



KETS DE VRIES INSTITUTE

HOW EARLY LIFE EXPERIENCES COULD PLAY FOR AND AGAINST US IN THE EXECUTIVE BOARDROOM

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When Sylvia, a confident and successful top executive in her 40s, broke down in tears during a group session at a high profile global leadership development programme, her colleagues were perplexed. I was the coach for this small group of senior executives. We were working together to debrief each participant's feedback report and explore ways for them to become better leaders. Looking at Sylvia's feedback report, we saw a lot of very positive feedback from her board colleagues and direct reports, but unfortunately no feedback from her boss. She was bitterly disappointed by such lack of attention. Having received no feedback from him in a long time and not being sure where her career was going, Sylvia was really looking forward to his comments. Her boss had originally agreed to fill in a feedback report for her. She knew reminders had been sent to him. However, she finally admitted, she had known her boss's feedback was still pending, but she "did not dare" to ask him to complete it and send it in. And now her tears showed how very frustrated, let down and hurt she felt. However, other group participants still couldn't quite comprehend why such a confident and high achieving person suddenly felt so ineffective and emotional about asking her boss for his time and attention ...

Discovering deeper forces at play

We all seem to be aware of the fact that early life experiences influence certain aspects of individual's adult life, yet in both my executive experience and coaching practice I found that executives were not fully aware of the influences their family of origin had on their work behaviour and ultimately on their success or failure in certain executive roles and teams.

When I am meeting and getting to know my clients in a coaching setting, among other things I usually ask about their family of origin: where they come from, how big their family was, whether they had siblings. Clients are free to disclose as much or as little as they are comfortable with. If they are willing to tell more, I ask about the role they had in the family, or how the family dinners usually went, or to come up with a metaphor that would best describe their family experience.

Sylvia told us that she grew up with two other siblings and described her role in the family as a "dutiful daughter". While her siblings were a handful for the parents in their own way, she learned to keep a low profile, take care of herself and also help her mother around the house. Such low maintenance behaviour was appreciated by her mother, whom Sylvia very much respected and empathised with. As Sylvia was describing this family situation to our group, she had an insight - she realised she was playing the "dutiful daughter" role and treated her boss in a

similar way she related to her parents! She had never thought of it that way, nor put the two pieces of puzzle together.

Challenging our “natural” strategy

Sometimes the strategies we learn as children in our families work for us in the workplace quite well, and sometimes they don't. In fact, in my research (Urnova, 2014) I found that most executives had failed quite badly at least once in their career just because they were not aware of the fact that what they were doing was a strategy they learned long time ago and that it was no longer working.

In Sylvia's case her dutiful attitude and ability to empathise with authority figures served her very well in her successful career so far. She was “natural” at aligning her agenda to that of her superior, worked hard to build her own expertise without asking for support, and took initiative to oversee unpleasant or difficult projects no one wanted to be involved in. In return, her bosses always appreciated her efforts, offering praise, pay increases and promotions without her ever asking. However, in her present situation, Sylvia's low maintenance, dutiful behaviour bred a risky by-product - she and her career may have become a low priority on her boss's radar.

In the framework of psychodynamic perspective, Manfred Kets De Vries (2012) talks about the “inner theatre” of the individual, which he describes as “a rich tragedy-comedy playing out on our inner stage, with key actors representing the people we have loved, hated, feared, and admired in our lives ...” (p. 19). We all tend to internalise our relations with early caretakers and unconsciously re-enact them in later interpersonal situation. Thus, some of our actions and reactions at work could be driven by our “inner theatre” rather by our reading of the real situation at hand.

In my research I found that our childhood family dynamics could have a direct influence on such aspects of executive work experience, including: preference for certain way of working in a team; relationship with peers and authority; approach to stakeholder management; communication style; ability to deal with conflict; and performance.

Discerning between past and present

At another group coaching session, Ralf, an experienced executive in his 60s, did not take his feedback well. All the raters gave him mostly positive feedback, but Ralf was angry. He felt his feedback was not good enough, he felt his boss was not showing enough interest in the function he was representing, and his peers were not appreciating his team contributions. We were puzzled why Ralf was not content with what looked to all of us as balanced feedback. But Ralf refused to accept that. One participant shared an observation that Ralf's behaviour reminded him of a stubborn child. At that point Ralf told us that he grew up as a baby of the big family. His most vivid childhood memory was that of his mother coming in with a tray of food, while the whole family gathered around the big dinner table. Even from afar, he could spot the smallest piece of food on that tray, which he knew would be his. “Always, always the smallest piece!” –

exclaimed Ralf in distress. Putting the childhood story next to his present experience, Ralf realised that the feedback report did remind him that tray of food. He did not see the feedback reports of his peers, so he assumed he got “the smallest piece” again!

However, Ralf’s story also had a positive side to it. He came from a large family, where people from three generations lived together. He may have felt at times mistreated by his mother and siblings, but he also had a very strong and positive connection to his grandparents. We all noticed that Ralf was the only one in the group who, without any probing from us, described a wide stakeholder map he was operating in. His connections went well beyond the boundaries of his immediate team. He also shared that, although he was somewhat frustrated with his immediate boss, the CEO, he had a very good trusting relationships with several supervisory board members and felt very secure in his position in spite of turbulences his company was going through.

Working as an executive coach with executives in a group or team setting, I noticed that those who mentioned close relationships with grandparents in the family of origin story would often have a relationship with authority figures “above” their immediate boss, e.g. boss’ boss, supervisory board member, company owners, etc. Even if they wouldn’t connect or work with those people directly, these executives would be more likely keep those authority figures in their inner stakeholder map and take them into account as part of a bigger picture.

Gaining awareness and power

As Sylvia and Ralf’s stories show, we sometimes “confuse” our peers for our siblings or parents—relationships from the past. In my experience, if a client’s challenge lies in peer collaboration, it is often worth looking at the size of the family and sibling relations he grew up with. Our old conflicts and challenges could blind us from seeing the real relationships with those around us and thus make us react in an ineffective or even destructive way. In Sylvia’s case, being dutiful at work had advantages, but it seemed she now needed to take more control in her relationship with her boss. In Ralf’s case, he misdirected anger meant for his family members towards his work colleagues, who had shown him nothing but respect. Such behaviour could potentially put Ralf, Sylvia, or anyone of us, at risk of a major misunderstanding, conflict or even career derailment.

The key to successfully making your early experience and natural talents work in your favour at work is AWARENESS. By awareness I mean a willingness to consciously explore default settings within ourselves, as well as the circumstances, which created them. Gaining awareness does not automatically mean a need for change. By recognising their inner default patterns of relating to others, executives gain the power to make conscious choices of how to adjust behaviour to a particular situation. Some patterns may indeed need to be changed or released, while others could be strengthened into a true competitive advantage for future performance and growth. As a result of higher awareness, clients could gain higher autonomy, flexibility and become more effective in their leadership roles.

One way of starting to develop such awareness could be the following exercise. Try drawing a schematic picture of your family of origin sitting around a typical family meal or maybe a family birthday party and then producing a similar drawing of your current work team sitting around the boardroom table. Put the two next to each other and look for any similarities between the two settings. What is your place at a table? Who are the authority figures in both cases and how do you relate to them? Who are your key peer relationships in both setting? Are there any conflicts? Are there any figures from outside the team you are aware of and feel connected to? What surprises you? What, if anything, should you watch out for or change next time you are at work?

References

Kets de Vries, M.F.R. (2012). The Group Coaching Conundrum, INSEAD Working Paper.

Urnova, A. (2014). Childhood Story as a Key to Individual Patterns of Team Behaviour, INSEAD EMCCC Thesis.