

Finding my place

A systems psychodynamic exploration of role taking in the family business

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Abstract

Existing research confirms that the phases of generational leadership transition in family businesses are of extreme importance for the long-term survival of a company.

However, despite the body of research work, little is known about the particular nature of the role the successor steps into. Not only are organizations complex systems with a multitude of expectations and agreements (conscious and unconscious), so are families. Being at the interface of this multi-level complexity can be overwhelming and frustrating as task and boundaries may be vague, variable and various.

In this autoethnographic study, the Organizational Role Analysis framework is applied as a mean of shedding light on the specific situation of succession in a family business. Being in the third generation and a non-traditional role holder, legitimation and gender play into this process, as well.

Analyzing these interlinked dynamics by a systems psychodynamic search in personal stories and additional data surfaces conscious and unconscious drivers that are at play during the process of role taking.

Key words: Organizational Role Analysis, role biography, role history, systems psychodynamic approach, self-awareness, autoethnography, Night Vision Cycle, family business

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Prologue

- When I was applying for the “Executive Master in Change” program at INSEAD in early Summer 2019 there was an interview to execute with one of the program directors during the application process. I scheduled a phone meeting with the program director and understood that he was on vacation. He told me that he was on the road and had been pulling over his car to a parking lot somewhere in the countryside. The connection was not the best and I was telling him why I was interested in the program. He figured that actually I could be feeling fine, having reached the role of the chair of a supervisory board of a decent family business. He questioned what my deeper thoughts where. I told him more of my story, of the complications between family and business and of role confusion. His answer to this was full of empathy and very short: “Oh, that’s a mess.”

I felt highly understood and I knew in that very moment that the EMC Program was for me. I wanted to find more clarity in this situation and wanted to untangle some of the strings. That is the aim of this thesis. -

Introduction

This study is focusing on the ambiguous situation of being a member in a business family in the third generation while being in the role of chairing the supervisory board from the respective family business.

Looking at organizations, life is full of strong emotional forces. Roles have obvious and hidden elements to them, as well as formal and informal manifestations. They have symbolic meaning attached to them that shape projection and expectation of the system they are embedded in (Krantz & Maltz, 1997).

Researchers have offered several explanations for the contradiction and confusion that are an inherent part in family businesses. They argue that the combination from the two different ways of reasoning firstly from the family background and secondly from the business background are constantly at play. There is ongoing mixture of financial, economic and

emotional issues and the mixture in thinking about the past, the present and the future. Often this is not even conscious to the players. Researchers also draw attention to the fact that the tension field is of a special and delicate quality as each system is running high on emotions (Von Schlippe, 2014, p.27).

Being in this situation myself and experiencing the confusion almost every day, my intention was to gain a deeper understanding of the situation and to further investigate the unconscious side of the setting. Being a non-patriarchic personality creates quite a stretch from the role as it was occupied before and as it might still be viewed from stakeholders to my personal approach of taking it on.

Through the systems psychodynamic lens of Organizational Role Analysis combined with the Night Vision Cycle, I seek to explain how personal awareness can be enhanced. These together with relevant literature on family business challenges are summarized in the **Literature Review**.

In the **Methodology** section, I describe how I applied the method of autoethnography. This allowed me to reflexively dismantle my own thinking and understanding. At the same time, it enables me to give an insider perspective on this complex topic. However, this approach also acknowledges the existence of multiple stakeholder realities and aims to touch a least on some of them in the research.

Being aware of the intensely inward focused approach of autoethnography as it is strongly linked to the investigator, I aimed at setting clear guidelines to be followed in order to minimize biases and in the claim to make the best use of the potential power of this method (Poerwandari, 2021).

In my **Data Gathering and Discussion**, the first step, was to create a diverse set of qualitative data to investigate the conditions and the connections between myself, the role and the (family-) system. I explored my own experiences, historical data from the founding times of the company and the view from inside the company. In the first phase, the aim is to identify themes that appear in the different data sets by using a reflective space for myself and others. In the second phase, I started working with the themes that came up in phase one, applying them to areas that came to the foreground while working on and with the data and the themes.

By dealing with the different levels of consciousness in these areas in the third phase I give an outlook on findings and how to start linking the patterns to reality.

I hope that the study findings might, under certain conditions, generalize to a wider scope of research in this field and help others in a similar situation to advance their ability to create awareness, connect with their emotions and better see and understand what is below the surface.

Research Aim and Objectives

This study analyses the situation of taking over the family business in the third generation in the role of the chair of the supervisory board. As there is a multitude of influences and expectations revolving around this position that is right at the interface of owning family and family business. Through the method of Organizational Role Analysis and the Night Vision Cycle a closer look shall be taken to the different levels of influences towards this role.

Specific questions this study addresses are the following:

- How much is the role shaped by the current role holder, how much by the existing system and how much by the people who were formerly in the role?
- What are the amplifiers of the perceived ambiguous and uncertainty in the role?
- How can systems psychodynamic techniques help in gaining clarity in the specific situation?

Literature Review

Much has been written about the dynamics and challenges that are inherent in family businesses. The tightly knit web between owning family and business over a long span of time contains great chances and severe risks at the same time. For a long-term existence of the enterprise, it is inevitable that the expectations of the family and the demands of the business are well managed and well balanced. As the feelings and emotions in the business family are often running high and are charged with the legacy and heritage of several generations the topic of built-up expectations and hopes has been investigated manifold (Brundin, p. 32). Von Schlippe even mentions that considering the complexity of the family business system, the multitude of possibilities for misunderstandings and variety of possible occasions for them, family business actually could be considered to be an 'impossible endeavor' (Von Schlippe, 2014, p. 19).

An additional level of complexity is added as in most cases the family business is used to strong patriarchic leaders who were and are filling their position over many years or even decades. This has strong implications for the culture, the structure and leadership style that is present in the organization (Von Schlippe, Groth, Rüsen, 2017, p. 196). As the role taking by non-traditional role holders like women, younger people and people from diverse backgrounds will be more common in the times to come there seems to be a gap in research and literature since there are different needs and requirements in this situation (Long, Newton, Sievers, 2018, p. 175).

With time and growth, both the family and the business system, will get more and more complex. Both systems are under the impact of inherent contradicting requirements which make coping and decision making harder. On the business side one finds the paradoxons that are seen in any business organization. For example, the need to be creative and innovate *and* the need to avoid mistakes. Employees need to be flexible, *and* they need to respect the rules. They shall collaborate *and* they shall be competitive. Cost should be kept down, *and* highest quality shall be delivered (Thornton, 2016, p. 97).

Looking at contradictions and paradoxes on the family side there is the underlying intention to be found that every family member's individual interest and expectation shall be taken into consideration *and* at the same time there is the striving for the continuous endeavor to keep the company as a property in its entirety (Von Schlippe, Groth, Rüsen, 2017, p. 20). Other

contradictions are linked to the special and critical situation of the generational succession in the top position. Mixed messages are sent by parents and predecessors like for instance – “*Be successful and you will make me happy, but don’t be so successful that you leave me behind.*” (Hollis, 1993, p. 64). In family businesses this often irritating and confusing phase usually stretches out significantly longer than in publicly held companies where the transition period at the helm usually takes some weeks or at most few month. The time horizon for a transition in this position in family businesses is usually measured in years, sometimes even decades (Von Schlippe, Groth, Rösen, 2017, p. 79).

Challenging opposing views involved here are for example:

- Parents have the wish for their child to find her way and follow her interests and at the same time they influence the child to stay close to and interested in the company.
- Identity finding for the successor is aggravated as it is never clear if the path into the company is taken voluntarily or due to the implicit pressure of caregivers, family and the environment.
- During the phase when two generations are in the company, the senior wants the junior to shape and renew the company and at the same time it shall not happen against the senior’s ideas (Von Schlippe, 2014, p.80).

“I chose what I was told to choose: They told me gently who I was...”

David Wagoner - Hero with one face

Although the necessity of dealing and living with contradictions is inherent in any system, in the case of a family business this process requires great attention. Stakeholders need to learn to live with the ambiguity as not every paradox can or will truly be resolved. But if managed well instead of paralyzing an organization or family, paradoxes can also be levers of change and can lead to creative solutions (Thornton, 2016, p. 97f).

Several instruments have been developed by researchers to establish a helpful structure in the family business context. One of them is about the task of role differentiation. This instrument wants to shed light on the capacity of the individual to differentiate the several roles (board member, founders’ grandchild, owner, little sister, etc.) that she is facing simultaneously in differing contexts (Sandig, p. 53).

Theoretical frames that will be applied in this research

This research wants to investigate the situation with a **systems psychodynamic** lens as it is highly probable that the insights that are desired will not be found on a rational and obvious level but on a more irrational and unconscious level.

The systems psychodynamic paradigm was developed in the 1950s and 1960s at the Tavistock Institute in the United Kingdom. It combined the psychodynamic inside-out perspective and the system outside-in perspective. By merging these two perspectives, the systems psychodynamic approach helps in understanding the unconscious processes in people, groups, and organizations (Henning & Cilliers, 2012). According to Kets de Vries and Cheak *“the psychodynamic approach to leadership study and development focuses on the dynamics of human behavior, which are often the most difficult to understand. It acknowledges that people are complex, unique, and paradoxical beings with rich and myriad motivational drivers and decisions-making and interaction patterns* (Kets de Vries & Cheak, 2014).

To be able to have a look below the surface and to unearth unconscious parts and relations, the instrument of **Organizational Role Analysis** was applied.

This method has been developed since the late 1950s. The Organizational Role Analysis seems to be a fruitful way to support an individual to be more successful in her working environment. It sheds light on the connection between the system or the organization on the one hand and the person or the individual on the other hand. It helps to bring about a more complete picture of the influences that are existent and that can help or hinder individuals and organizations in performing at a higher level (Borwick, 2006, page 7).

According to Sievers and Beumer the objective of the Organizational Role Analysis is to discover the inner picture a person has of the system and combine this picture to the “external” reality of the system. Part of this process is the building of hypothesis, free association and discussion (Sievers & Beumer, 2006, p. 65).

Organizational role analysis has two manifestations. Firstly, there is the analysis of the **role history** which brings additional information about how the respective role was filled by the persons who have been in this position before. Each of these incumbents shaped the role in a certain way and thus raises expectations of the system how the current role holder should or would behave. It involves aspects like explicit and implicit power, behavior toward

employees, management and shareholders and the handling of challenges and conflicts. There might be a different level of impact the former incumbents have made on the role, according to the term of office, the personality of the role holder or if some far-reaching changes have been implemented. In family business an additional aspect is the fact whether the role holder is a family member or not. According to Long the enquiry of the role history could give the current role holder a good idea about the unconscious influences she is experiencing (Long 2018, p. 227).

Secondly, there is the analysis of the **role biography** which describes the personal development of the role holder and questions the experiences she has had in the past with the roles that she occupied during her life. Often interesting insights originate from very early roles the person has had in her childhood. It is not uncommon that certain patterns and relationships from an early age are triggering behavior in the adult life in the business context (Long, 2018, p.228).

Combining the organizational role analysis with the **Night Vision Cycle** provided me with helpful tools that seemed valuable to grasp the vague feeling of something being not all right. And getting closer to the insight where this feeling might come from. The Night Vision Cycle was developed by Van de Loo and Lehman as they state that it is in many cases not sufficient to use pure logic for decision making and problem solving. Simply searching for the root cause and asking why something is happening will not give answers to the issues that are situated outside of one's consciousness. The Night Vision Cycle is an instrument to help making sense of a negative or positive feeling by opening up thinking and facilitating a non-judgmental debate. It consists of the following steps:

1. Triggering, observing and wondering

This step is being activated by the realization that logic alone will not be sufficient. Different participants can and should be invited to the process.

2. Creating and entering a reflective space

During this step a space is created where all individual thoughts are welcomed and where no judgments take place.

3. Associating

Here free associating takes place, and everyone is asked to express whatever associations comes to mind, may it be pictures, feelings, or even songs. These might help to tap deeper into the unconscious.

4. Spiking

From step three new insights and connections might arise. These are used to bridge the unconscious association to the conscious issues that are discussed.

5. Patterning

In that step the group looks for patterns within the associations. If patterns can be found it is highly probable that a further investigation will help to progress on the issue.

6. Linking

In this final step options for interventions are developed by working with the patterns found in step five
(Lehman, Van de Loo, 2016).

Summary

Extensive research has been done about the peculiarity of family businesses considering their strength and weaknesses and the distinctions versus public companies. In addition, there are many insightful studies and case studies about the ambiguity of owning families and the implication of certain decisions and behavior on the family business and the business family. The focus is on systems and organizations. Not much has been researched and published concerning the individual who is playing its part in one or both of these systems. Hence, the aim of this study is to focus on the personal and inside-out view.

In this approach I will work with systems psychodynamic methods to gain a new angle and deeper knowledge about what is going on beyond the obvious. And to show where

unidentified conflicts might be remaining dormant (Long, 2018, p. xxi). By sharing my unique perspective, I wish to provide a deeper insight into the multilayered and emotional field of family business and business family and offer material for further reflection to myself and others.

Methodology

The approach of the autoethnography as a method of qualitative research is still relatively young and it is being discussed in a controversial way. It is a form of narrative research where the object of research is the very own experience of the researcher. The setting of the research is where the researcher lives or works, and the data and materials are coming from the researcher's personal story, knowledge and experience. The missing distance between researcher and research object is exactly the point where critics see the high probability of risks and bias. Potential risks are that the researcher might have narcissistic tendencies and therefore covers up parts that have a negative connotation. This can happen consciously or unconsciously. Hollis answers the question whether the concern for personal growth is by itself narcissistic, that it is not if one is determined to fulfill one's potential and to grant the same right to others. He describes that for the process of understanding oneself deeper there is the need for the ability to take responsibility for oneself and at the same time the need for courage to validate the reality of the others (Hollis, 1993, p. 52f). In his view, the concern of gaining individual awareness is not narcissistic but the best way to serve society and support others (Hollis, 1993, p. 99).

As the scientific boundaries between object and subject in an autoethnographic approach are not clear, for some researchers the academic demand might not be fulfilled. Stronger critics even state that an autoethnography could be the outcome of a form of self-obsession or the result of laziness and unwillingness to follow the moral obligation to collect proper data (Poerwandari, 2021, p.3f).

But there are positive sides to this method, too. The potential insight in this approach can be significant. It will contribute findings that could not be brought to light by the process of observing from the outside. Who could bring a deeper insight of an experience than the

person that is immersed in it and lives it? For the researcher, the research object becomes part of her life for the timespan of the project. And according to Barton, as a result most elements of life become data itself that can add additional and unexpected width and depth to the research (Barton, 2011, p. 432).

Taking these opposing views into account it becomes clear that the closer the researcher is to the researched object the higher is the probability of bias to occur. So being highly aware of these traps and dangers would be key in any research and is especially important in qualitative studies and even more in a method as personal as the autoethnography. For the researcher, setting up clear guidelines like the following is an indispensable prerequisite.

- Understanding the complexity and responsibility of scientific research
- Constant awareness of own involvement, bias and narcissistic tendencies
- How are other persons and parties involved in the study and how is their privacy protected
- Involving other (neutral) persons to reflect about the findings and the interpretation of the data and to ensure different perspectives

In following these guidelines, the limitations of this research method cannot be avoided completely but they can be minimized and when conducted well, an autoethnography can contribute new knowledge to the specific field of research. There is even the fair chance that some of the results generate questions that help leading to additional research and a deeper understanding of the topic (Poerwandari, 2021).

For me as a researcher the method of autoethnography seemed particularly challenging as I wanted to make sure not to avoid unpleasant and uncomfortable thoughts and stories. This would be a normal and obvious mean of self-protection, may it be conscious or unconscious. Hence it was essential during my writing to remind myself to be able to distance myself from the writing ever so often and at least try to look at it from a more neutral and reserved position. This and the exchange with peers enhanced the likelihood that the thoughts which came up during this very personal research are honest, transparent and relevant.

Description of the research setting

The beginnings

I was born into a business family as the youngest daughter of the youngest daughter of the founder. My grandfather was brought up in a family of farmers and shepherds in a small village in Germany. Being the oldest child of four he lost his father when he was a teenager. He therefore partly took over the role of the breadwinner and was working very hard to be able to receive a proper education as a mechanic. After his apprenticeship he moved to town to start a job in a mechanical workshop. In 1925 my grandfather decided together with my grandmother that he would give up his salaried job in the mechanic workshop and they started their own business. The first business model was to do service for machinery in the woodworking sector. They exchanged parts like bearings to enhance the performance of the machines' and to make them last longer. The thinking of "making things better" has been instilled in our company ever since. My grandparents had four children: First, they had a daughter, then two sons and the fourth child was my mother. The oldest daughter was severely disabled from a very early age on. She was in need of care all her life, living with my grandparents until her death. It soon became clear that the two sons would take over the management of the company. So consequently, according to their vocation, one was educated in engineering and the other in business administration. My mother was asked to enter the company after she graduated from school, but she decided against it and went into a healthcare profession.

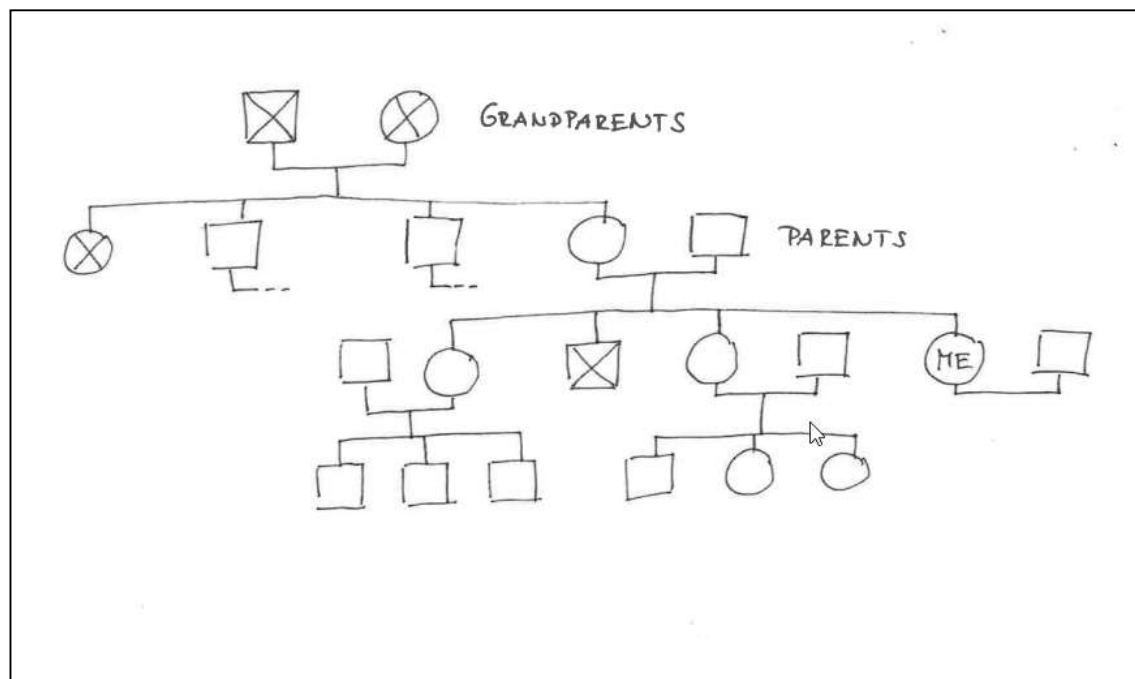
The second generation

The company developed in a very successful way especially in the 1960s when my uncles, inspired by trips to the USA, started a new business model and ventured into industrial automation. Meanwhile my father had entered the company and he took over the management of the woodworking-machinery division from my grandfather. My father grew up with his single mother in humble conditions as his father went missing in action in Russia during WW II. As a teenager he became friends with my mother's middle brother and thereafter became a

part of my mother's family. By studying mechanical engineering, he was in some way filling in for my mother, as she had decided against entering the company.

In my family, we were four children. I have never met my brother, who was born second after my oldest sister as he died of sudden infant death syndrome when he was only three months old. Some months after this tragic incident my middle sister was born and I was born last, another three years later, on the death anniversary of my brother.

During my childhood and teenage years, the industrial part lead by my uncles was very successful and fast growing. While the woodworking part led by my father was rather volatile and difficult and slow in growth. As the industrial part became the main part of the business during the 70s and 80s my sisters and me got the feeling of being second in row when it came to succession. We always felt comfortable in this role and gladly let my cousins go first. We never thought about taking over a leadership role in the company during these times.



Family - Genogram

Structural changes

In the late 1990's my parents and my uncles decided that separating the two divisions of the company would be of value for everybody. And at the same time, it was decided for both remaining parts of the business to change the way of leading the companies from family managed to family governed. Which implied that from then on family members would not be present in the management board but only in the newly instituted supervisory board.

Enquiring about the reason for this decision I did and still do only receive vague answers. In my imagination there could have been several roots for the second generation to taking this decision:

- They acknowledged the growing size of the company and therefore decided to establish a more structured and professional way to let the company be led by outside managers.
- They experienced so much struggle and tension within the family and themselves because of business matters that they did not want to expose their children to that, acknowledging that it would become even more difficult with every generation to come.
- They did not have the impression that someone or several members of the third generation seemed suitable and appropriate to managing the business as successful as they had done.
- They wanted to lower the threshold for the third generation to enter the company.
- They did not want to step back and make room for the next generation. As a result opting for external management would allow the second generation to stay on the helm in a more implicit way, while dodging conflict and confrontation between the second and third generation.

Perhaps it was a blend of all or several reasons mentioned above. Some having a rational background, some a more irrational and personal motivation. I do not know how the decision back then was taken, nor do I know who took it. What became clear to me, is that my father did not make the true shift from being a managing director to being the chair of the supervisory board as he still was involved in many operational topics, especially in his

personal fields of interest. This added to some ambiguity in the perception of my role and I am still in the process of figuring out where the ideal separation of managerial tasks and supervisory tasks in a family business is to be found. Or how Sandig frames it, *“it is about finding out how to be present in the business without interfering in the space of the management board and developing ways to stay in control of the company without managing it”* (Sandig, p. 61).

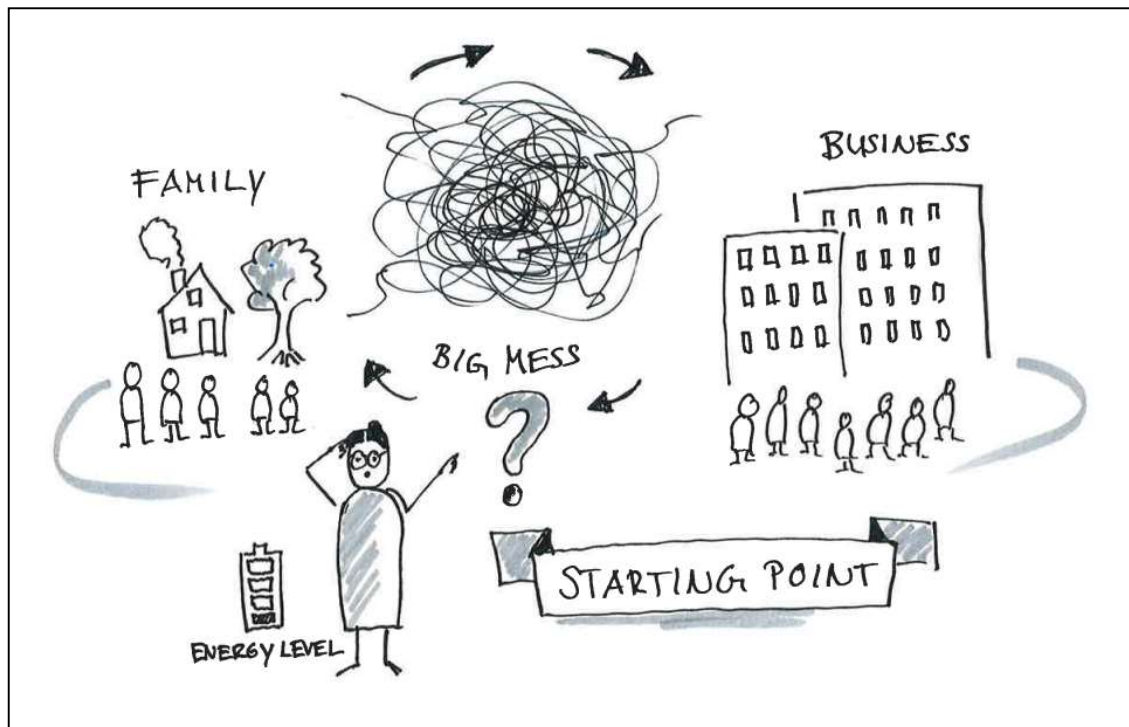
The new situation

My sisters and I therefore encountered a new situation after the year 2000 as we now had become the owners of a significantly smaller company, but we suddenly found ourselves placed in first row. We started a process in our core family with a consultant to set things up for the future. My sisters were already following different career paths. They did not show interest to rearrange their lives and take over a role in the family business. Consequently, I was the only one to be ready to follow in my father's footsteps.

At that moment in time, I felt ambivalent about it. On the one hand it felt very overwhelming as it seemed to be a responsibility that felt way too big for me to fulfill on the other hand it felt intriguing and as a positive challenge that I wanted to take. In addition, there was the slight pressure that if I did not take over no one of the third generation would. Consequently, after my studies of business management, I took on different roles first outside and then within our company with the goal to take over the seat of the supervisory board chairperson within several years. I did not become my father direct successor as he handed the chair position for some years to his long-standing co-managing director and after that episode there was another external manager whose father and grandfather had been working in our business, who took over the position. Only then he handed it over to me in a process which was well coordinated between the two of us and the rest of my family. Here I am, in the position of the chair of the supervisory board for three years now, still feeling ambiguous about it. For that reason, I want to take a closer look at the dynamics that brought me there and which I face holding that position.

Main stress factors

The main stress factor that I can see and recognize was the ongoing mixing of family matters, business matters, undefined roles and differing views on roles. To gain more clarity in this matter I looked into the general differences of roles in family life and roles in business life and into possible implications for a family business.



In family life one enters not by choice or free will but by fate, coincidence or destiny in the form of a helpless undeveloped human being. There are roles that are defined for life as one will always, remain for example, the daughter and it is not possible to lose one's role in the family (Borwick, 2006, p. 6f). If one decides to leave the family or is cast out there still remains a certain genetic and mental bond. Roles like the "head of the family" might change over time but this is often implicit, and a transition period can take very long. It is often accompanied by weakening through age or illness. Agreements are mostly verbal, and expectations are shaped by personal imagination (*"You shall have a better life than me"*). In

general, there is an inward focus in family systems, they are aiming for stability and they are found to be rather resistant to change (Kets de Vries, et.al. 2007, p. 29).

In business life, one enters the role in most cases by choice and at an age in adult or late teenage life when one has been shaped and settled in a certain way. Beginnings and endings of a role are mostly clearly defined, and the business role is always temporary. There is a certain danger of losing the role and therefore losing economic security and the connection to the organization (Borwick, 2006, p. 6f). In an ideal szenario the boundary of the role is defined, expectations are work related and measurable, agreements are documented in writing and tasks are clear. The role of a member of the supervisory board for example involves tasks and responsibilities like supporting the management board in establishing a strategy for the business and monitoring the implementation of it, succession planning for the management board and ensuring that necessary measures to control risks are taken (SpencerStuart, 2017, p. 8f). For the role of the chair of the supervisory board more and softer responsibilities come into play. Like setting the tone, playing a leading role in board composition, coordination of the board and encouraging productive interaction and trustful relationships between members of the management board and members of the supervisory board (SpencerStuart, 2017, p. 44f). In general, and in contrast to family systems, successful businesses focus on the external environment and are aiming for development and adaptability (Kets de Vries, et.al. 2007, p. 29).

The comparison illustrates that business and family systems are two very different matters. This shows for example in their general motivation, in decision making and in the communication style. As Carlock frames it “there is an inherent tension between the needs and expectations of the family and those of the business” (Carlock & Ward, 2010, p. 7).

This is exactly what I experience when I oscillate between the two worlds, dealing with emotions, history and hopes here, and planning, performance and future there. Defining rules and finding instruments does only help to a certain extend as there are unconscious drivers and suppressed emotions for the players in the family business game.

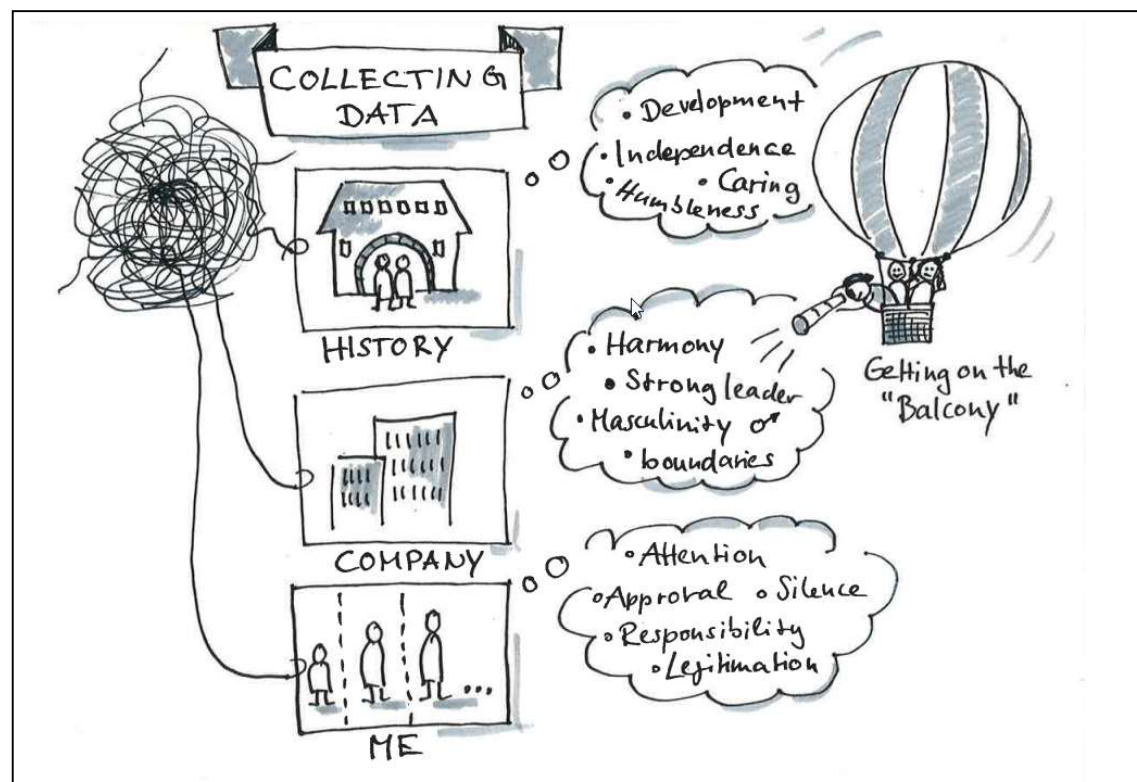
This situation might be somewhat more extreme in the family business but it applies to any organizational context. Thinking *“of the organization as a complex system of multiple agreements including agreements about roles and tasks emerging from each role holder’s mind and experience. Many of these agreements may be consciously decided. Many are*

unconsciously decided and enacted. To make things even more complex, each of these agreements, has the potential to affect agreements elsewhere in the system” (Long, Newton, Sievers, 2018, p. 173).

The Organizational Role Analysis is directed towards these complexities and helps exploring them by asking questions about the demands of the systems to the role, about structures and dynamics put into the role and about emotions and thoughts generated by the role (Long, Newton, Sievers, 2006, p. 173).

Collecting Data and discovering Themes

As described by Long, roles are never taken up in a vacuum. There is the role history that shows how the various predecessors shaped the role and it sheds light on the expectations that others have had in or for the role. And there is the role biography that shows the impact which the past life and past roles of a role holder have on the current role. For exploring the background context along the lines of organizational role analysis I gathered data from different settings in order to find themes that influence the role, the system and myself (Long, 2018, page 227 ff).



The process of discovering the themes and the sense making from the gathered data could be approached as Ibarra points out by putting a kind of frame around the experience. Meaning the effort to create stories that link the interpretation of what is happening today and the reinterpretation of past events. In her view we are only able to know someone and ourselves if we learn and understand the stories that talk about meaning and purpose. (Ibarra 2004, p.133).

Personal stories

For analyzing one's role history, the usual approach of looking into leading roles at the age of 6, 16, 26 etc. did not give me enough insights. The reason might be that in the case of growing up in the world of a family business there is a mixture of emotions and expectations and vague boundaries. Therefore, taking on roles is not a defined process with a defined start and a defined ending. One is never solely at work, nor solely in family life. To gain more insight into this complex situation I wrote down stories that seemed memorable during my life. Stories that had a certain impact on me and my behavior. For finding hidden implications and meanings in such personal material and linking the individual view to a broader view, including culture and organization, Susan Long recommends the support of a reflection group. Reflection group members should be trained in observation and reflexive practices. A contained space where trust is a prerequisite and confidentiality is kept is the base for this work (Long, 2018, p. 230). I shared my stories with two fellow students, and we discussed them in two sessions over a period of six hours. The exchanges were recorded and transcribed. During the exchanges and by reading over the data several times I discovered certain themes that came up, which seemed important to me and resonated with me.

- Attention

In general, every human being craves for attention from the very moment of being born. I will therefore focus on two incidents that probably make my situation somewhat special. The first one is being part of a business family. It indicates that the business is always present in every family gathering, may it be an ordinary dinner at home or a birthday party of a member of the extended family. Particularly in my family, it meant as well that my father was putting so

much time and effort into the company that there was just not much room and capability left for him to listen to my thoughts and problems. It felt to me as if the company was an additional family member. And us children had to share the attention of our parents with it. When competing for attention from our parents among the siblings, the business would always win. The other incident was the passing away of my older brother, who died when he was only three months old. It might be that my father's concentration on the company was even reinforced by this as the company was a safe place to go for him. A place where he had some control about beginnings and endings and where he experienced less emotions or at least different ones. Taking this thought further Kets de Vries states that the family business can sometimes be seen as a transitional object that shields from painful experiences and represents a comfort zone between family life and the rough world outside. This view implies the possible risk that the family business might block the personal development of the respective players preventing them from personal growth and might lead to a dysfunctional behavior of not achieving a true sense of self (Kets de Vries et al, 2007, p. 92f).

- Responsibility

I did never experience any openly communicated or directly addressed push or pressure to enter the family enterprise. But when my parents used to talk about other family businesses and business families that we were acquainted with, they always profoundly stated that selling the company would mean failure and that at least one family member of every generation would need to assume responsibility for a senior role in the company. I experienced these conversations from my earliest childhood. As the composition of the family environment and the natural role model function of parents has a convincing and important impact on children, I am not able to analyze how much of the decision of entering the family business was my free will and own choice and how much it was imposed upon me by the expectations of my parents and by the feeling that it was my responsibility. I am often wondering if I had rejected this position, would I have felt a determination strong enough to follow a different vocation. But perhaps the situation unconsciously did not allow me to even think about what my dream career would and could look like. What I do know is, through my own personality I would never have had the ambition and the drive to get in a position with that much power and visibility.

- Silence

In my family, silence was the default position to go to when things went wrong. For example, no one talked about the existence and the death of my brother. I only found out about him as there was a little black and white picture put up next to a candle at my childhood birthdays. When I turned five or six, I then enquired about who the baby on the picture was. My mother answered my question, but the topic was never discussed or reviewed.

Another example was when my father and I were both engaged in the family business. I often had issues that he, in my opinion, was not acting according to the rules that we had given ourselves in a mutual approach with a consultant. When I then addressed these issues with him, he always reacted in an understanding and kind way but kept on doing the things as he used to before, he was simply not addressing them anymore.

- Legitimation

I am struggling with the legitimation of being in this position as I have the feeling that I am only there because I was born in the specific family. Looking from the outside perspective with a high probability I would not be in such a position as I am lacking experience, I would not be there as a woman in a very male business, I would not be there as someone who has not taken all the career and hierarchy steps through our or another organization. Someone in a similar situation once said with some degree of bitterness: “Whatever I do and however successful I am in my job, everything will always be attributed to my surname.”

From an inside perspective I would not be in this position as I am an introvert person that does not like to be in the center of attention or in the position of leading the way. I will rather stay in the background, observing and analyzing calmly and trying to see the big picture. I am for example very hesitant to start interventions, I rather watch how things develop.

On the other hand, as a family member, one has been introduced to the company from a very early age. The family business was the topic at dinners and on weekends. Experiencing this, one has a decade long knowledge of the history and development of the company, about interventions that went well and plans that did not. Based on the emotional engagement there should be no question of loyalty or sincerity towards the company and a long-term view is

probably instilled since childhood. As Andrea Calabro points out these are “hard-to-replicate resources for a non-family manager” (Calabro, p. 40).

Data from the Business

To gain a broader perspective on my role I gathered data from the business from different sources. I used sample surveys with employees, management board members and supervisory board members as well as findings from certain group projects, meetings with new and long-term employees and from random conversations with employees.

Common subjects that showed in these conversations were the following:

- The employees feel that they are part of a big family, harmony is very important, there is no culture of healthy discussions and debate.
- Innovation is highly valued, but it is used as an instrument of power. Not everyone is allowed to innovate. It is the privilege of a small circle.
- The boundaries between departments are considerably high and solid, there are departments in the company that are viewed as superior to others. Hierarchy is valued and decisions are often shifted to or drawn by the top-level management.
- The courage of taking decisions is rather low, there is a climate of safeguarding one's position. On these grounds, mistakes are kept under the table and if mistakes happen there is quite some finger pointing involved.
- Leadership positions are being held quite long; employee turnover is fairly low.
- Diversity is low, especially higher management positions are mostly held by German men. Career opportunities are somehow vague and it is sometimes unclear how career opportunities are offered. The boundaries, roles and tasks of the family as well as the role of the supervisory board are not clearly defined.
- From a performance perspective the company is doing very well, turnover is rising, and results are very satisfying for many years in a row. That might be a reason that the general resistance to change is rather high.

An interesting finding in this study was the extent to which the values and valencies of the owning family (or of one important and visible member of the family) can be found within the

culture of the company. These can be well founded values that have been established for decades and have been handed down by several “generations” of employees. They are seldom openly expressed, and, in many cases, people do not know where these cultural characteristics originate from (Schein, Schein, 2017, p.15). Or the values of the owning family can surface through unofficial rules that run in the company for decades. They are handed from one employee to another without questioning their truth nor genuineness. It is probable that this happens in every organization but in family businesses the effect might be stronger as the players at the helm usually stay longer in their positions and hence have a stronger impact over time.

Historic Data

Looking at organizational culture Edgar Schein has established the model of the three levels of culture. According to him there is a first level called artifacts. Artifacts are structures and processes that are easy to observe but hard to decipher, for example language, products and clothing. The second level is about espoused values which include strategies, goals and philosophies. And there is the third level of basic underlying assumptions. These are unconscious but taken for granted beliefs, thoughts, and perceptions. Schein describes them as the “*ultimate source of values and action*” (Schein & Schein, 2017, p. 14ff). Based on this theory I am trying to highlight some basic assumptions from this third level. My hope was to find some insights to the operation of the company and the behavior of the employees. As Schein states, the values and belief system from the founding time (that are for our company approximately 90 year ago) are most likely still in place and are thus, influencing the company in a major, but subconscious way (Schein & Schein, 2017, p. 106). What supports this thought for me is that I found out in several exchanges with managers from our mother/sister company that behavioral patterns here and there are in many cases the same. Hence, there must be some profound and well rooted basic assumptions that are influential over a very long period of time as the companies got separated more than two decades ago.

As a source I looked into historical data from jubilee publications, my grandfather's obituaries and my grandmother's memoirs. Scanning them for values and beliefs and mind mapping them I could condense the data to five basic topics that are followingly listed.

Development

In the data I found many hints to the importance of being creative, curious, courageous, open, foresighted and risk taking. The will for shaping something and the appreciation of contradicting views and constructive difference of opinion was mentioned, and importance of education was found in several places. Here are two quotes from my grandfather to back this up:

“Either an entrepreneur takes all assessable risks that he faces, or he has to refrain from being an entrepreneur.” and “One can only be supported by something that offers resistance.”

The element of development can still be found in the business concerning the product portfolio. What has been somehow lost over the years was courage and the appreciation of contrasting views.

Caring

The second outstanding subject is evolving around the theme of caring for other people. Words like helping, fairness, responsibility, solidarity, responsibility, and obligation were frequently mentioned. For my grandmother this was clearly the main driver and my grandfather was sharing her thinking in many ways, for example, he wanted to offer the best and safest jobs for his employees. It was especially my grandmother's mission and aspiration to organize Christmas events and summer festivities for employees, offering presents for their children and visiting ill workers or women in childbed. It was interesting to me to find out that my grandparents were in most cases not being addressed by their first names nor by Mr. and Mrs. S. but by “Father and Mother S.”.

Humbleness

The third topic that became obvious from the data scanning was being humble. It became evident through descriptions from employees, partners or majors who describe my grandfather as altruistic, modest, unselfish, supporting, dutiful, approachable, being a good friend and not being a “man of many words”.

Two quotes of my grandfather emphasize this: *“But it is not my work alone, it is the work of many hands.”* and *“I wonder which economic system will give everybody a greater benefit and greater happiness.”*

Humbleness is still rooted in the business. Our marketing approach is for example very low key and exaggeration is not welcome. The same is true for my family with a very down to earth and frugal lifestyle.

Autonomy

As a main reason for starting the business in the first place was the importance of autonomy to do what you think and to be your own boss. This must have been a tremendously strong driver as there was quite something at stake. Leaving a secure and proper employment as a mechanic and starting with little money into the unknown. As an additional risk my grandparents and their new company had to face the world depression starting in 1929.

It seems a paradox situation that autonomy and independence being the main or one of the main drivers for founding an own business turn into the opposite after handing over the legacy to the next generations. The generations to follow are now struggling with accepting the handed down responsibility as a life challenge or a burden. Or to appear as a disappointment to their parents by not accepting the responsibility. I do not want to depreciate the fact that being the owner of a business comes with a lot of independence and opportunities to implement one’s vision. But of the multitude of possibilities that unfold when reaching adulthood this one option is already being set clearly by history, legacy and expectations. Thinking about the entrepreneurial spirit of founders it would be more straightforward if founding parents would encourage their

children to not enter the family business but start an entrepreneurial career themselves. This alternative was not seen as an option in my family or origin.

Work Ethic

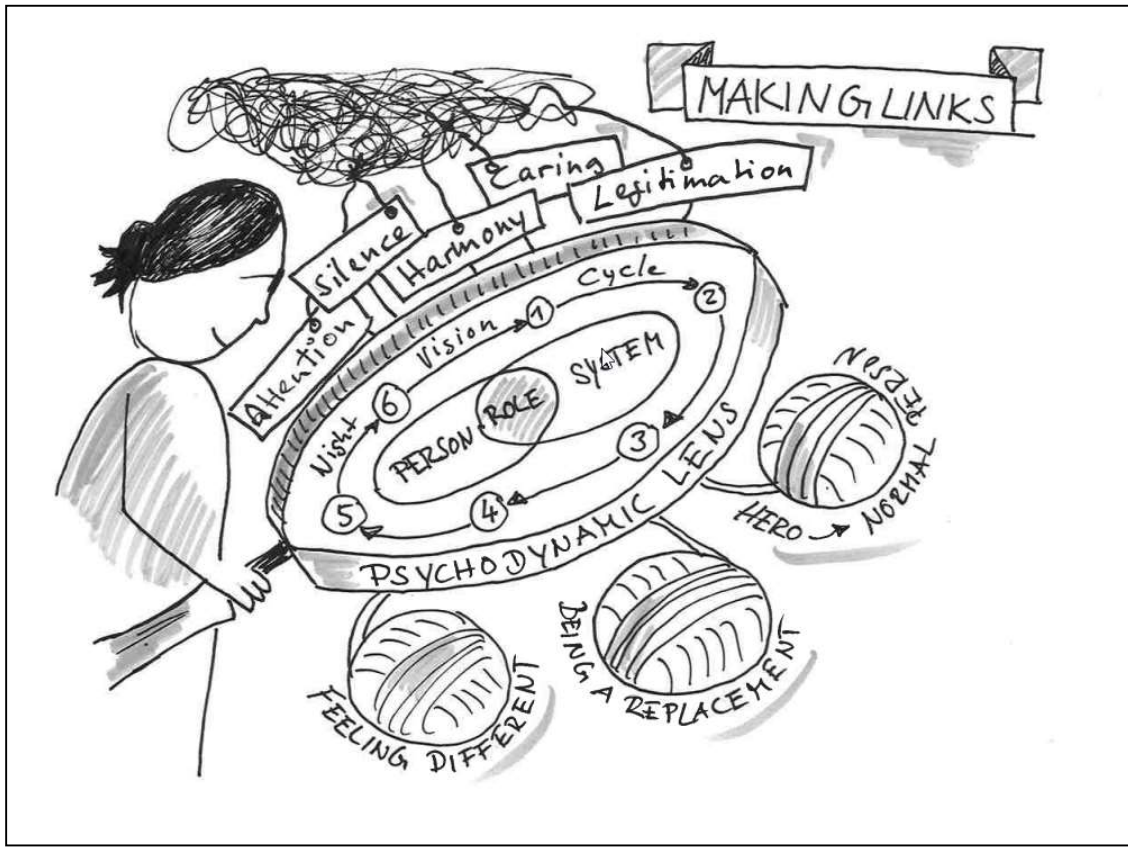
For dedicating a life to building up a company in a way my grandparents did they must have had a strong drive. Hard work and assuming responsibility for them were clear virtues. Making the world a better place by producing high quality products at high quality workplaces was noticeably what stimulated them to take on the risk and hardship that building their own business involved at these times. An extreme quote by their sons when they started taking over leading positions in the business reflects this thinking: *“Bad work is a sin and must be detested.”*

The responsibility thinking is instilled deeply in my family until today. Working hard is seen as a virtue. A flamboyant lifestyle would be not acceptable for all family members.

Discussion - Identifying and linking patterns

According to Kets de Vries and Cheak, *“the human development is an inter- and intrapersonal process; we are all products of our past experiences, and those experiences, including the developmental experiences provided by our early caregivers, continue to influence throughout life”* (Kets de Vries & Cheak, 2014).

To find patterns in the themes collected above and to be able to link past episodes to present feelings and behavior I decided to dissect three areas. These areas contain some unresolved issues and looking into them was driven by my wish for more clarity. As Lehman and Van de Loo describe in the fourth step of the Night Vision Cycle, the so-called spike provides a bridge between what is happening on the surface and the unconscious (Lehman, Van de Loo).



1 Looking for a role model and support

Reflecting on the relationship between my father and me, I can segment it into four phases. The first phase being my childhood and teenage years until my mid-twenties. I did regard my father as a *hero*, unfortunately he did not have much time for me nor did he pay much attention to my thoughts and interests. My parents had a strict separation between private matters for which my mother was in charge and business matters for which my father was in charge. And it was understood that my father needed to relax when he was at home, therefore I did not bother him with problems, questions or noise. Being close to him meant involving the business, so I was very happy when he would work on projects with me that involved the tools our company developed and manufactured. From my perspective during that time, he was doing an amazing job at the family business and I could not imagine following him in his footsteps as his role seemed very grand. When I took the decision to follow him as his successor in the business, I was probably driven by the desire to make my parents and especially my father happy and proud and receiving his attention. As it seemed not possible to

compete with the company for my father's attention, I unconsciously decided to join forces with the company, and gain my father's trust and attention that way.

The second phase started when I was entering the company. I was sure that he would be my *supporter* who would facilitate my way to the helm of the business. I was also convinced that he would help me to successfully find my place in the company and that he would announce me officially as his successor. I hoped that through my decision of following in his footsteps he would acknowledge and see me for what I am and what I am capable of. I was longing for his approval. In the years to come I found out that he was not willing or able to fulfill my hopes and expectations. There were several incidents where he literally ignored me while taking important decisions and when he did not care about my standing and about my opinion at the slightest. There were no words or deeds of approval either. This period was very disappointing and painful for me as my image of the 'perfect father' was somehow shattered to pieces.

Consequently, in phase three I considered my father to be a *traitor*. I was so hurt that he did not support me that I considered everything he did and said to be wrong, unhelpful, even stupid. I accused him of not keeping his promises, of not stepping back as agreed upon and of not being able to take on his role as an ordinary supervisory board member. He was still very much involved in operational business. I wanted him to vacate his office and limit his visits to the company. What I achieved with my behavior was that our relationship deteriorated severely. According to Smythe and Sardeshmukh the success of a transition process is largely depended on a healthy relationship between predecessor and successor. This is including trust, respect, understanding and collaborative behavior (Smythe & Sardeshmukh, 2013, p.2). During that phase we were in danger to not only mess up the family cohesion but also sending confusing signals to our family business, severely endangering the process of the generational transition.

Only after some time, reflecting and learning about systems psychodynamic concepts like Melanie Klein's paranoid schizoid position and depressive position, I could enter phase four where I understood that my father is simply a *normal human being* with flaws and talents and burdens and dreams. During the first three phases, I was captivated in the paranoid schizoid position where one sees other people in an all good or an all bad way. In the first two phases, I idealized my father and interpreted everything he did in that perspective. In the third phase, it was the opposite and everything he did and said was, in my eyes targeted against me, mean

and ignorant. The all-negative perception can serve the purpose of protecting someone from feeling sad or guilty. Being ready to move towards the depressive position enables someone to realize that all humans have positive and negative characteristics and in this complexity imperfections and frailties can be accepted. It is about seeing yourself and others as they really are (Milton et al., 2011, p. 38).

Looking at our relationship from a more depressive position, I can see that my father had a lot of issues to struggle with. Most probably it was not his calling to take over the position in the family company of his parents-in-law. He was always a mechanical engineer with a love for details and a talent for design, but I think he never felt comfortable in the role of the general manager. At least he never showed the excitement and enthusiasm to lead the company with all the challenges and opportunities that came with it. Some years back I incidentally heard him talking about plans of giving up his position of general manager at the age of 50 and to start a new life as a farmer in the USA. His dream was somehow suppressed by the family system. No one ever talked about it, at least I got no notion of it then. Additionally, the company might have been a place for him to escape mourning his lost father and son he both had hardly known. He never had many interests and hobbies besides the family business. And here I come, expecting to smoothly transition into his position while he shall quietly withdraw himself from all the appreciation and power that he had once built up through this position. In retrospection I am not surprised anymore that the transition did not go well.

2. Replacement child

Although I was not born directly after the early death of my brother I do feel a special connection with my brother that originates more from within me than from external circumstances. It started probably when I found out at one of my childhood birthdays that this was not my special and happy day but that I had to share it with my brother's death anniversary. Hence positive emotions were always mixed with the sad feeling of my parents being reminded of the severe loss they never really talked about. Coming across the term "replacement child" did resonate with me a lot.

Schellinski defines the term replacement child as being a child that was conceived to replace a child or other member of the family, or who was born shortly after such a loss, or who

replaced a sibling or other family member during the years of growing up (Schellinski, 2020, p. 21).

For any parent there seems to be no greater nightmare than the silent tragedy of sudden infant death syndrome. When a child's death is attributed to it, the infant's death remains somehow unexplained. And agonizing over questions like "Why has this happened to my perfectly healthy baby?", "Who is to blame for this death?" or "How could we have prevented this from happening?" will occupy the parents and the relatives closely involved (Duncan & Byard, 2018).

Back in these times it was not so easy to receive or to ask for professional help in this serious situation. So, their way of dealing with it was numbing the pain by not addressing it and not talking about it.

My sisters and I did most probably sense our parents' silent suffering. As a result, we were "good kids", never bringing our parents any trouble, never rebelling against them, rarely being loud or troublesome. I am assuming we did not want to cause them any more pain or grief by behaving inadequately. According to Coles for example Salvador Dali (who was a replacement child) spent the rest of his life trying to find a way into his parents' heart which gives a deep insight into the effect that a dead sibling can have upon a surviving sibling (Coles, 2011, p. 28).

An additional difficulty in the situation of sudden infant death syndrome is that the parents' experiences with their baby are limited. They have few memories to mourn and instead must mourn the wishes and expectations that they had held for their child (Grout & Romanoff, 2000, p. 95). Which leaves replacement children with the unrealizable task of living up to someone that is idealized or even perfect.

For quite some time I had the feeling that I am not in the right place having the position of leading the company and that I will never be good enough doing so. According to Schellinski the replacement child's need for survival make it comply and bend itself to meet the unaccomplishable expectations of the parents as it does not want to lose their love and affection. As a consequence, the child is not likely to develop according to its own character and true self (Schellinski, 2020, p. 53).

In Jaffe's Book "When will I be good enough?" I found the passage that describes my feeling for not having an opinion of my own considerably well: "*In my family of origin, my emotional*

existence depended on blending into our family's fabric that had already been woven. I morphed into the color beige without yet fully knowing that my vibrant soul screamed red, magenta, anything but blandness. And thus, I learned to bury many desires, my thoughts, and my feelings at an early age. I became a passenger instead of a driver in my own life, ultimately taking the backseat in many of my decisions..." (Jaffe, 2016, p.1).

Creating awareness of my feelings about being a replacement child showed me that maybe my ambivalent feelings in the supervisory board chair do not only have to do with the family business itself, nor with my experience and my resume but with many unconscious incidents and expectations that came from within me and that I projected on the players in my environment.

3. Feeling different

Describing my fathers' role in the business is probably best expressed by the "caring patriarch". He knew everybody in the company mostly by name and with their family background. He knew about all technical projects as high-quality products are our biggest asset. And he knew all building projects as our employees should have a nice surrounding to work in. He did not stick to the official tasks of a supervisory board member but took decisions in the daily business. Everybody knew and accepted it. He valued people that thought along the same lines as he did. If managers had their own opinions that were contrary to his, they were exchanged, often on short notice.

The high value for caring started in the very beginning of the business, personified in my grandmother. Another source that was enhancing the caring component originates from my core family. As my parents transferred some of their caring potential from the family to the business, seeing it as an additional child. My parents being role models for my sister and me, we acquired this view as well.

And as they were not only role models for us but for the business as well, over the years a culture of striving for harmony and preventing open dissent developed. To avoid deviating opinions even small decisions were made at the top level. As this is deeply embedded in the company, I get approached for examples about decisions concerning the color of the cardboard packaging of a consumable. And this is clearly not a decision I want to or shall take in my role.

My rational thinking is that I want to have clear boundaries between the management board and the supervisory board. But I am often having trouble in sticking to the role as the system is used to another behavior and I found myself getting caught in these expectations.

Chapman and Long state that the more powerful the history of a role is the higher is the probability that the role will have an active influence on the current role holder and on the system itself (Chapman & Long, 2009).

Another reason why I feel ambivalent in my position, is being the only woman in the leading position in the business. All predecessors in this or in similar roles were male, the business is very male, our customers are mostly male. By looking at the culture and behavior and the way employees pursue their career prove a rather masculine environment. Since I am the only women on the board, according to research chances are high that stereotyping takes place and that I am probably reduced to the typecast of a helper and nurturer which reduces chances of being seen as a potential leader. Other research shows that women that find themselves in such situations tend to make themselves invisible (Goffee & Jones, 2001, page 8).

Through my parents, I had very traditional role models when it comes to women in business. My mother did not continue working after the children were born. My father was not involved in family matters. This was quite similar in my uncles' families and mostly in my sisters' families as well. Consequently, roles were pre-defined for women and men in the environment, I was growing up in.

According to Kets de Vries, women who are reaching high positions are running a high probability of feeling out of place when this is in conflict with their family of origin thinking concerning gender. Women tend to consciously or unconsciously compare their role with the role of their mother. This may lead to an inner confusion and a rising feeling of self-doubt (Kets de Vries, 2005).

Recognizing that the role as it was set up is very powerful and contains a mix of patriarchal decision making, knowing all the answers attitude and caring about every employee explains some of the difficulties I am having in taking it. As this is deeply embedded in the system (and in me) I am having a hard time in following my own vision of the business. A business where employees are empowered to share their views and are involved in decision making. Creating an environment where the workforce is diverse and productive disagreement is not only possible but valued.

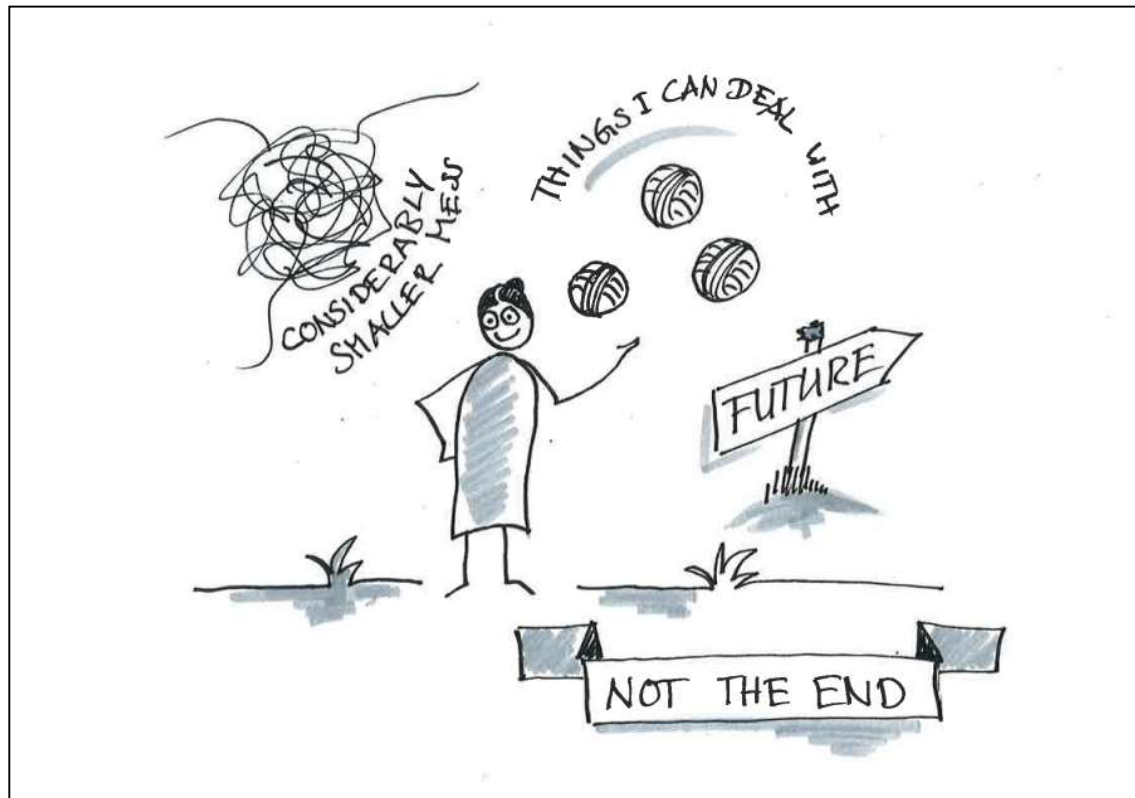
Findings and Implications

The fifth step of the Night Vision Cycle involves the identification of patterns. The emergence of similar patterns might trigger a further investigation (Lehman, Van de Loo). The pattern that emerged in all the three areas of deeper consideration is the one of “being silent” and of missing self-esteem. Knowing about its existence I can now see that it is reinforced from different backgrounds. First, from trying to be a good and uncomplicated child that did not want to cause trouble or sorrow. Second, from the desired for, but missing support and encouragement in the business role that added to a feeling of insecurity and as a result triggered the behavior of being imperceptible. And third, from being a non-traditional role holder as a woman, that can lead to blending in and silencing oneself.

A related pattern that runs like a central theme through my thinking is the question of how much my decision to enter the family business was based on free will. Or was much of it triggered by outside expectations? It is not so much about finding an answer to this question but about the analysis of internal drivers that have a powerful influence on beliefs, values, behavior and attitudes (Kets de Vries, 2011, p. 82). In the generation following the founding generation there is always the question if the commitment to the business was a conscious decision or simply the lacking opportunity and courage of stepping out of the shadow of the founder or predecessor and to develop an own personality. It is a somewhat basic realization that it is not only me that is struggling with these dynamics but everybody who is involved no matter how balanced and stable they may appear. Paying attention to those interpersonal relations from the past as well as the present, it is important to understand how we are unconsciously drawn to certain wishes, desires and fantasies (Kets de Vries et al, 2007, p. 81).

Transferring these insights mentioned above to the role of a leader shows that self-awareness is “the” starting point. According to Du Toit et al., successful leaders of the future will only strive if they understand their emotional, irrational sides and those of others. Leaders need to take care of external impacts on their organization as well as of their own personality as it shapes how one handles ambivalence, contradictions, self-empowerment and empowering others. Du Toit stats that a new type of leadership is needed. For that reason, he points to the

growing importance of the supposedly more feminine principles of leadership like nurturing, containment and integration (Du Toit et al.).



This research has helped me understanding the dynamics that are inherent in this process of role taking. It already starts with being born into a social system. Kets de Vries and Cheak state, *“only in understanding ourselves and our drivers, and in turn turning our analytic gaze to deciphering the motivations and behaviors of others around us, can we truly understand the complexity of the system in which we live and work”* (Kets de Vries & Cheak, 2014). The moment we arrive we are exposed to a multitude of external expectations. We soon find out that these expectations define how our future role should be taken up but the script that we are learning is mostly unconscious. Growing up, the push and pull of these expectations are met by the surfacing drivers and characteristics of the individual, thereby shaping an identity. Questions arise about whose expectations are most important and if they might be helpful or limiting our development. There are expectations that we either internalize and make them

our own or that we repress and try to forget. And all these experiences we take with us when we start a role at work (Newton, 2018, p. 207).

Quoting Newton *“our challenge is to clarify just how our current role is best shaped to contribute the shared task of this organization, and to harness what we can bring appropriately from our past experience to fill out this role. For example, we might have to disentangle experiences in our family system from those in our work system, and this might be made more difficult when (...) we actually work in a family business”* (Newton, 2018, p. 207).

Personal Findings

In the process of researching for and writing of this study I made these personal and basic findings.

- Accept the presence of messiness at the intersection of owning family and family business
- People have their strength and weaknesses – There is not black and white, only grey
- Disentanglement in a family business can be challenging, as conflicts may originate in childhood
- It is not enough to look at the surface. The unconscious level has to be taken into account.
- If businesses are treated like families, problems might occur
- Family scripts might be long lasting and strong, but this does not automatically make them helpful and truthful - They may be questioned

Limitations and future research

The limitations of this study are inherent in the method of autoethnography. This research is almost exclusively based on my personal and individual perspective. On these grounds, my observations might be shaped and filtered by my perception. Since I was aware of this peculiarity, I involved other people in the process by forming a reflection group for analyzing

my personal stories and I tried to take on the role of an outside observer whenever possible, still, it remains a subjective work. Furthermore, I am aware of the fact that my view is strongly influenced by the culture and region I was socialized in, where hard work is a virtue and keeping a family business in the family for generations is the default mindset.

I am also aware that my findings are most probably not applicable to others and they cannot be generalized. Still, I hope that there will be cues, indications and tools for someone in a similar situation that are helpful for understanding the processes in a family business.

Writing this thesis, I came across themes that would be interesting for future research at the intersection of family businesses and systems psychodynamic methods.

- Analyzing the particular situation and the challenges of role taking from non-traditional role holders by interviewing a qualitative cluster of affected persons
- The question whether the process of “letting go” for the predecessor in the family business is even more difficult when he or she was urged into that role in the first place
- The question about triggers that make someone from the owning family decide to enter a position in the family business or not. And what are the implications on the respective family members long-term.

Conclusion

There is the general advice “Begin with the end in mind.” I have to admit that the advice was not applicable for this kind of research. When starting, I had a different approach and target in mind, but while writing, the content changed and morphed a lot. Consequently, the process of writing this autoethnography was a real challenge for me. I was constantly bouncing back and forth the two poles of on the one hand really making progress and diving into the topic as it is for my own good and in my very own interest. On the other hand being very reluctant to write about myself as there was a constant underlying feeling of having nothing important to contribute to a general audience and being uncertain to what extent I want to share my personal story and partly my family’s story. Hence this thesis journey was a real emotional

roller-coaster. One day I wanted to press the delete button and the next day I was entirely grateful that I had the opportunity to write this thesis. During the process, I kept wondering why I decided to write my master-thesis about myself. I probably felt that I had to and wanted to work through several topics that had been surfaced during the 'Executive Master in Change' program over the last two years. I have gained more insight on these topics by writing this thesis, acknowledging the start of my own path of self-awareness.

And this is the fascinating element about writing an autoethnography. With its evolving, the writer evolves with it. The autoethnography of yesterday is no longer true today. The mere process of writing and thinking, and the confrontation with oneself on different levels does already change one's course and thinking, and environment.

Talking about family businesses some time ago someone said to me: "The third generation is the most difficult – there is not fun." Hearing this back then I totally agreed with this view. Meanwhile I think that maybe there is no fun now, but it doesn't have to stay like that. Or as Hollis expresses it: "I am not what happened to me: I am what I choose to become." (Hollis, 1993, p. 97)

When you hike, you bend into the mountain. Sometimes you slip and hurtle forward. Sometimes you lose your balance and topple back. This is a story of trying to learn in just the right way, to lean one's present self into something unattained, attainable, yet out of view. Even slipping can be instructive. Something happens not at the top, but along the way. One has the chance, in Nietzsche's words, to "become who you are."

John Kaag – "Hiking with Nietzsche"

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