

## **"Our workplace is like a family" – that's the problem**

What's the first organization you joined? Little League, a local children's group, a theatre troupe, childhood soccer or sports team, Boy/Girl Scouts, school, church? Well, actually, the first organization we all joined is our family. And in this organizational setting, we learned how to "be" - how to act, react and interact with authority figures, peers, and outsiders and how to create roles for ourselves amassing knowledge and skills we would later bring to our world, and the world of work.

Psychology, neuroscience and brain research more and more conclude that the patterns of behavior and roles we learned as children stay with us throughout life. Like it or not, we bring our family - our biography and our biology - to our adult life at work, at home and at play. Many of these roles and patterns are visible; however, many are invisible, operating on an unconscious level, often as "blind spots" and, as often as not, cause us and others upset, unhappiness and discontent.

Visible roles we learned as children are, for example: the athlete, the clown, the big shot, the goddess, the actress, the strong type, the bimbo, etc. Just look at the daily news, magazines, TV offerings and even the workplace for real-life examples of adults who mastered the roles they identified with as children and now play out dutifully as adults. These are roles we can see and touch.

Invisible roles are unconscious and contain certain assumptions, expectations, and emotions. While families do not speak outright about them, they have an unspoken agreement that they are what they are and affirm them by how they indirectly respond to them. Such invisible roles include: the bright one, the funny one, the pretty one, the weak one, the incorrigible one, "brainy" one, the good one, the compliant one, etc. Each of these roles comes with its expectations and rules for how one is to play it out, e.g., be a straight-A student, be popular, make everyone laugh, be a troublemaker, follow the rules, please everyone, etc. It's the unconscious, invisible roles that cause us so much upset and difficulty in our adult lives. This role and pattern dynamic is true for all families.

All of life, even life at work, is about relationships. At work, if truth be told, it's our dealing with others that causes us and others the most pain, upset and conflict. And, the interesting note is that it's not about the other person so much as it's about who in our workplace reminds us of our original family. So, at work, we play our roles as we learned how when we were children.

Consider:

For example, when you experience a conflict at work and someone is loud and angry, do you shout even louder to make your point, or go silent and look away and feel defeated or deflated, or change the subject, or make light of the situation and say something funny?

Or, if there's a meeting to discuss possibilities of future downsizing during this economic downturn, do you email your boss or HR with all your ideas of how to handle employees during the process, or immediately cancel your family's vacation plans, or promise your key employees you'll keep them no matter what, or form a group and head off to management and blame them for their greedy ways that led to the downsizing, or meet with and tell your boss you'll back him/her no matter what and do what she s/he wants you to do?

Or, because of a previous commitment, your boss wants you to speak at a national meeting in two weeks because she's unavailable. What do you think? Ah, this will allow me to

assume more power? Or, I'll feign illness and get out of it. Or, why do I always have to be the one to go? Or, I'm really busy so I'll get someone else to prepare the presentation.

Why is it that everyone doesn't act or react the same way? Simple. Family history and pattern development.

Each of the responses in the above situations reflects a pattern an action pattern and/or a thought pattern. And, as importantly, these reactions are not "one-off" patterns." They will arise again and again in similar situations.

Some examples (there are many) of learned pattern behaviors that show up in the way we react at work are:

The victim - the consummate complainer; pessimistic; feels disrespected, inadequate and fearful; quiet and withdrawn; avoids folks they view as highly competent; suppress feelings of incompetence; needs to be rescued; allies with other victims; avoids conflict; feels put upon; dislikes being managed; often gets sick; creates and re-creates unhappy settings;

The clown - extrovert; diverts attention with jokes and loud, witty, often sarcastic, offensive and embarrassing comments and one-liners; trivial experts; always adding their two cents; seen as bozos, jokers, smart-asses, motormouths;

The over-achiever - must excel at everything they do-to the point of obnoxiousness; must look picture-perfect; needs the "best" and "latest" of everything; chooses "success" over "happiness," needs special treatment; self-absorbed; resents criticism in any form; needs to be right and others to be wrong; generally untrustworthy;

The persecutor - bullies; needs to control, micromanage; exhibits verbal contempt for others; puts others down with offhand remarks or harsh criticism; views others as weak; admires other bullies; unfeeling; needs to feel important; needs to dominate and be the center of attention; needs to maintain a "most important person" status; sometimes a loudmouth; sometimes quiet and subtle; likes seeing others fail; withholds information;

The pleaser - can't deal with the truth; fearful of their own honest emotions; quiet; avoids conflict at all costs; rarely offer opinions; needs to fit in; self-conscious; afraid of disapproval; always apologizing and saying "I'm sorry," chameleon; talks a good game; plays it safe; results don't match words; likes being micromanaged; can't make decisions; passive aggressive; hidden anger;

For the vast majority of us, these patterns - our patterns - the ones we learned as children, are unconsciously and invisibly embedded in our cells, our brains and in our emotional bodies. These patterns represent who we are. They give us comfort and a sense of peace when faced with stressful, challenging and difficult times, events and circumstances and drive how we interact with others. They are self-fulfilling prophecies, and unless we have done the work to make the invisible, visible, we'll continue to react the same way over and over again in this job or another job, in this relationship or another relationship, in this or another similar circumstance, often wondering what pushed out buttons or why we reacted the way we did.

Only by working to make the unconscious, conscious, can we begin to see our self-limiting, self-destructive and self-sabotaging patterns and work to transform them into healthier and more productive ways of being so we can be with people, events and circumstances, which heretofore caused us stress, pain and suffering, and experience a firm sense of OK-ness and

well-be-ing.

One way to do this exploratory work is to spend serious, reflective time looking at our past, our history growing up in our family our experiences which formed us and made us who we are. The expression, "I wasn't born yesterday" is very apt in this situation. The decisions we make today, our choices and our reactions to today's people, events and circumstances are not "in the moment," for the vast majority of us but are in fact "tape replays" of experiences we lived as children.

While today's events, characters and players are different from our childhood, our inner emotional, psychological, physiological and neurological wiring and reactions are not. Only when we consciously choose to explore and inquire into our past for the events, traumas, hurts, betrayals, emotions, and values that have determined who we are, and confront them head-on, with honesty and courage, can we become aware of the recurring themes and patterns which cause us and others with whom we relate, so much upset and unhappiness.

A few areas of exploration, and some initial questions that can assist your inquiry are:

Health - What was the health of your family like? How was sickness or illness viewed? What did your family believe about illness? How were sick family members cared for? Was illness denied? Did folks obsess about sickness or illness. Did sick people feel courageous or like "victims?" Did they persevere or give up? What about addictions?

Money - What role has money played in your family? Did folks misuse money? What was financial security like? Do you talk about money with you spouse or partner? Do you need financial support? Do you support others financially? What's your credit like?

Relationship - Was/is your family close or disengaged from one another? What is your relationship with your family of origin? What beliefs or messages did you hear about men and women as you were growing up? How did your family deal with guilt, fear, denial, and shame? Are there "family secrets" that are still affecting you and your family relationships?

Work - Was accomplishment rewarded and if so, how? How did folks gain attention and their "identity?" Who at work reminds you of your family either physically, emotionally, or in terms of their roles? Can you see your patterns of success or failure at work? What thoughts and messages did you hear about "work" as you were growing up? Do you view work as: fun, creative, or burdensome?

Spirituality - How did you develop a relationship with "the spiritual " i.e., a higher power, God, religion, spirituality? Was a religious practice or affiliation important as you were growing up? Does religion or spirituality affect your life: marriage, parenting, self-esteem, sexuality, and familial responsibilities or loyalties? Does your family observe rituals of celebration and connection (meals, rituals around coming and going, couple rituals)? Was anyone in your family particularly spiritual? How so? What positive or negative messages did you hear/receive about spiritual beliefs and practices?

(Other areas you might consider are: personal environment and organization, health and wellness, friends, personal development, play and recreation, and intimacy.)

So, it's no surprise that in our life at work, at home, at play and in relationship, we more often than not are acting out our childhood patterns and roles. It's not surprising that we unconsciously place overlays of our family members on to our colleagues, bosses and

managers at work, on to our spouse or partner at home and on to our friends, neighbors and others at play. It's natural and normal, but often self-destructive and self-sabotaging both to us and to our relationships.

It's not uncommon, then, to witness workplace (or home or "playground") arguments that resemble family arguments, disagreement and conflict. It's not uncommon to experience dysfunctional relationships in the workplace with in-fighting and back-stabbing behavior that mimic sibling rivalries.

When we choose to undertake personal growth and self-awareness work, we then discover how we have come to behave in the ways we do, how we chose to play the roles and wear the masks to cover up our feelings of lack, inadequacy, or guilt or shame. In essence we discover the "shadow side" of our personalities. As Jungian analyst Robert Johnson says, "There's gold in the shadow" and that the discovery and mining of this gold is "related to our higher calling" our True, Real and Authentic Self - where we can shed the defensive roles and patterns of, for example, the "victim," "clown," "over-achiever," "persecutor," and "pleaser" to be replaced by the "True and Real" me.

When we discover who we truly are, we open to the possibility of emotional, psychological and spiritual maturity - the doorway to the place where the "truth sets one free." We can open to the possibility of being real, a state where we experience lightness of being and we have no need for defensiveness, grandiosity, avoidance, denial or fake and phony self-destructive and self-sabotaging role behavior.

Sometimes the journey backwards is well worth taking. This is one of those times.

**So, some questions for self-reflection are:**

- How do you deal with conflict at work, at home, and at play?
- Do folks at work remind you of your family of origin in any way? Do personality conflicts remind you of your parents or siblings?
- Do you ever play the role and exhibit patterns of the "victim," "clown," "over-achiever," "persecutor," and "pleaser?" Or other roles?
- Do you generally take things personally? What would your friends and colleagues say?
- Did you ever look at your history to see why you are who you are? How do you feel when you think about this question?
- Do you know who your authentic self is? How do you know?

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