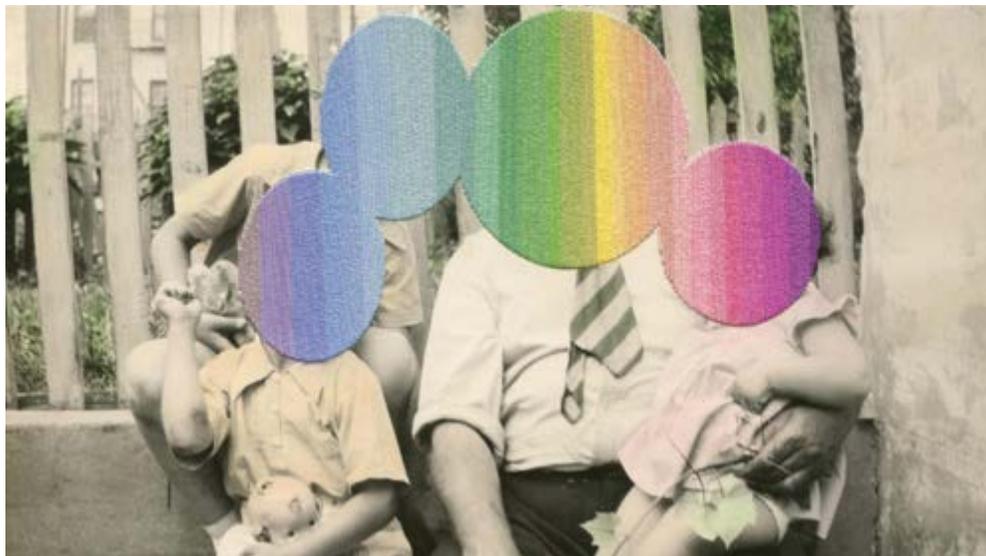




Career Coaching



Family Ghosts in the Executive Suite

by Deborah Ancona and Dennis N.T. Perkins



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AUTHORS

**Deborah
Ancona**
Professor, MIT
Sloan School of
Management

**Dennis N.T.
Perkins**
CEO,
Syncretics
Group

Family Ghosts *in the* Executive Suite

The roles you played growing up
can help and hinder you at work.
Here's how to maximize the positive.



ARTIST JULIE COCKBURN







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IDEA IN BRIEF

THE CONCEPT

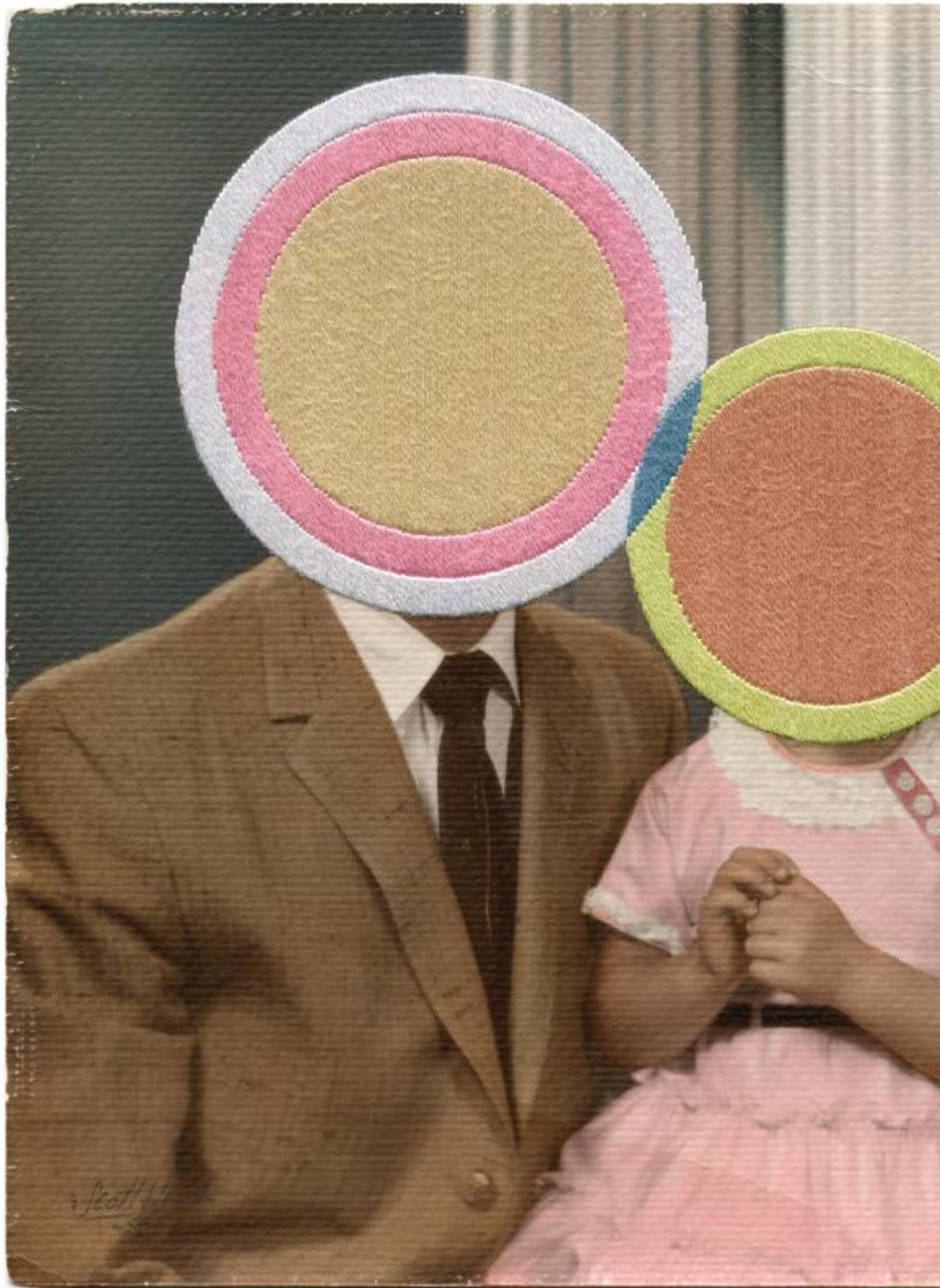
Early in life, family dynamics give rise to many fundamental behaviors and attitudes toward authority, mastery, and identity. When similar dynamics emerge at work, people often revert to childhood patterns.

THE INSIGHT

To enable change, psychologists often encourage clients to consider the nature of their original family system. This approach has been widely applied to behaviors in the personal realm but can—and should—be applied at work too.

THE WAY FORWARD

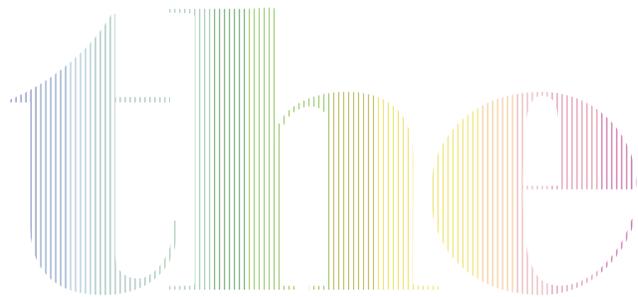
Six factors influence how family dynamics play out in the workplace. To achieve your greatest potential, you need to understand how those factors have helped make you who you are.





ABOUT THE ART

Julie Cockburn alters and embroiders found vintage photographs, reimagining and layering their forgotten histories.



THEORY GOES LIKE THIS: If you want to become a better leader, you have to seek out feedback and engage in self-reflection. Do that, and you'll come to understand your strengths and weaknesses, which in turn will allow you to embark on a program of self-improvement.

In practice, it's not that simple. Even if you know exactly how you want to change at work, you often find you can't. And it's not clear why.

Professional growth can get stymied for all sorts of reasons. But one of the most important is rarely discussed: You're contending with ghosts from your past. Fundamental attitudes and behaviors that evolved from the family dynamics of your childhood have traveled with you into the present—and into the office. Those dynamics taught you a lot about authority, mastery, and identity. So when similar ones assert themselves in the office, it's easy to revert to childhood patterns. There you are, negotiating with your boss, when suddenly your five-year-old self shoves the adult you aside and reacts. Or, when meeting with your peers, you find yourself behaving as you so often did in sibling free-for-alls.

These ghosts don't just lurk at the bottom of a sea of memories. They create hungers that you have to feed, and they actively steer you through the world. You bring them to life every day through what psychologists call "transference," a process during which thoughts, feelings, and responses that have been learned in one setting become activated in another.



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THE FAMILY SYSTEM

A system is a set of dynamically connected elements. If you do something to any one of those elements, the others are also affected. Families are systems, and their members are dynamically connected too: What any one person in the family does affects everybody else.

In clinical psychology, practitioners of family-systems theory (among them Murray Bowen, David M. Kaplan, Salvador Minuchin, and Virginia Satir) encourage clients to examine patterns that date back to childhood to enable change in themselves. This approach is well established when it comes to personal behaviors and relationships, but until recently it hasn't been used widely in the business realm, where companies often expect employees to maintain strict boundaries between their professional and private selves and to be rational rather than emotional. Some executive coaches prefer that they and their clients focus on the present and leave an analysis of the past to therapists.

Things are changing, however. A growing number of scholars and coaches, including us, have started to apply family-systems theory in the organizational setting. What we're suggesting is not therapy but a mode of self-analysis and reflection that can help you develop as a leader. Many of the executives we've worked with have found this approach to be extremely helpful, but we urge caution: Any deep exploration of the past can expose sensitive and difficult issues.

Guided by the tenets of family-systems theory and by our own work, we've identified six elements of family dynamics that commonly play out in the workplace. To understand yourself better in the office, you need to understand what they are, what role each one played in your upbringing, and how they have helped make you who you are.

Consider the case of one of our students, whom we'll call Sarah. When we first met her, Sarah had been in the HR department of a large company for 17 years but had plans to strike out on her own. Creative and tech savvy, she had been working for two years with classmates from an executive MBA program on a start-up—a company that, using an algorithm she helped design, would match employers with prospective employees. The algorithm was tested and ready, and the next step was for the team to line up venture capital and clients.



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Not surprisingly, the role you play in your family tends to be one that you fall into easily at work. Common roles include the jester, the troublemaker, and the brain.

Sarah was a natural for those tasks. She was a confident manager, believed passionately in the new company, and had terrific connections in the VC and HR worlds. She enthusiastically prepared PowerPoint presentations and a contacts list, but when it came time to actually schedule meetings, she found herself stuck. She began each day intending to get going but was constantly diverted. Soon her inability to act was causing her such stress that she worried about her health.

Sarah was confounded by her own behavior. Admittedly, this was a new role, one in which she was often the only woman in all-male settings, and a lot was riding on her work—but she'd dealt with those things before. So what was going on? As Sarah reflected, she began to recognize deep connections to the dynamics of her childhood. She came from a family in which education and success were very important. Wanting to please her parents, she had excelled at school, and her parents had been thrilled. They had been less pleased with her older brother, who, try as he might, was never able to excel in the way that Sarah did. They pushed him hard until he rebelled and eventually became estranged from the family. Sarah was devastated. She felt proud of her accomplishments and craved her parents' praise but worried that her success had pushed her brother away. As she considered her role in his estrangement, guilt replaced pride.

Those dynamics, Sarah realized, were at play in the paralysis she was feeling. She was poised to succeed, but unconsciously she feared that in moving into the limelight she would undercut her peers and make them angry. She worried, too, that in making her board happy she might alienate her team. The ghosts of her parents, her brother, and her younger self were right there with her in the executive suite.

With Sarah's story in mind, let's explore the factors that affect behavior in the workplace.

I **Values and beliefs.** Each family has a unique character that's transmitted to children through a shared framework of values and beliefs. This framework, which determines the shoulds in a family, guides individual behavior and defines the core identity of the family as a whole.

Executives we've worked with find it relatively easy to identify core values and beliefs. Among those we've heard are these: Education is the most important thing. (Assumption: It's what gets you ahead in life.) Be caring and considerate of

others. (Assumption: Relationships are more important than other things.) Never let them see you sweat. (Assumption: Being successful means having a stiff upper lip.) Father has all the answers, and you must follow his lead. (Assumption: Your own thinking and reasoning is inferior to his.) You must be a doctor, lawyer, or engineer, or you will embarrass the family. (Assumption: Your responsibility is to maintain the family's standing in the community.)

Take a moment to identify your family's core values and beliefs. What should's went along with being a child in your family? Which ones have stayed with you? When have they served you well? When have they gotten in your way? When might the underlying assumptions be wrong?

It wasn't hard for Sarah to identify her family's values and beliefs. Most important were working hard, doing well in school, making the family proud, and succeeding as a professional. Sarah did all these things. But her success was at odds with another core family belief: that the son in the family should be the star. A daughter could—and should—be a top performer, but her success would always be secondary.

Given this set of values and beliefs, it's no wonder that Sarah was paralyzed by the idea that in promoting the company she would also be promoting herself above her colleagues.

2 **Roles.** All members in a family tend to play a role determined in part by their individual personality and in part by their family system's need for dynamic equilibrium. Parents might decide that a child is the reincarnation of, say, Uncle Martin or Aunt Nina, and as a result will reinforce certain Martin-like or Nina-like traits in that child until they stick. A family might label one child a success but another a disappointment or a rebel or a dud. Twins might divide up the world in order to create separate identities: one the introverted artist, the other the extroverted athlete. Or they might become two peas in a pod that others can't tell apart. A child might take on the role of decision-maker or breadwinner if adults have abdicated responsibility. The possibilities abound. Common roles include the jester, the troublemaker, and the brain.

Not surprisingly, the role you play in your family tends to be one that you fall into easily at work. Think about how this applies to you. What roles did you play in your family



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when you were young? What were the roles of others in your family, and how did yours relate to theirs? How does that dynamic relate to the roles you now assume as an adult and a leader? When have your family roles been useful at work, and when have they held you back?

Sarah could easily identify the roles she played as a child. She was the creative doer—the successful child—while her brother was the troublemaker and rebel. As fighting between her brother and her parents escalated, Sarah also took on the role of the peacemaker and supporter, always trying to soothe feelings and calm the storm.

Some of her ghosts were a positive force. As a creative doer, Sarah knew how to identify and meet the expectations of those around her. As a peacemaker and supporter, she excelled at bringing opposing parties together and encouraging her team. But those roles also roused her negative ghosts. When her colleagues failed, she felt guilty, even though it wasn't her fault. She wasted a lot of time trying to manage others' conflicts, sometimes becoming exhausted and overwhelmed as she tried to meet high expectations in her own work while also attending to others' concerns.

3 **Secrets.** Most families have secrets. Sometimes, everyone in the family knows them, but they aren't shared with outsiders. Other times, only certain people know them, and they hide them from the others in the family. Secrets affect how family members communicate and act. They often involve substance abuse, sexual abuse, mental illness, sexual orientation, divorce, money, and other issues difficult to acknowledge and discuss.

Consider your family's secrets growing up. What subjects or people were taboo? Who in your family was privy to the secrets? Which subjects continue to feel off-limits to you today? How do they affect your ability to lead?

The big, unacknowledged secret in Sarah's family was that her brother was not doing well. In the narrative her family presented to the world—and to itself—every member was accomplished and successful. When Sarah's brother acted out or lost friends, the family treated it as a one-time aberration—so consistently, in fact, that for years Sarah didn't recognize the abiding nature of her brother's problems.

At work, Sarah often found herself keeping secrets. When she dealt with problematic colleagues, she reverted to the

behaviors she had developed in dealing with her brother: When somebody on her team failed or was performing poorly, she treated it as an aberration not to be talked about. In doing so, she often lost the opportunity to give realistic feedback—and to create a record that she could refer to if poor performance ultimately warranted dismissal.

4 **Boundaries.** Families differ significantly in the way in which they think about structure and boundaries. In some families, anything goes; showing up at dinner a half hour late with three friends in tow is just fine. In other families, rules are rigid and boundaries are never crossed; such families might not allow playdates after school and might deny food to any child who arrives five minutes late for a meal. Most families occupy a place somewhere in between.

Needless to say, people often find that they're more comfortable in organizations that have boundaries like those of their families. Consider your own situation. How would you characterize your family? Was it highly structured, with clear rules, roles, and decision-making authority? Or were things looser and more flexible, even chaotic? Were rules made and enforced only within the family, or did outside influences and ideas play a role? How did it feel to live in such a system, and in what ways might it have affected your leadership style and job choices today?

Sarah's family had well-defined boundaries, so it's no surprise that she ended up working for so many years in a large bureaucracy, where the rules, expectations, and reporting structure were clear. She was comfortable in that setting. She always knew where she stood and how to navigate the system.

But Sarah was itching for a change. For too long, she'd existed comfortably within the boundaries defined for her by her bosses and her organization. She wanted to try working in a new setting without the kind of strict hierarchy that had characterized her family. The prospect scared her, but nonetheless she was eager to break out of the prison of expectations. This is common: As the psychologist Robert Kegan has written, in adult development it's normal to move from a "socialized self" (meeting others' expectations) into a state of "self-authoring" (defining independent values, ideas, and modes of operating). The trouble is that your ghosts can slow down this transition.



As you identify your ghosts, take note of why it might be difficult or scary to leave behind a cherished role or identity, even when you aspire to be different.

5 **Triangles.** It's easy to think of family dynamics as a set of one-to-one relationships: a son fears his father; a sister overshadows her brother. But relationship triangles are very important in determining the dynamics of any family system. Parents might never scold or discipline a child when a grandparent is present. Or they might avoid their own conflicts by each complaining about the other to a child. Children are masters at the triangle game, often playing one parent expertly off the other to get what they want.

Think about the triangle patterns that characterized your family. Who formed the three sides? What patterns of behavior dominated? Can you see any patterns repeating themselves in your office and leadership behavior? Do they help or hinder you in your work?

The main triangle in Sarah's family was made up of Sarah, her parents, and her brother. From her parents' perspective in the triangle, Sarah was the "good" child, and her brother was a "problem." When her parents paid attention to her, it affected her brother, who felt she was stealing his thunder; when they paid attention to him, she felt invisible and ignored. Another triangle in the family unit consisted of Sarah's mother, father, and brother: When her brother got poor grades at school, he went to his mother for support, which angered his father, who favored punishment. In both triangles, family members were struggling to deal with a boy who failed to meet family and societal expectations.

At work, Sarah often found herself in a triangle like the first one mentioned above, in which the three sides were formed by her bosses, her colleagues, and herself. From the perspective of her bosses, she was the "good" employee who dutifully met expectations and rose up the ladder, while some of her colleagues, who were less successful, became the "problems"—and they resented her as a result. After Sarah recognized this, she resolved that in her new company she would strive for cooperation, not competition, among her peers.

6 **Expectations and mastery.** All parents have expectations of their children. Some children, like Sarah, are loyal lieutenants who work hard to live up to them, and in so doing develop a sense of mastery that helps to define them as adults. Others try but fail to

meet family expectations and seek out mastery in other areas. And still others, like Sarah's brother, buckle under the weight of expectations and simply rebel. In our research and consulting work, we sometimes find seasoned executives still trying to meet family expectations. One CEO kept collecting honors to please his parents even though they had been dead for years!

What were the expectations of your family? Did you meet them? Are you still trying to? If you developed a sense of mastery in response to those expectations, within or outside your family, how did that make you feel? And how does it affect the way you now respond to expectations at work?

THE PATH TO CHANGE

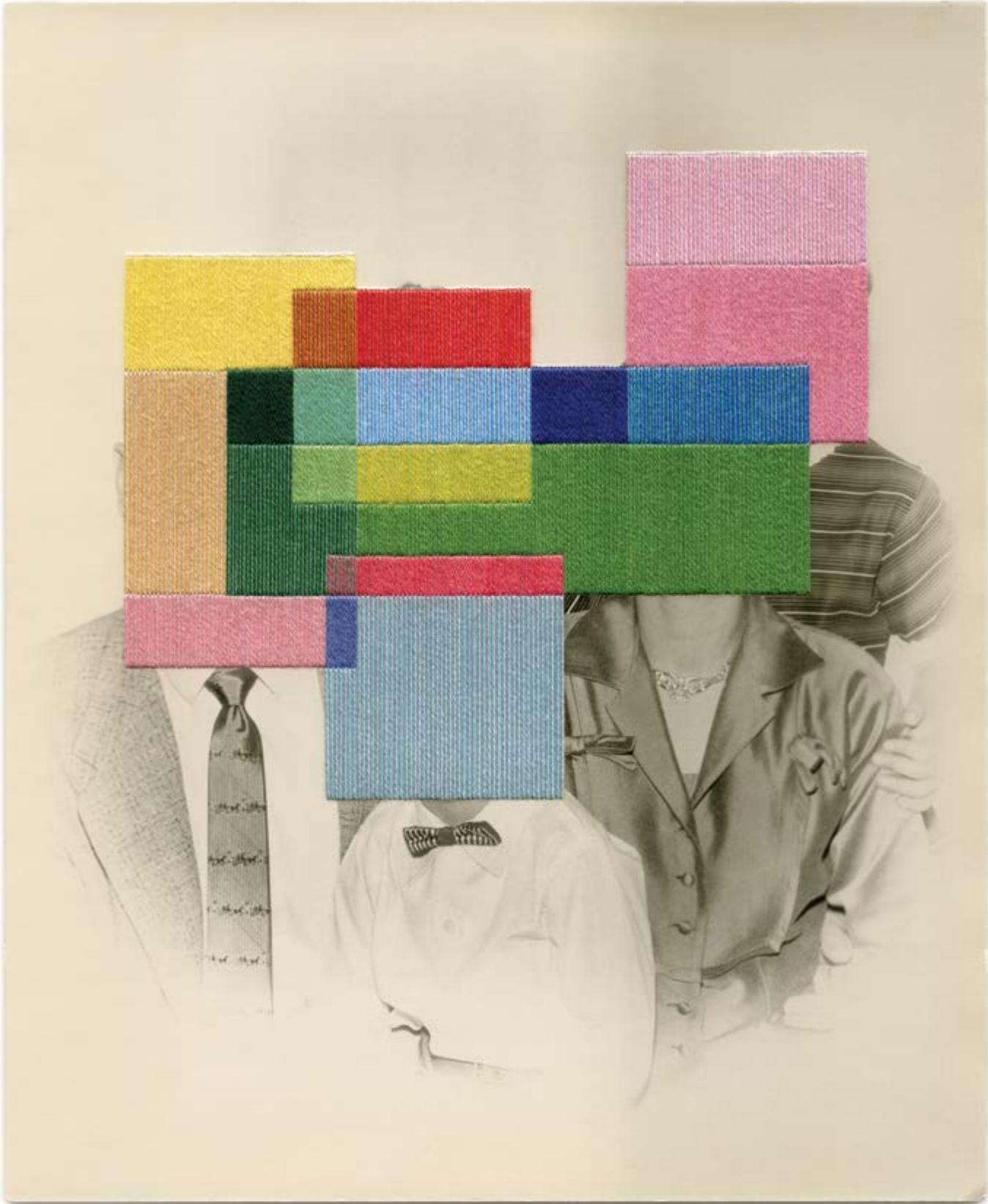
Your family ghosts are a part of you. But the good news is that they don't have to define you. If you can recognize the dynamics that shaped your early life, you can create a new developmental path for yourself.

Here are some helpful steps for doing that:

Identify your ghosts. Review the questions we've posed, and jot down a summary of your family dynamics. What surprises you? What confounds you? Some people like to compare notes with family members; others discuss their conclusions with friends or spouses.

When we ask executives to do this exercise, many of them experience an aha moment: They finally understand how important pieces of their complex personality puzzle fit together. Some feel relieved in this moment, and others feel ashamed, but in having the epiphany, they open themselves up to the possibility of change. Seeing the full pattern may take some time, so be patient and try not to judge yourself. One executive found that the reason he wasn't able to be a more empowering leader at work was because in his family he had always been the one everybody looked to for the answers to problems, and he feared that in delegating, he would lose his identity. Such connections often seem obvious in retrospect, but in the flow of life and work we often simply don't make them. As you identify your ghosts, take note of why it might be difficult or scary to leave behind a cherished role or identity, even when you aspire to be different.

Set a goal for change. When you look at your summary, consider how your family ghosts affect you at work. First,





Some ghosts make you resilient and are the pillars of your success. Celebrate and build on them.



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focus on the ways they help you. Some ghosts make you resilient and are the pillars of your success. Celebrate and build on them. After that, think about the ghosts that hinder you. If you could exorcise one of them, which would it be? What change would best help you become a more productive leader? Neuroscience has taught us that the most effective way to change behavior is by creating new neural pathways rather than trying to get rid of old ones, so be sure to phrase your goal as an aspiration. It's better to tell yourself, "Listen and encourage others to participate" rather than "Don't hog all the attention," because the first statement focuses on instilling a new behavior.

Frame the goal properly. Once you've identified your goal, make sure that it is framed in a way that will steer you away from your old triggers.

Here's how Michael, one executive we worked with, managed this task. He wanted to become more visionary and strategic. But he came from a family in which he had always been expected to put his plans on hold and help a disadvantaged sister. Invariably, at times he didn't, and in those moments their mother came down hard on him, telling him how selfish he was. Michael internalized that criticism. Consequently, at work he had trouble with any goal that triggered this feeling of selfishness. "Spreading my ideas throughout the organization" was one such goal that he struggled with. His family ghosts wanted him to shut that ambition down. But Michael realized that he could reimagine the goal as "Introducing a new vision to help my organization survive recent changes"—a reframing that no longer felt selfish to him.

Develop new versions of yourself. Now that your goal is well framed, it's time to take the first steps toward change. As a start, gather clues about how your ghosts work. When do the negative ones take over? Are there predictable dynamics or triggers that summon them? When this happens, how does it affect the way you feel, think, and act? What scares you about change? With a better understanding of when and why negative ghosts take over and how they impede your development, you'll open up some space for self-reflection and change.

One way of doing this is to create what the leadership expert Herminia Ibarra calls "provisional selves"—new versions of yourself that do not set off your ghosts. The key

here is to identify role models who are successful at doing what you want to do. It doesn't matter if you know these people or not. Analyze everything you can about their behavior as it pertains to your challenge, and try to figure out how they met similar ones. Finding multiple role models is vital, because you want a whole range of behaviors to try without the interference of your ghosts.

Sarah managed this step effectively. She began by studying women executives who actively advanced their own careers but simultaneously were empathetic and supportive to their peers and employees. She found it surprisingly liberating to realize that not all leaders worried that their successes would hurt others. Taking her cues from these women, she fashioned some provisional versions of herself to try out—more-assertive selves that also praised fellow employees. In this way she allowed herself to keep the ghosts of her brother and parents at bay and move ahead with her work as CEO.

Experimenting with new behaviors is not enough. Reflection is important too. Did your new ways of acting lead to positive changes? Or did your old thoughts and feelings still interfere? By paying careful attention to your answers, in time you'll be able to move in new directions.

ULTIMATELY, LEADERSHIP IS about imagining the future that you want to create, for your organization and for yourself. The steps we've described involve making short-term changes, all of which are important, but you can also follow the same steps as you develop a long-term vision for your new self.

To reach your full potential at work, ask yourself these questions: What kind of leader and colleague do I want to be 10 years from now? Can I find or create a place that will be hospitable and nurturing to the person I hope to become? Which family ghosts should I embrace and celebrate—and which should I finally leave behind? ©

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 **DEBORAH ANCONA** is the Seley Distinguished Professor of Management at MIT's Sloan School of Management and the founder of the MIT Leadership Center. **DENNIS N.T. PERKINS** is the CEO of the Syncretics Group and a former faculty member of the Yale School of Management and Yale's Department of Psychology.