

## The Homegrown Leader: A Family Systems Approach to Leadership Development and Organizational Structure

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On any given day, an internet search on the subject of leadership development is likely to return several hundred, if not thousands of results. As a subject of some interest, leadership is a highly researched topic that continues to generate a myriad of theories about how and under what circumstances effective leaders are developed, trained, or perhaps even grown. Contemporary training and leadership programs have largely been relegated to university settings and academic centers designed to instill and equip aspiring leaders with the requisite skills needed to fill leadership roles (Wilke et al., 2015). However, the debate about whether or not these programs actually produce quality leaders or simply enhance and further develop the innate character traits and mindsets of the students they serve is a discussion worthy of further exploration.

The 1800s era poet, William Rose Wallace, in his well-known work about a mother's influence on her children, asserted that "The hand that rocks the cradle, is the hand that rules the world." The impact of Wallace's poetic refrain may lose some of its original effect when juxtaposed against the age of shared parenting, however, the intent to extol the influence of the parent on the child continues to highlight the role parental guidance and the family system play in a child's future endeavors. While the contemporary hand that rocks the cradle may be less of a gender issue than it was in the 1800s, parental influence continues to a defining aspect of a child's developmental course, character, and life path.

The family system has been identified as the most basic and influential environment to which a person is exposed (Bowen, 1978; Bowlby, 1998). Children who experience their childhood years as safe, supportive, and relationally bonded tend to report greater satisfaction with themselves, others, and the larger systems of which they are apart (Bowlby, 1998). Conversely, children exposed to unsafe, unstable, and conflicted experiences in their familial homes tend to have greater difficulties maintaining long-term relationships, managing conflict, and dealing with difficult life circumstances (Hardy, Soloski, Ratcliffe, Anderson, & Willoughby, 2015). Strongly connected family units consistently produce children who are better able to manage their relational, emotional, and spiritual selves (Peleg, 2014). As expressed by Gilbert (2008) the level of emotional maturity a child develops in their "formative family" unit tends to predict the level of emotional maturity they will carry into their own homes and interpersonal relationships (p. 12).

Framing the family system as the primary center for leadership development brings into focus the role parental influence and familial stability play in developing relationally healthy children and future leaders. Such a paradigm, emphasizes the need to strengthen the family unit, reduce parental conflict, and encourage strong, stable, and intact family units. Because the familial home acts as a defining framework for the development of a child's most basic understanding of self and others and because parental influence has a long-term and enduring effect on the relational, emotional, mental, and spiritual well-being of the child, the family system is a natural and effectual

setting for instilling the basic tenants of principle-informed and relationally connected leadership.

### **The Family System**

As a naturally occurring system, the family unit acts as an incubator of sorts for the development of basic life skills, relational interdependence, and systemic savvy. Done well, a child's experiences in their family of origin can set the stage for a productive, interconnected, and satisfying existence (Hardy et al., 2015; Peleg, 2014). Done poorly, a child's familial experiences can result in a conflicted, unstable, and emotionally reactive misadventure (Kerr, 2019; Kerr & Bowen, 1988).

As Bowlby, (1988) has pointed out, a child's relationship and experience with their parental figures (or caregivers) greatly influence their view of themselves and others. Children that experience a secure attachment to their parental figures tend to fare better than those who experience their parents as unavailable, distant, or absent (Bowlby, 1988). Conversely, Winnicott (1953) postulated that the presence of a good enough parent acts as a deterrent for ongoing issues of abandonment and limited positive self-regard. The good enough parent motif provides that the child matures with a sense of stability, confidently assured that the parent will be there when needed (Nydham, 2004).

In a similar manner, Bowen family systems theory (BFST), provides a unique lens through which to conceptualize the role parental influence and systemic dynamics play in childhood development. According to Bowen, a child's basic sense of self is highly reflective of the generalized level of differentiation in their family of origin (Bowen, 1978). The ability to define and maintain self while being intimately connected to others (differentiate) acts as a foundational base upon which the child's patterns of relational interdependence are established (Bowen, 1978; Friedman, 1991). As expressed by Nydam (2004) the fully differentiated person "can love deeply and maintain intimacy, can be relatively non-anxious in the midst of chaos, and can be realistic and accepting of human limitations" (p. 207). Such individuals know what they believe, why they believe it, where they begin and end and where other people begin and end. They are, in short, mature and able to separate and manage relationship with self and others...at the same time.

According to Winnicott (1964) this ability, to integrate one's internal world with one's external world, to hold both one's relationship with self while simultaneously holding one's relationship with others, is the natural product of the developmental maturation process best facilitated within the context of a secure "holding" environment, most notably the home. Because a child's level of differentiation is a reflection of the overall health of the familial home, the quality of the parental dyad and the ability of each family member to find balance between their need for connection and their need for separateness is a vital aspect of healthy human development (Bowen, 1978; McGoldrick, Carter, & Preto, 2011).

Developmental tasks that are not completed or resolved in the family of origin tend to carry forward into future relationships and become hindrances that impede the child's ability for healthy interpersonal relational connections and act as predictive indicators of a child's ability to lead self and lead others (McGoldrick, Carter, & Preto, 2011). The conceptualization of the family system as the preferred seat of leadership development emphasizes the important role parental influence plays in a child's social, relational, emotional, mental, and spiritual development. Children exposed to

emotionally mature, non-reactive, and interdependent parents tend to carry these emulated traits into their families of creation and the workplace (Wilke et al., 2015). As system informed thinkers and leaders their exposure to and capacity for effective systemic assessment and management make them exceptionally strong leaders, educators, and proprietors of successive generations of self-regulated and emotionally mature individuals (Fox & Baker, 2009).

### **The Familial System as the Seat of Leadership Development**

Traditionally, leadership programs have attempted to develop, teach, or otherwise instruct aspiring leaders through a variety of leadership models, ideologies, and templates (Fox & Baker, 2009; Wilke et al., 2015). Generally speaking, these programs tend to focus on the development of the individual and the individual's perceived ability to influence an organization, group of subordinates, or followers. The overarching schema is the facilitation of behavioral change in the individual (Kerr, 2012). From a systems orientation, the concept of individual change is incomplete because it does not recognize the embedded relationships of which the individual is a part. A truly systemic view shifts the focus from the individual and towards the family or organizational whole as the unit of study (Friedman, 2007; Kerr, 2012). More succinctly stated, systemic thinking requires the development of a new template for analyzing human problems that locate behavioral symptoms or problems within the context of the relationship between the parts (Gilbert, 2008). Rebalance, realign, reorganize the emotional field (relational connections) in and among the various parts of the system and the individual parts will correspondingly realign.

Effective leadership, through a systemic lens, recognizes that problems exist in the space between people, not in the people themselves. Thus the systemic leader has learned to focus on the process of changing self instead of attempting to change others (Fox & Baker, 2009; Kerr, 2012; Kerr, 2019). The leader's ability to define and maintain self while remaining connected to the collective whole provides the impetus from which to calm an inflamed emotional system and promote emotional maturity in the other members of the system.

Historically programs designed to encourage systemic reorganization by increasing levels of differentiation in the collective members of an organization have focused on teaching leaders, managers, superintendent, and employees systemic principles (Friedman, 2007; Wilke et al., 2015). The goal of these programs being the realignment of the organization and the subsequent calming the emotional field as a result of higher levels of differentiation in the individual group members. Few, if any, contemporary or systemic leadership programs have focused on the development of a family leadership program as a method for effective, ergo, preventative leadership development program.

Such a family leadership paradigm would recognize the reorganization of problematic familial systems as an effective way to develop both individual and collective leadership skills, decrease familial discord, and facilitate improved relational connection among family members and larger social systems. Such a program would emphasize self-regulation as an instinctual drive, promote systemic adaptation to strength (maturity) as opposed to immaturity, encourage parent leaders to implement a growth-driven response to challenge, normalize the maturation process and encourage each

developing family member to more fully define congruent life principles and values. (Friedman, 2007).

By recognizing the family unit as the most basic and naturally occurring organizational structure and emphasizing the benefits a family leadership program would offer to both the familial system and the organizations of which these systems are a part, the framing of a family leadership paradigm as a pro-active and fundamentally effective method for developing mature parent leaders and educators is both a relevant and reasonable supposition. Family leadership programs that provide for the development of parent leaders/educators, familial restructuring, and a system-wide maturation process act as the first and most productive form of leadership development and framework for organizational structure.

### **The Impact on Leadership and Organizational Structure**

As expressed by Friedman (2007) “Mature leadership begins with the leader’s capacity to take responsibility for his or her own emotional being and destiny” (p. 203). Mature or well-differentiated leaders provide the substantive foundation upon which productive and enduring organizational structures are built (Fox & Baker, 2009). Such an orientation is a fundamental shift from contemporary leadership positioning that emphasizes “doing” over “being” and skill development over the development of self. In short, quality leadership is more aligned with an internal process of maturation (self-control, self-definition, self-regulation, and personal responsibility) than external processes of power, authority, position, or skill sets. These character traits and ways of being are generally reflective of one’s internalized beliefs and perceptions which developed in the familial unit and were honed by familial experiences and relational interactions.

While contemporary leadership programs do offer some instruction about the development of character traits they tend to gravitate towards the organizational “other” as opposed to the internal self (Kerr, 2012). Most notably, these efforts include attempts to change or otherwise influence others by implementing strategies, theoretical applications, or tactical plans (Wilkes et al., 2015). Such exercises in the management of others tend to increase resistance, subvert mutuality, reduce personal responsibility, and encourage the organization’s tendency to adapt to immaturity as opposed to strength (Friedman, 2007).

This tendency to seek methods of intervention through which to analyze, develop, or motivate others to conform to organizational agendas, avoids the deeper and more fundamental aspects of effective leadership that require self-management and maturity as a precursor to leadership and educational aspirations. Programs that recognize the emotional processes that undergird all forms of systemic interactions offer the aspiring leader and/or educator a relational lens through which to visualize and understand the constructs that frame human relationships and organizational structure (Friedman, 2007; Thomas, 2002; Wilkes et al., 2015).

However, efforts to provide instruction about the dynamics of the family system often fall short by becoming attempts to teach about a phenomenon. While such efforts can be academically helpful true integration and developmental differentiation is a process best facilitated through experience. As expressed by Fox and Baker (2009) “Children with highly differentiated parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins stand a good chance of growing up to be highly differentiated adults, marrying someone

at the same level, raising highly differentiated children, and becoming responsible contributors at work in the community and in the wider world” (p. 165). In short, the ability to be self-lead and emotionally mature begins in the home and projects out into the world through the differentiated lives of the children and aspiring leaders who experientially learned to manage themselves and their emotional processes while remaining intimately connected to others in their family unit.

### **Conclusion**

The academic arena has traditionally been recognized as the leading venue for the development and training of leadership and educationally minded students (Kerr, 2012; Wilke et al., 2015). While the academic model for leadership development continues to address the substantive need to inform, instruct, and otherwise prepare aspiring leaders for the organizational workplace, such programs are not designed to address issues related to emotional and relational maturity. Often these programs are void of any type of emphasis on personal growth, maturity, or the relational and emotional well-being of the student leader (Fox & Baker, 2009; Gilbert, 2006; Friedman, 2007).

This omission is generally fueled by a lack of awareness about the role familial experiences play in personal and professional development. As stated by Bass and Bass (2008) “Understanding the performance of leaders requires an examination of their family background, early childhood development, education, and role models...” (p. 1052). Taken a step further such a delineation emphasizes the need to more fully understand how the emotional processes to which a child is exposed in their family of origin translate into either maturity or emotional reactivity.

As a naturally occurring system, the family unit acts as a crucible for developing effective parent leaders that, through their own development process, lead and influence their children to live principled, self-directed, and emotionally mature lives. Because the patterns to which a child is exposed in their family of origin tend to become enduring ways of being in adulthood, family leadership programs that recognize the parent leader as the first and most formative model for leadership development offer an exciting opportunity for strengthening family units, reducing intergenerational patterns of emotional reactivity, and promoting the home as the birthplace of value-driven leadership and education.

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