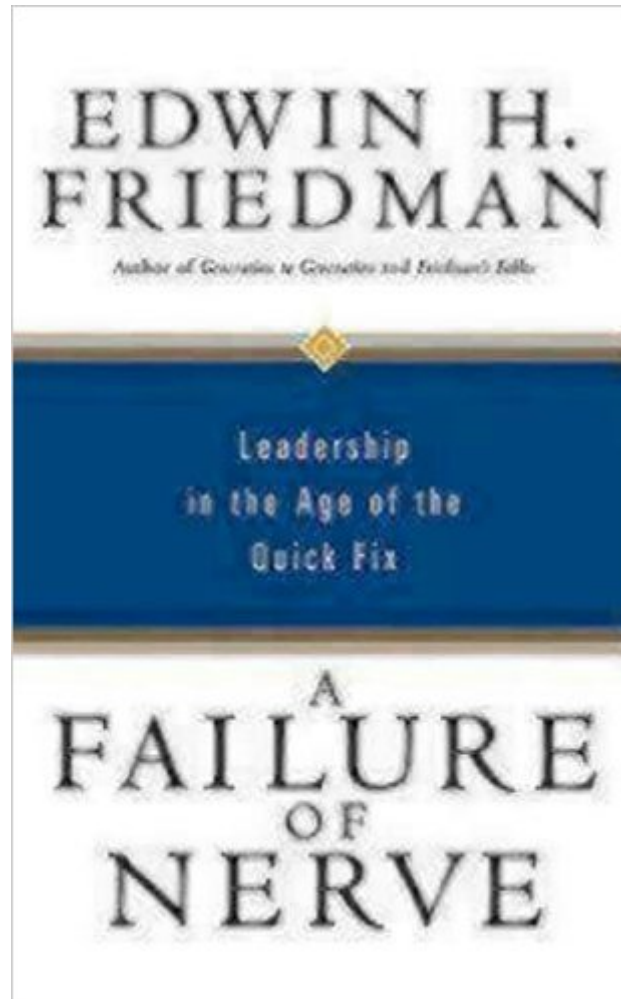


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# A Failure Of Nerve: Leadership In The Age Of The Quick Fix



## Synopsis

Ten years after his death, Edwin Friedman's insights into leadership are more urgently needed than ever. He was the first to tell us that all organizations have personalities, like families, and to apply the insights of family therapy to churches and synagogues, rectors and rabbis, politicians and teachers. *Failure of Nerve* is essential reading for all leaders, be they parents or presidents, corporate executives or educators, religious superiors or coaches, healers or generals, managers or clergy. Friedman's insights about our regressed, seatbelt society, oriented toward safety rather than adventure, help explain the sabotage that leaders constantly face today. Suspicious of the quick fixes and instant solutions that sweep through our culture only to give way to the next fad, he argues for strength and self-differentiation as the marks of true leadership. His formula for success is more maturity, not more data; stamina, not technique; and personal responsibility, not empathy. This book was unfinished at the time of Friedman's death, and originally published in a limited edition. This new edition makes his life-changing insights and challenges available to a new generation of readers.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This is perhaps Edwin Friedman's magnum opus -- or would have been, had he lived to see this to completion. Building on his earlier work in *Generation to Generation* and on a multitude of conversations he had been involved in since the publication of that work in 1985, Friedman was working on this book on leadership at the time of his death in 1996. Friedman's wife worked with several of his colleagues to bring the manuscript to print -- at least, the 300+ pages that Friedman

had written by that point. The first five chapters are thorough; the latter five chapters are somewhat more sketchy; but there is enough material here that the interested reader can get a pretty good glimpse of where Friedman was headed. Friedman's thesis: there is a "failure of nerve" in American civilization today. "There exists," he says, "throughout America today a rampant sabotaging of leaders who try to stand tall amidst the raging anxiety-storms of our time. It is a highly reactive atmosphere pervading all the institutions of our society -- a regressive mood that contaminates the decision-making processes of government and corporations at the highest level, and, on the local level, seeps down into the deliberations of neighborhood church, synagogue, hospital, library, and school boards." This reactivity leads to what he calls a "leadership-toxic climate" that makes it exceptionally difficult for clear, decisive, well-defined leadership to function effectively. The book, he says, "is about leadership in the land of the quick fix, about leadership in a society so reactive that it cannot choose leaders who might calm its anxiety."

Note: This review originally appeared as a "You Be the Critic" column in the Rochester NY Democrat & Chronicle, 5/8/07: In 20 years of coaching executives, I've read scores of books on leadership. I continue to return to Edwin Friedman as the most insightful, realistic analyst of the dynamics that occur in the emotional soup we call the workplace. This book is not for the faint of heart. As the title implies, the antidote to a failure of nerve is courage. Courage becomes necessary once a leader begins to shift his/her own participation in the brokenness of the organization - e.g., to finally address a performance issue with a key employee. With this commitment to decisive, mature action, reactions are inevitable. Thus the need for courage: to persist in the face of those reactions. Leaders will discover keys to recognize the emotionality that contaminates all decision-making processes, and what is required to provide clear, decisive, well-defined action. Friedman offers a treasure trove of tools, concepts and principles (e.g., five characteristics of a highly anxious system) to help leaders diagnose complex situations and to determine what is helpful and what is harmful. Perhaps his most crucial contribution is the insistence that the leader focus on self: that is, in order to create transformation in a system, the leader needs to identify his/her participation in the present dynamic, and focus on altering his/her own role. Again, courage is a requirement here, but thankfully, focus on self diminishes the stress inherent in attempting to change others.

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