

Leaders in Our Families—An Exercise

Many of us can make the charge that the novelist, Franz Kafka, so eloquently articulates in his *Diaries*:

When I think about it, I must say that my education has done me great harm in some respects. This reproach applies to a multitude of people—that is to say, my parents, several relatives, individuals, visitors to my house, various writers, a crowd of teachers—a school inspector, slowly walking passers-by; in short, this reproach twists through society like a dagger. . . . I can prove any time that my education tried to make another person out of me than the one I became.

For the most part, our schools and families have failed to create a nurturing and supportive context for our development as leaders. As long as this context remains invisible to us, we cannot shift our thinking or our behavior to fill the leadership gap. Before we can learn to lead, we have to reexamine the context that builds or limits the full expression of our leadership. Indeed, anyone who does not master this context will be mastered by it. In this exercise we analyze the context that was created in our families.

We begin by focusing on our families of origin, the ones in which we grew up. They were the most powerful learning environments we ever experienced. It is in our families that we first develop a sense of our identity, our values, our aspirations, and our expectations for leadership. Yet it is in our families that we have the least examined and most determining experiences. Because family life is so powerful in influencing our views of leadership, and because we often maintain an unconscious barrier to recognizing its impact, it is difficult to make choices about the lessons we learned and the messages we received.

We propose that the place to begin is with discussions with your own immediate family members. If you are fortunate enough to have members of an older generation still living, you can start with them. If not, talk to siblings, cousins, and other members of your family of origin. If you are the sole member of your family, plumb your own memories. Try to discover answers to the following questions:

Questions to Consider

A. Who were considered leaders in your family? Who were heroes and heroines? What traits did they have? Make a list and notice who is included and who is excluded. Ask several family members the same questions and compare their responses. Who showed up on all the lists? Who are the people on your list who did not appear on the lists of others?

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The Leadership Crisis

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B. How did your family view leadership? Was it something far off in the distance that only "great men" exhibited? Were there leaders of both genders in your family, right in your own house? How was leadership defined differently for each gender or age group?

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C. Were leaders identified with a particular role, a particular place in the sibling hierarchy, a special branch of the family, a particular gender, culture or race?

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D. What were the signals sent to you about being a leader? Who sent them, and how were they delivered? Was the communication subtle or direct? How did you respond? Did you rebel or did you conform?

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E. How were you encouraged or discouraged to exercise your leadership skills? What decision about yourself did you make on the basis of these expectations?

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If you are able to work on this exercise in a team, compare notes and exchange anecdotes. Notice the variety of responses from different families. As a

team, collect common themes, insights, and conclusions. What are the different attitudes toward leadership expressed in different families? How did gender, culture, race, ethnicity, immigration, and social class influence leadership patterns? As you exchange your observations, your family's contribution to your view of leadership may become clearer.

You now have an opportunity to create a family tree that diagrams the history of leadership for generations past in your own family. There are many approaches to genealogical research and family trees. We have designed the leadership family tree included here for you to use in diagramming your family's history in relation to leadership. In this exercise, we invite you to use the diagram and fill in the information for your ancestors, going back as many generations as you can. By creating your family tree, notice the legacies, models, and messages that have been passed down to you through the generations. Notice the participation in leadership roles by your family members, the ones they assumed and those they did not. Knowledge of our family history allows each of us to become more conscious of the choices available to us. Susan Griffin, in her extraordinary book *A Chorus of Stones*, writes about the importance of embracing family history:

I am beginning to believe that we know everything, that all history, including the history of each family, is part of us, such that, when we hear any secret revealed, a secret about a grandfather, or an uncle, . . . our lives are made suddenly clearer to us, as the unnatural heaviness of unspoken truth is dispersed. For perhaps we are like stones; our own history and the history of the world embedded in us, we hold a sorrow deep within and cannot weep until that history is sung.

The leadership roles you enter on your chart may focus on different aspects of your early life: church, synagogue, family, school, community, work, and the larger world. Include any expression of leadership that you can remember or discover in your family history. You may also want to ask your spouse or partner to complete a similar chart and compare it with yours. Notice the patterns you each have inherited. Observe how you carry these patterns into your current family

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and work environment. Do you notice any parallels? When you have completed the chart, show it to a family member and discuss your observations. It is through these conversations that our “history is sung,” as Susan Griffin describes it, and that we are released from the hold of unconscious patterns from the past.

In each box in the chart, list the name of the person and the leadership role they played. You may want to use one color for you and your direct ancestors, and another color for members of your extended family.

Leadership Family Tree

