



When ‘Being Seen’ Becomes a Burden

High-Functioning Anxiety, Inward Mindsets, and Organizational Decline

Article written by: **Dr Cobus Pienaar**

In many high-performing organizations, success stories often conceal quiet suffering. Individuals who appear composed, consistent, and tireless—those who never seem to falter—are frequently driven less by confidence than by compulsion. What appears to be resilience may, in fact, be fear of not being enough unless they are seen as exceptional.

This reflects a deeper psychological pattern—what the Arbinger Institute refers to as the “Must-Be-Seen-As Style”—a self-deceptive orientation in which individuals prioritize maintaining a socially valued image (e.g., competent, dependable, tireless) over making authentic contributions or connections. In such cases, others are no longer seen as individuals. They become mirrors, threats, or irrelevancies depending on whether they reinforce or challenge the person’s constructed identity.

Recent academic literature deepens this understanding. In a study published in the *South African Journal of Psychology*, Pienaar (2021) examined the relationship between leadership self-schemas and feedback integration. His findings confirm that individuals with rigid, idealized self-schemas (e.g., “I must always be in control” or “I must always have the answer”) experience feedback as deeply threatening, particularly when that feedback contradicts their internal identity. As a result, such leaders or employees often avoid, dismiss, or defensively reframe feedback rather than engage with it constructively. The feedback process becomes less about growth and more about self-protection.

This aligns closely with the dynamics seen in high-functioning anxiety, a psychological state in which individuals perform at high levels while internally struggling with worry, perfectionism, and an intense fear of failure. According to Weir (2018), these individuals often push themselves excessively, driven by internal scripts that equate personal worth with achievement. They may outwardly appear in control, yet they operate from a place of hypervigilance and internal distress.

In organizational contexts, these dynamics can be subtle but corrosive. Leaders and employees who are consumed by a must-be-seen-as style, for example, might often exhibit the following:

- Overcompensate for perceived inadequacy
- Micromanage rather than trust others
- Avoid delegation for fear of losing control
- Reject feedback that disrupts their identity

This behavior is rarely recognized as dysfunctional because it mimics the appearance of high engagement. However, over time, it undermines psychological safety, damages trust, and cultivates cultures of fear and self-suppression. As Edmondson (1999) has shown, psychological safety is essential for team learning and innovation. Without it, people avoid risk, withhold ideas, and disengage emotionally. What Pienaar's research adds is a theoretical anchor—that these behaviors stem not from poor leadership skills, but from distorted self-identity. Leaders who cannot hold flexible, evolving self-concepts are more likely to experience dissonance in the face of feedback, and this dissonance impairs their relational effectiveness. They retreat into performance over presence, control over connection.

This is precisely the danger Arbinger warns of—when inward mindsets dominate, people stop seeing others, and, eventually, stop seeing themselves with clarity.

To shift this, leaders must do more than build technical skills. They must cultivate cultures where identity is allowed to be flexible, where leaders and employees can grow without the fear of being exposed as “not enough.” Feedback must be framed not as a threat, but as relational care. Internal narratives must be challenged, particularly those rooted in a compulsive need to prove one's worth.

The first step is awareness

- Am I acting to be seen in a certain way, or to be helpful?
- Do I experience feedback as a threat or as an opportunity?
- Do I trust others to carry the load, or do I need to be seen as carrying it all?

Only then can leaders and employees shift from performance to presence, and from image protection to meaningful impact.

References

- Edmondson, A. (1999). Psychological safety and learning behavior in work teams. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 44(2), 350–383
- Pienaar, C. (2021). Leadership self-schemas and feedback. When identity gets in the way. *South African Journal of Psychology*, 51(4), 547–559. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00812463211031889>
- Schaufeli, W. B., & Taris, T. W. (2014). A critical review of the Job Demands-Resources Model. Implications for improving work and health. In *Bridging Occupational, Organizational and Public Health* (pp. 43–68). Springer
- Weir, K. (2018). High-functioning anxiety. A misunderstood form of distress. *Monitor on Psychology*, 49(1), 34–35