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The Corporate Family Model of Leadership Development

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This article introduces the concept of the "corporate family," and discusses the use of family systems theory in the assessment, diagnosis, and treatment of workplace pathology and dysfunction. As a leadership development company started by Steve Wilke, Ph.D., LEADon Inc. has been working with organizations for nearly two decades to increase their productivity and profitability. In these consultations, traditional leadership development methods proved not to be as effective as anticipated in relieving workplace dysfunction. Utilizing the Corporate Family Model, which blends traditional leadership development interventions with family systems theory to treat workplace pathology, Dr. Wilke has been able to significantly improve organization's relational functioning, enhance emotional intelligence, and increase the productivity and profitability of his clientele. Using the Corporate Family Model in leadership development training, along with the core principles of family systems theory, has led to fundamental change and improvement in the culture of many organizations. Further explanation of the Corporate Family Model, its blend of family systems theory and traditional leadership development, and how it can positively impact workplace culture are discussed in this article.

Keywords: leadership, transformational leadership, leadership development, family systems theory, corporate family

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Businesses, corporations, and other types of organizations most often fail because of internal dysfunction, poor leadership and communication, and waste in production and finances (Heffner, Kennedy, Brand, & Walsh, 2011). Whether it is a small private business, a public corporation, a charitable nonprofit, or a large multinational corporation, many organizations can struggle to reach their full potential. The reason for this is simple: All are created, operated, and managed by people. Whereas people can be creative and innovative, they also have intra- and interpersonal conflicts that interfere with their attainment of personal organizational goals. It seems logical then that psychology, a field that is dedicated to the study of human behavior, is one of the best options to help these entities improve workplace cohesion and reduce financial loss.

Many organizations acknowledge a lack of effective leadership within their ranks. Boatman and Wellins (2011) completed a survey that included over 14,000 human resource departments and leaders across various organizations. These researchers asked the respondents how they would rate the quality of the leadership within their company. Only 26% of human resource departments and 38% of leaders reported that the current quality of the leadership in their organizations could be rated as "excellent" or "very good." Moreover, the quality of leadership was described as "fair" or "poor" for 31% of human resource departments and 24% of leaders. Boatman and Wellins found even more concerning news when 18% of human resource departments and 32% of leaders reported that they considered their future leaders to be "very strong" or "strong," whereas 16% of human resource departments and 25% of leaders considered their future leaders to be "weak" or "very weak."

To improve the leadership quality within the workplace, organizational psychology has focused on leadership development as the primary method of treating the difficulties found within the workplace (Avolio, Avey, & Quisenberry, 2010; Kaiser & Curphy, 2013). Leadership development has been defined throughout literature as an organization's intentional effort to provide current or potential leaders with opportunities to increase their efficiency, effectiveness, and productivity within that organization (McCall, Lombardo, & Morrison, 1988). Traditional leadership development often focuses on individualized action plans, which includes improving employee and manager productivity and effectiveness through training and skill-building. The goals of these interventions often include improving communication, conflict resolution, time management, and collaboration. Another method of traditional leadership development is to offer compact and intense seminars in which large groups focus on improving workplace knowledge and skills (Day, Fleenor, Atwater, Sturm, & McKee, 2014).

Multiple studies have confirmed that overall leadership development can improve workplace problems and inefficiency (Avolio et al., 2010; Brown & May, 2012). However, these same studies also reveal that results vary

considerably, leading to criticism about the efficacy of leadership development programs. Accordingly, business experts have noted that the traditional form of leadership development is often not as successful as anticipated (Avolio, Reichard, Hannah, Walumbwa, & Chan, 2009; Heffner et al., 2011). Brown and May (2012) found that "an intensive year long transformational leadership development and training program resulted in significant increases in contingent reward and transformational leadership behaviors among first-line supervisors." A more intensive leadership development training that focused on newer "transformational leadership styles" were found to be effective in developing leaders and increasing productivity and employee satisfaction. Simply training individual managers and leaders often isolates improvement to the individual trained without the improvement generalizing to other employees within the organization. The group training method also has its shortcomings because the skills taught during these seminars are often lost over time as leaders return to a system that does not sustain or complement their changed behavior (Heffner et al., 2011).

We believe that traditional leadership development is not enough to create the transformational change leaders want to see in their organizations. Instead, an approach that combines traditional leadership development interventions with family systems theory has in our experience been more effective in helping develop leaders within organizations. Such an approach not only changes negative behaviors and patterns, but also increases the likelihood that the changes made will be sustained over the long term. Using this Corporate Family Model for more than 20 years, Dr. Wilke and his associates have observed and experienced significant productive change within many different types of organizations. Dr. Wilke (Wilke & Wilke, 2010a) characterizes the term, "corporate family," in the following way:

> The word corporate is the Latin word, *corporare*, which means to make into one group. In other words, rather than consisting of a bunch of individuals doing their own thing, a corporation joins people together into one, united entity. In its essence, a corporation is really about the body of people comprising it rather than the business product or service, or even the bottom line. (Wilke & Wilke 2010a, p. 12)

We have found that using family systems theory as a paradigm and model foundation significantly improves the understanding of the culture and processes of any organization.

A review of the literature revealed that no other authors use the term "corporate family" in this manner. When the term "corporate family" is used in research, it usually refers to a person's career versus their private family life along with the struggle to maintain the balance between the two (Gullotta & Donohue, 1981). Other definitions include focusing on a family-owned business, which is a commercial organization in which decision-making is influenced by multiple generations of a family who are closely identified with

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the firm through leadership or ownership. One additional use of a corporate family is in reference to corporate structure consisting of a single parent corporation and multiple subsidiaries that the parent corporation owns directly or indirectly. In this definition, the focus of the corporate family is the group of organizations rather than the people who make them up. Dr. Wilke's unique definition and concept of the corporate family is essential in the implementation of the Corporate Family Model of leadership development.

FAMILY SYSTEM THEORY INTEGRATION

A critical difference between the Corporate Family Model and other leadership development programs is the use of family systems theory. Family systems theory was created and developed by Dr. Murray Bowen to better understand the systemic organization of the nuclear family and its effect on individual and family behavior (Fleck & Bowen, 1961). Bowen saw family units as systems that shaped and influenced the individuals within them. This theory understands people as interconnected and interdependent, rather than as isolated or fully independent individuals in a group (Bowen, 1985). Bowen introduced several concepts critical to family system and to the Corporate Family Model, such as differentiation, triangles, family projection, multigenerational transmission process, and emotional cutoffs.

Understanding these concepts and how they apply to therapeutic intervention are fundamental to applying family systems theory. Differentiation of self is an individual's ability to separate his or her own intellectual and emotional functioning from that of the family or system from which the individual developed. A triangle is a three-person relationship system that often (but not always) has unhealthy aspects that disrupt the functioning of that system and the individuals that comprise it. The family projection process occurs when the parents of a family unit transmit their own unresolved difficulties to a child, thereby decreasing the child's ability to differentiate effectively from his or her family unit. The multigenerational transmission process is the progression of the levels of differentiation between parents and their offspring onto future members of the family unit. In this process, the levels of differentiation from one generation affect the differentiation among the members of a new generation within a family. This can lead to members being more differentiated because of healthy relationships and experiences within the multigenerational family, but it can also often lead to an increase in dysfunction and turmoil with family members who become less differentiated. In the more individualistic societies found in western cultures, the differentiation of family members is often essential in helping those individual members grow away from their family unit that they were

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born into. Finally, the term "emotional cutoff" refers to an individual's response to dealing with one or more dysfunctional members of a family unit by reducing the amount of contact with them and even completely disconnecting from them altogether (Gladding, 2002; The Bowen Center for the Study of the Family, 2014).

These concepts helped Bowen and other family systems therapists understand pathology and self-defeating behavior within family units and improve treatment of individuals and their families. If a therapist identifies a triangle involving two parents and a child, then they can work with the family on increasing healthier relationship skills and decreasing negative behaviors that are within the triangle. Likewise, Bowen's other concepts help a therapist to identify other types of dysfunction within the family system and to devise a treatment plan to address the pathology. One important note to consider is that much of Bowen's concepts are formed from an individualistic culture. There is the potential for many of the aspects of families from more collectivistic cultures to be overlooked and potentially create misdiagnoses. Understanding and identifying these differences is important in helping to determine how different cultures affect how Bowen's theory is applied in diagnosing and treating families (Ross & Murdock, 2014).

Bowen (1985) also discussed utilizing his systems theory within organizations, and other leadership development consultants have found it to be useful in helping them to treat dysfunction within the workplace (Kott, 2014; Kaiser & Curphy, 2013). In the Corporate Family Model, we analyze each employee's position in an organization and assign roles based on these concepts. By understanding employees as part of a corporate family, we can improve our ability to identify and understand dysfunction that is occurring through Bowen's concepts. Concepts from other family systems theories and theorists are incorporated in the Corporate Family Model. James Framo (1970) introduced the idea of a "family of origin," the family people are born into, and its importance on individual behavior. Framo's work focused on how the patterns and behaviors of one's family of origin are transmitted into the next form of family for individuals. Usually the next form of family is the "family of procreation" (i.e., the family that individuals create when they have children), but these patterns and behaviors could also influence the corporate family. Salvador Minuchin (1974) founded structural family therapy, which emphasizes the understanding of the unspoken rules that govern a family's functioning and to understand the individual relationships between family members. He also recognized that there were multiple patterns of relationships between people and families—those who are enmeshed and those that are disengaged. Enmeshed families often are interconnected to an stifling or unhealthy degree whereas disengaged families are avoidant so that individuals are cut off from one another. The goal of structural family therapy is to disrupt dysfunctional relationships within the family unit and to create

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a more stable environment by building healthier and more productive relationships between family members (Minuchin, 1974).

The Corporate Family Model differs from traditional leadership development methods in that it incorporates many of the principles of family systems theory along with current leadership development and research methods. The different schools, theories, and paradigms of family systems theory share a core belief that involving families in solutions is essential in promoting a healthier family unit (Gladding, 2002). The Corporate Family Model follows this central tenet of family systems therapy. We believe that it is essential to bring corporate family members together and provide them tools that will enable them to build healthier relationships with each other and help the development of an improved system of relating to one another, thereby increasing productivity and profitability.

CORPORATE FAMILY MODEL

There are three phases in applying the Corporate Family Model of leadership development. The first phase begins with assessing an organization's conflicts and weaknesses from a family systems perspective (assessment phase). In the second phase, a diagnosis is made of the dysfunction(s) that is currently causing disruption within the corporate family (diagnosis phase). Finally, in the third phase, a treatment plan is developed that organizes interventions over a continuous and recurring period of time to address the dysfunction in that organization (treatment phase). Much like with family therapy, group interventions are accompanied with those oriented to the individual. An organization works similarly to a family unit; therefore, treatment is comparable to family therapy in which the therapist meets with both individuals separately and with families together. Because many people spend a large majority of their lives with their corporate family, it follows that the family of origin and the family of procreation are both affected and influenced by the corporate family. After years of experience, it is apparent that utilizing the Corporate Family Model significantly reduces conflicts, promotes relational growth, and guides companies to greater success.

For the assessment phase, utilizing a multidimensional approach to identify which personnel and areas of an organization to address is essential. Similar to Minuchin's structural family therapy, the dysfunctional relationships and behaviors that need to be disrupted are identified. An essential part of the assessment within a corporate family begins with meeting with the necessary individuals of an organization. To help promote accurate assessment that incorporates system features, this occurs by assembling groups and interviewing on an individual basis. This is especially useful for small- to

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medium-size organizations; however, it can pose a challenge for larger organizations with hundreds employees because one cannot meet with every single employee. In these cases, it is important to select the individuals who represent their particular department or group in the organization to ensure accurate understanding of the problems affecting the corporate family.

Many leadership development consultants utilize measures to quantitatively estimate strengths and weaknesses of individuals in an organization as well as the organization as a whole. Within the leadership development field, many consultants focus on the emotional intelligence of individuals within organizations. Research in this area has suggested that emotional intelligence can be a better predictor of an individual's performance within the workplace than general intelligence (Bar-On, 1997; Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2002; Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002). Every individual has a unique personality and interpersonal skills that influence their emotional intelligence, and these abilities directly affect people's productivity and efficiency in their organizational system.

To measure emotional intelligence, the authors developed the Developing Emotional Competency Questionnaire (DECQ), a 100-item self-report measure that assesses emotional intelligence strengths and weaknesses of people within an organization (Wilke, 2014). This measure quickly and efficiently provides normed, quantitative information to supplement the information derived from interviews, interactions, and observations. This type of measure can be indispensable, especially when dealing with larger organizations. In cases in which it is not possible to meet with each employee and leader within the company, measures such as the DECQ help identify the strengths and weaknesses within the organization and lead to more effective assessment of dysfunction. In this first phase, the assessment phase, with the help of emotional intelligence measurement, unhealthy triangles, the effect of transgenerational values and behaviors, and an individual's level of differentiation begin to be understood. The ultimate purpose of the assessment phase is to better understand the corporate family dynamics that then inform the diagnosis and treatment plan.

In phase two, the diagnosis phase, family systems theory is most heavily utilized in the Corporate Family Model. The assessment phase helps identify the dysfunction within the corporate family, after which the diagnosis for each dysfunction can be made. Each employee participating is understood to be a part of the dysfunction of the corporate family; therefore, they are part of the diagnosis and treatment. Diagnoses identify dysfunctions within the corporate family most often take place in the form of triangles, emotional cutoffs, and the family projection process of "parents," individuals in leadership and management roles, onto the "children" or their subordinates within the corporate family). Individuals are also diagnosed at this stage, not in terms of clinical diagnoses, but rather how their specific roles play a part in

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the dysfunctional corporate family. Although the corporate family is seen as the main moving part, each individual member is moving within the family; therefore, they must be understood as a unique piece of the dysfunction.

In phase three, the treatment plan created for every organization in the final phase is unique and individualized are created for an organization target the specific family systems problems that have been identified in the previous phases. The goal is to disrupt recurrent dysfunctional cycles and to perpetuate positive cycles within the corporate family system. At the same time, it is also essential to equip all personnel in the organization with the skills needed to prevent unnecessary conflict and nonproductive behavior. As in family therapy, if you do not have the "buy in" of the corporate family, then the therapy will not work. It is inevitable that in some cases a few members resist the interventions and even the entire process, but if most of the corporate family members can be reached, then the treatment plan can succeed. For the prescribed interventions to work, we have to fundamentally work to differentiate as many people in the corporate family as possible.

The treatment plan phase utilizes interventions in collaborative and individual work with members of the corporate family. Meeting with leadership teams and in groups within the corporate family on a regular basis is important for equipping the corporate family for second-order change. It is also important to identify the leaders of the corporate family and motivate them to share the interventions and skills that they learn with all members of the corporate family, a process that is referred to as "cascading." As in therapy, in which assignments and homework are useless if it not completed and practiced, the same is true in the Corporate Family Model. The people who are being equipped must practice new skills outside of group and individual trainings for the treatment plan to be successful.

One of the more common types of dysfunction that we have seen is the disruptive effect of unhealthy triangles within corporate families. This often occurs when two leaders or superiors (the parents) entangle a subordinate (the child) into a power struggle that the managers are having. In cases such as this, the treatment plan would include collaborative work with all three people in the triangle along with individual work. As a facilitator (therapist) between the members of the triangle, taking care to establish rapport and relationships with all three members of the triangle is essential in beginning any effort to resolve the dysfunction in the relationships. Depending on the type and acuity of dysfunction, interventions would range from traditional leadership development skills such as communication training and conflict resolution to therapeutic interventions such as creating boundaries and role-playing. Other kinds of dysfunction, such as emotional cutoffs and family projections, would be analyzed and then treated with a similar framework.

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CASE STUDY

A request was recently made for an assessment, diagnoses, and treatment plan from an organization of which the scope of work was focused as a professional services firm. This firm had approximately 50 employees and was a privately held corporation owned solely by 3 professionals with a leadership and management team of 12 people.

Assessment Phase

We conducted our initial assessment by interviewing all three owners, senior managers, and all corporate family members/employees. Because this was a relatively smaller corporate family, individual interviews, along with group interviews, were able to be completed. We were also able to administer the DECQ measure to assist us in obtaining further information about the emotional quotient strengths and weaknesses of each corporate family member.

Diagnosis Phase

Consolidating the information from the interviews in the assessment phase, we identified the presenting concerns within the organization as serious miscommunication, unresolved conflict and misalignment among the three owners (triangle), several "problem" leaders on the second level of leadership dealing with multiple business and client relationships that had mixtures of enmeshed and disengaged relationships, multiple triangles between senior-level corporate family members and the owners, and underachievement on behalf of other senior leaders. We attributed what we recognized as general poor conflict resolution and low morale to the dysfunction that was occurring between the "parents" of the corporate family. When we began our work with this corporate family, we found that the owners had underestimated the gravity and severity of the condition of the relationships within their organization and with their clientele, many of which have been aforementioned in this paper.

Treatment Phase

Over a 2-year period, our staff implemented the following treatment interventions. (This is not meant to be an exhaustive list of interventions, but a summary to illustrate our clinical objectives and their results).

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- We began an owners group that met biweekly to work on improving the differentiation of each of the three principal owners. Our time focused on helping each owner create insight into the dysfunctional triangle in which they were involved and how this negatively affected their corporate family.
- Simultaneous to treating the three principal owners, we immediately commenced focusing attention on our work with the second level of leadership, which we called the "leadership team," on a monthly basis. Interventions focused on conflict resolution, communication, project management, and other specific skill sets needed to improve both individually and together as a corporate family unit.
- Shortly after beginning the previous two interventions, we began to meet monthly with the entire corporate family to focus on specific areas of need. Our purpose was to process self-identified issues disruptive to corporate family functioning, to identify dysfunctional corporate family patterns, and to promote specific skill sets or new habits that would improve the individual and overall corporate family performance.

The Results

One year into our work, there was progress already being seen throughout the corporate family. The principal owners realized they had several irreconcilable differences that could not be remediated. With our support, they eventually decided that one of the tripartite principals would leave to follow other interests. The three principals avoided a potential cutoff within the corporate family and amicably reorganized. Although this outcome was not a part of our original treatment plan, it was apparent to all involved, including the owner who left, that the consolidation of ownership was a necessary transition for the survival of the corporate family. Our work had promoted the healthy development, progress, and differentiation, with the consequent insight of all three owners. A consequence of this corporate triangle that had evolved over years was that it had perpetuated secrets between family members, supported poor communication patterns, and created a high level of anxiety for all corporate family members. Furthermore, the original principal owners and their alliances with specific family members that had previously divided their corporate family were removed when this triangle was dissolved. Family members now had to relate directly with one another, instead of triangulating the owners, which gave opportunity for resolution and a reduced level of anxiety.

Another important progression was the cessation of dysfunctional relationships that occurred between the original members of the corporate family

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and newer generations of family members that came in during and after our work with this firm. The original corporate family members who were learning how to reconnect and communicate with their siblings were able to cascade this information to newer employees who joined the corporate family. This process was accelerated by the owners and senior leaders, who modeled healthy conflict resolution, communication, and teamwork skills. Overall, this process helped to create a positive multigenerational projection process, increase the differentiation of each corporate family member, and improve workplace cohesion and production.

At the conclusion of our 2-year term, there was a reduction in conflict and anxiety, and the self-confidence and self-respect of a large portion of the corporate family members was improved. As a result of a financial audit sponsored by our client, the audit demonstrated that the organization had saved more than several hundred thousand dollars in annual expense as a result of our work together, which they were able to use toward marketing, employee resources, and other organizational improvements.

Not all consulting relationships work out this productively. However, this scenario and similar results occur in many of our engagements in which the corporate family participates and completes the treatment plan. Although there are certainly several contributing factors to these positive gains in the corporate family, we have found that utilizing the Corporate Family Model has allowed us to successfully help organizations of all kinds to thrive and grow significantly after nearly 2 decades of utilizing this corporate family systems paradigm.

CONCLUSION

The Corporate Family Model focuses on the transformation of corporate family members and thereby changes the culture of the organization. The key feature of the Corporate Family Model is to take family systems theory and merge it with what works well within traditional leadership development practices. When leaders change from focusing solely on profits to first addressing the needs of their corporate family, increased productivity and profitability will follow. As employees start to view one another as part of the same corporate family, their focus changes from competing and conflicting with one another to working together as a cohesive unit (Wilke & Wilke, 2010b). By using corporate family systems theory, destructive patterns within the workplace are identified and addressed with an executable strategic action/treatment plan. Dr. Wilke and his associates have found success with this model, and they strive to provide others with ideas that can help organizations of all kinds to improve their ability to be more significant and

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productive and, most importantly, to positively affect the lives of each and every corporate family member. Their hope is that leaders in all types of organizations can use this model to assist them in improving their workplace environment and building a more cohesive corporate family in the process.

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