactive versus creative state happened in a transformation workshop with the senior leadership team of one of the biggest Dutch companies. The most senior leader in the room, a CFO with his team, was very proud of being a very rational and logical and smart person. I had suggested that in the workshop we do a session on inner states (as described above) but the CFO said they had too little time for that nonsense and we should dive right into the content.

However, part of the workshop was designed for his team members to give each other (including the CFO) feedback on their behaviour, one-on-one. Besides some appreciative comments, the CFO also heard quite a bit of criticism which was new to him. This led him to get into a reactive state and later during the workshop he exploded when I used the word “emotion” in such a “ra-

tional” team and he screamed at the top of his lungs loudly “Nils, we are not an emotional company!!!”. Afterwards, there was silence in the room for what felt like minutes - even though it was probably only seconds. Then, the CFO became aware of what had happened and he said slightly embarrassed, slightly trying to smile “mmh, guess that was quite emotional” and in the following coffee break he asked me whether I could support him in working on his states, emotions and whether in the next workshop we could work on emotions in leadership. That was quite transformational ;-). I learned from that that sometimes I can trust the process more and do not have to push topics that are important to me (e.g. “emotions”) down my participants’ throats.

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