

The Family Dynamics We Grew Up with Shape How We Work

by Roger Jones

JULY 19, 2016



Does your CEO remind you of your bullying older brother? Or the mother who always refolded your clothes because you didn't do a good enough job? Or the emotionally distant father who never praised you? Watch out: Chances are your CEO is recreating the very same dynamics that shaped his early family life. The entire executive team, and its mission, may suffer unless the CEO recognizes it and takes conscious steps to change his subconscious behavior.

My work with top executives has shown that deep-seated, sometimes irrational fears can skew their decisions and their ability to execute company strategy. But I've found another influence, equally deep-seated, that affects how they deal with others in the C-suite: their earliest interactions with family members and friends.

Research has shown that our early family experiences often re-emerge in our adult life interactions with others, including those in the business world. Families, after all, are our first “enterprise,” and our parents and siblings are our first “management team.” Early family life affects how leaders respond to pressure and react when team members compete for their attention. It influences whether they have close or distant relationships with the people who report to them, communicate directly or indirectly, micromanage or empower, encourage debates or shut them down.

The late psychoanalyst Joyce McDougall described a “theater of the mind” whose script is written in childhood and reprised subconsciously in other settings as the child grows up. Depending on family dynamics and fate, that script could be written by Frank Capra or Tennessee Williams. Was the family open or guarded? Were emotions encouraged or repressed? Were the parents nurturing or uninvolved? Did the death of a parent, the birth of a disabled sibling, or a reversal of fortune make the family stronger? Or did it cause rifts and recrimination?

Other researchers have proven this link between childhood experiences and adult behavior. Psychoanalysts John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth have shown that children’s attachment to their mother affects how close they get to others in adulthood. And researcher and social policy analyst David Utting’s work links poverty to family stress. This, in turn, can derail even the most committed parent and undermine a child’s future ability to deal with stress.

Anna Urnova, in new INSEAD research, linked executives’ family experiences to subsequent behavior in businesses. In her study, executives told her they typically preferred working in groups that replicated their family experiences. For example, the smaller an executive’s original family, the less effort he made in building wide relations with the executive team. A first-born or only child tended to build stronger attachments to bosses.

Transference can occur when someone subconsciously redirects feelings from childhood onto a person later in life. This often happens to executives, as psychoanalyst Michael Maccoby points out. A CEO may recreate dysfunctional early family experiences in the organization, influencing team members (who have their own early family dynamics as a backdrop). So if a CEO reminds a team member of his angry father, the team member will cower just as he did when he was young.

As you might imagine (and may have already experienced), this can make for bad feelings and underperforming senior management teams. I have seen such dysfunctions play out among a number of executives over the years. For example, Peter (all names have been changed), who heads a division of a large international services firm, preferred a hands-off approach to managing and didn't get to know his team personally. His team felt disconnected and unhappy, and its performance suffered. Peter was stunned when he learned at his 10-month review that they perceived him as a "loner," "disengaged," and "emotionally distant." But then he realized that his own father, a military veteran who moved his family frequently, was the same way.

John, a regional CEO of another big company, was a beloved father figure to his team. He was sensitive to others and worked to minimize conflict. But when his company told him to lay off team members during a downturn in business, John became distressed. He saw his team as family and friends, while the company president used words such as "head count" and "bottom 5% of performers." John did some soul-searching and realized that he frequently served as a peacemaker and sought family harmony when his siblings squabbled. While that is a noble role, it undermined his ability to lay off staff.

Sarah, a highly driven CEO of a technology company, was a heavy-handed micro-manager. When Sarah looked back at her childhood, she remembered that her father's business failed because of a trusted colleague's fraud. That taught Sarah to trust no one and monitor her team members' every move.

Addressing these childhood issues is never easy, for several reasons. To begin with, most executives are not even aware they have problems because these processes and dynamics are largely subconscious, even though they have become powerful influences that hover in what the American psychologist William James called "the fringe of consciousness." Those who vaguely recognize their issues may see them as unchangeable personality traits and dismiss them with "that's just the way I am." Others deny their problems because they are afraid of looking weak among fellow executives or because they lack the self-awareness to self-examine their past.

However, raising awareness of communication and relationship styles that typically are rooted in early family experiences can be incredibly helpful for executives, the people they manage, and their companies. Often, just recognizing that the CEO and other team members are acting out family dynamics can lead to significant change and improved team performance.

So what should you do if you suspect that childhood issues are affecting your behavior as an executive, or if you've been told you have a problem dealing with people?

1. Make sense of the early family events that shaped you. Ask yourself:

- Did family members speak openly or rarely speak their mind?
- Were emotions openly shared or rarely disclosed?
- How did your primary caregivers respond to pressure?
- Were relations with your extended family (such as aunts, uncles and cousins) close or distant? Why?
- Did you have any significant life events, perhaps the death of a caregiver or birth of a disabled sibling?
- What was your role in your family?

2. Self-diagnose how you behave with your team today. Ask yourself or ask a friend you trust whether you might be playing out any of these family attributes as you lead your top team. Think about which of these behaviors serve you well, and which should be discarded and replaced with more effective behaviors.

3. Make changes happen. Think about the new behaviors you need to adopt with your top team, but don't deeply intellectualize them. Instead, start to do them – in effect, “act” them. You might be surprised that this simple approach of living the new behavior will help you rewrite your inner script and make you feel more at ease with new ways of thinking and interacting.

Peter, the leader who appeared disengaged just like his father, recognized his behavior was harming his team's performance. He began taking small steps, which he said felt “very awkward at first”: engaging in small talk, dropping into his executive team's offices to share thoughts, and initiating an executive team dinner. With practice, Peter became more engaged and was able to savor his team's new bond, which Peter said helped improve the way they worked as a group and was a key factor in the company's ability to increase market share in a very challenging market. As a team member commented, “We feel unified and have a greater focus as a team.”

John, the CEO with the overly paternal leadership style, realized that although he was never going to be (in his words) a “cold, hard-nosed cost-cutter,” striving for harmony had the unintended consequence of producing a poor-performing team. Using his chief human resources officer as his adviser, he started to regard his team as a business unit rather than a family, and

engaged with them in a more businesslike manner when necessary. With the CHRO's support, John made the necessary reductions in headcount. His company successfully weathered the downturn.

Sarah, the ambitious CEO who micromanaged her team, spoke with one of the few people she trusted, an old business school friend. They discussed how her fear of trusting others wasn't serving her well. Like John and Peter, Sarah had to make behavior changes that felt uncomfortable at first: delegating, resisting the urge to review every project, and, in time, letting her executive team meet without her. She said it was "scary to let go at first," but she felt greatly reassured as her team started to contribute and collaborate.

Gaining insight into such childhood dynamics requires executives to explore their family roles, themes, styles and experiences. They then must determine how these experiences may have influenced their behavior throughout the years. Changing these influences doesn't happen without attention and focus. However, once these dynamics are brought out of the "fringe of consciousness" and into the light, leaders can make big improvements both in the way they deal with others, and in the way they deal with themselves.



Roger Jones is chief executive of Vantage Hill Partners, a London-based consulting firm that helps elevate the performance of executive teams. He can be reached at roger.jones@VantageHillPartners.com.

This article is about LEADERSHIP

 FOLLOW THIS TOPIC

Related Topics: [EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE](#) | [PSYCHOLOGY](#)

Comments

Leave a Comment

POST

21 COMMENTS

Will Barribal 2 months ago

Fascinating insight and real examples that resonate with my experience. This goes a long way to explain some of the fundamental behavioural drivers and how difficult they can be for leaders to accept. I would suspect that most would find this reflection quite difficult, but I will explore further. Great article, thanks.

REPLY



▼ [JOIN THE CONVERSATION](#)

POSTING GUIDELINES

We hope the conversations that take place on HBR.org will be energetic, constructive, and thought-provoking. To comment, readers must sign in or register. And to ensure the quality of the discussion, our moderating team will review all comments and may edit them for clarity, length, and relevance. Comments that are overly promotional, mean-spirited, or off-topic may be deleted per the moderators' judgment. All postings become the property of Harvard Business Publishing.