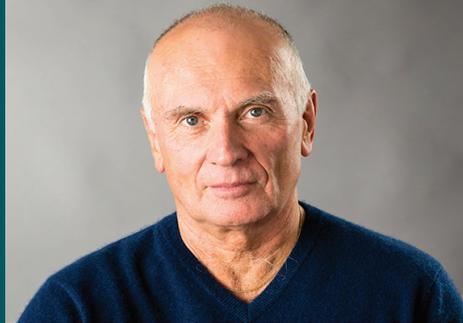


Parentification and Leadership

by Dr. Paul Dunion, Transformational Faculty Member



Parentification of children happens when parents are either unwilling or unable to effectively parent their children. Parental neglect may happen due to mental illness, addiction, arrested development, medical issues, unavailability due to work or travel, or a sense of overwhelm due to stress. Parentified children step into the parental void. They attempt to parent themselves, their siblings or one of their actual parents. These efforts snatch children out of childhood, truncating a normal developmental process. For more on this topic, see my article “Parentification.”

Through the years I have been struck by the large number of leaders with whom I have worked who had no idea that they had parentified childhoods. For sure, parentification impacts many aspects of adulthood. This article examines the significance of parentification upon leading. We will look at how it can be an impediment to being an effective leader, and what can be done to address parentification in order to strengthen a leader’s capacity to shepherd and steward an organization effectively.

What becomes relatively obvious is how parentified children learn to compensate for parental neglect. This compensatory move often generates a set of strengths and liabilities. It may be that many parentified children become leaders in industry, business and politics because of the compensatory development of innate gifts and skills. This may be testimony that parental neglect or loss need not be simply unfortunate.

Parentified Conditions Facing Leadership and How to Address Them

1. *The Condition* - A Gnawing sense of inadequacy. Feeling like they are not enough is inevitable when children are asked to parent themselves, a sibling or their actual parents. They constantly wrestle with not knowing what to do. They were simply children being asked to be adults. Often, the feeling of inadequacy was relieved by allegedly believing that they were actually ready to leave the uncomplimentary status of being a child.

The Impact upon Leadership - A gnawing sense of inadequacy can impact leading in several different ways. First, there can be a feeling of fraudulence, as a leader occupies a position of responsibility and power and feels inadequate. Secondly, this can inspire a compensatory move toward compulsive striving, which can easily morph into a myopic condition whereby the vision is limited to the next best way to prove competency. This often leads to an inability to truly see what is happening in an organization, especially what is needed by colleagues and employees. The compromised vision can easily extend to the family back home. Thirdly, there can be either a knee-jerk reaction to making decisions, attempting to demonstrate quickly that the leader possesses what it takes; or there can be great hesitancy in decision-making, driven by self-doubt.

The Remedy - First of all, it can be extremely helpful to leaders to simply get honest about how inadequate they feel. Secondly, there is potentially an opportunity to restore a great deal of confidence by understanding that these old feelings of inadequacy were never about their shortcomings but rather about being asked as children to be adults. Thirdly, reclamation of one's essential worthiness can happen by addressing the child part of the self that was convinced he or she was simply not enough. That inner child needs to hear that feelings of inadequacy occurred because the child was expected to be other than a child and not because of some intellectual deficiency. I recommend finding someone qualified to facilitate the inner child work.

2) The Condition – Pretending – Pretending to know something is a natural way for children to cope with expectations to know things that they are not capable of knowing. In order to diminish the tension that can accompany consciously misleading others, the propensity to pretend happens unconsciously and is reproduced in adulthood.

The Impact upon Leadership – Pretending becomes an issue when colleagues and employees begin to feel misled in regard to what is promised and predicted. At that point, the integrity of leaders can be seriously questioned by those with whom they work. As they experience the incongruence between what is said and what occurs, trust is compromised. When trustworthiness is discredited, effective collaboration along with teambuilding and loyalty go undermined.

The Remedy – It is quite important to get help from a practitioner who understands pretending as a natural way for a parentified child to cope as well as how easy it is for the coping mechanism to accompany a person into adulthood, rather than seeing the dynamic as simply about lying and misleading people. It is critical for leaders to accept the pretending they did as children as simply a way to deal with an untenable situation. The goal now will be to deepen a capacity to accept “not knowing” shamelessly. When leaders are honest about what they don't know, they foster a climate of trust, creativity, acceptance and collaboration.

3) The Condition – Exaggerated independence and compulsive self-reliance. No truth is more apparent to parentified children than that they are alone. Survival means learning to be independent, giving up receiving viable support from others. In order to numb the loss of others serving as a meaningful resource, independency is inflated to be an exceptional personal strength.

The Impact upon Leadership - Obviously, there is a payoff when leaders know how to depend upon themselves, experiencing themselves as possessing a valued interior resource. However, when self-reliance becomes compulsive, leaders can become confused about what it means to generate genuine rapport with others. It becomes easy to hold the belief: “Why involve others when I can get so much more done, more quickly by myself.” Teambuilding can become extremely challenging as well as losing sight of the strengths of others and how to best employ those strengths. Exaggerated independence becomes insular, leading to emotional isolation, which typically yields a loss of faith that leaders can by meaningfully joined by others. Emotional isolation also makes leaders anonymous, leaving colleagues and employees confused about who their leaders actually are. That kind of confusion can leave an organization at an immense disadvantage in regard to efficiency and productivity, especially when values and purpose remain veiled.

The Remedy – The initial key is to appreciate how the embellishment of independence was a key psychological way to survive childhood. It certainly transformed aloneness into a strength as well as seriously compromised a capacity for interdependence. An important beginning place is to do the work necessary to get to how alone the leader felt as a child. Accessing the grief associated with the loss of real support sets the stage for genuine rapport building. As the grief is felt and released, leaders can begin to peel away the protective layer of numbness and feel the desire to enroll others in their lives. Slowly, a resiliency builds to cope with frustration, loss and diversity as they relate to others. As leaders practice allowing themselves the desire to be joined, their discernment sharpens in regard

to the resonance they experience with folks. There is an evolving ability to see the varied strengths and developmental edges of others. There is typically a release of narcissism that naturally accompanies inflated independence. They become more curious about who they are working with and how to best generate effective alliances. Much of this remedy will depend upon a willingness to enrich their capacity to trust.

4) *The condition* - Living with an underlying feeling of distrust. When designated caregivers neglect to offer guidance, care, and appropriate boundaries, parentified children don't believe that the world is a place to receive meaningful offerings from others. Hence, there is no real reason to consider becoming more trusting.

Impact upon leadership - Early violations of trust naturally yield generalized stories about the world. It becomes easy to believe that no one is really trustworthy. When leaders relate to colleagues and employees with an underlying feeling of distrust, they typically remain defended by employing domination and/or distancing. Of course, the lack of psychological proximity begets distrust of such leaders. Hence, a culture of distrust is easily produced, wreaking havoc upon teambuilding, collaboration and exercising sabotage of decisions made by superiors. A similar climate of distrust can be created at home.

The Remedy - Strengthening a capacity to trust for leaders who were parentified is an extremely significant undertaking. The level at which they can trust will define much of their professional and personal lives. The beginning place is to get the support needed in order to be honest about just how much the ability to trust has been mitigated. Secondly, one needs to develop and appreciate how wise it was for a child to suspend trusting when so much was taken away. It was an effective defense against having to feel deep disappointment and hurt, which would have left the child feeling extremely vulnerable and unsafe. Thirdly, it is necessary to find, feel and express the grief associated with the loss of being able to trust designated caregivers. Fourth, it becomes

important for leaders to understand what it means to work with building a capacity to trust. One aspect of that work is defining trust as being about two beliefs: you believe you will be extended kindness and you believe you will be told the truth. Also, trust must be earned by demonstrating both the offerings of kindness and honesty. It becomes important to gradually understand that the entire world does not resemble one's parents. Leaders can then be introduced to the role of discernment as a way to measure the quality of kindness and honesty they are receiving from a person. Fifth, the next step is to identify someone as likely trustworthy and proceed to take the risk of confiding in that person, request that the person join you in some collaborative project or allocate a task to that person. The key is to discern the level of kindness and honesty received when taking one of these risks. It is important to keep in mind that sometimes we are hurt and disappointed by someone we trust. Like the rest of life, there's no guarantees when it comes to trust. However, leaders can grow an abiding trust for themselves as they exercise discernment and take risks to trust that yield favorable results. Along with risk-taking, an emotional resiliency can grow, allowing leaders to be hurt and disappointed when a risk doesn't work out without moving into pessimism and cynicism about the human condition. As a capacity to trust develops, leaders become more able to receive what others have to offer.

5) *The Condition* - An underdeveloped ability to receive. Parentified children are mandated to be givers. They give to their siblings and parents, and later on, to whomever is in their lives. Giving becomes a way to support personal worth as well as deserving to be accepted and included. They know deservedness as an outcome of what they bring to others, but not as a natural consequence of who they are. They organize their psychology by eradicating the need and desire to receive, allowing them to anesthetize the longing to benefit from another's generosity, since they don't believe it is possible. Amplifying a capacity to give while ignoring receiving easily leads to burnout and diminishes a motivation to be involved and committed to others.

The Impact upon Leadership – When leaders are challenged by receiving, co-workers become confused about what they can offer. It appears that the non-receiving leader has no needs both at work and at home. Colleagues and family members may also start to define themselves as lacking value as a resource for the person who has a prohibition upon receiving. The result in both environments is often a deep sense of estrangement where leaders and their colleagues as well as leaders and their family members really don't know each other. The mystery accompanying estrangement often debilitates trust.

The Remedy - The transformation begins by having the awareness that parentification drove the child into an exaggerated position of being a giver, while the ability to receive continued to recede. Next, a leader will once again be asked to grieve the losses accrued along the way. The key is to acknowledge, feel and express what was lost without catastrophizing the life that has been. It will be important to have a daily practice of identifying personal desires, with some involving others. Some desires will be practical while others will be more psychological. The later desires will likely be the ones pushed into the unconscious in order to avoid feeling disappointment. Some of these psychological desires will include: a desire to be understood, accepted, encouraged, appreciated, loved, included, trusted, reassured, invited and welcomed. It may take a while for leaders to become comfortable with these emotional desires. It is fine to take some time just identifying them without talking about them. In fact, leaders may need time to adjust in a serious way to committing to being an apprentice of receiving.

The next step will be to identify a manageable risk regarding making a request of a psychological desire to a trusted other. It is critical to make the request in behavioral terms. Only then will the recipient of the request know what is being asked and how to actually meet the request. There is also the opportunity to form an agreement with accountability. An example might be the desire to be understood, which can be translated into: "If you

simply acknowledge verbally what I said, it will help me to feel understood by you."

Another key to maturing an ability to receive is to simply practice making concrete requests, keeping in mind that you do not have to protect the recipient from fielding your requests. Recipients have three legitimate responses to a request: "Yes", "No" and "I want to negotiate." As leaders learn to receive, they create more engagement and emotional intimacy at home. At work, they strengthen their motivation to be involved and treat others as viable resources, decisions become more collaborative, problem-solving gains more ease in a climate that offers a more fulfilling work life.

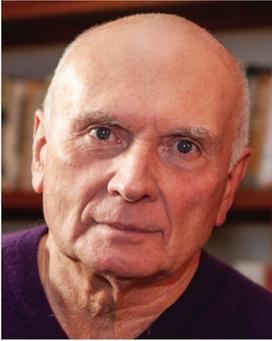
Conclusion

It appears quite clear that parentification does not necessarily prevent someone from acquiring a position of responsibility and power. To the contrary, it seems that a relatively large number of people attain positions of leadership in spite of having suffered from parental neglect.

What can drive someone to significant levels of achievement who was parentified?

With enough ego strength, some innate gifts and hard work, parentified children can generate an exceptional measure of socio-economic success. This is especially true when they are determined to prove they deserve to be remembered, loved and known as capable of making a difference. Of course, without introducing something reparative to what was lost, the need to prove oneself can go on endlessly, generating yet more loss.

My vision of what would be most restorative for leaders who were parentified children is an ongoing group experience - a gathering of seven or eight leaders willing to share their strengths, challenges and hopes related to their parentified experience. Leaders can begin to manifest genuine self-care in lieu of self-neglect or compensations for neglect. Members of such a group would need to be willing to be guided by the old adage, "In order to see clearly where you're going, you will need to look back and see clearly where you come from."



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He has been in private practice for the past thirty-seven years. As a holistic psychological healer, employing an existential modality as well as a somatic approach to treating trauma, Paul is trained in EMDR and is a graduate of the Somatic Experiencing Institute.

From its early beginnings, Paul represented the State of Connecticut at the national gatherings of the mytho-poetic men's movement, sponsored by Wingspan. As the founder of Boys to Men, he created a mentoring community for teenage boys. He is the co-founder of COMEGA (Connecticut Gathering of Men), having served over 6,000 men since 1992, which continues to offer biannual retreats. In 2013, Paul established the Croton Mystery School and designed its curriculum with a focus on teaching students how to make peace with life's mystery and unpredictability. He has offered over 200 workshops on topics related to Human Potential. Currently, Paul offers supervision for younger psychotherapists.

Paul has published six books: *Seekers – Finding Our Way Home* (2016); *Dare to Grow-Up – Become Who You Are Meant to Be* (2016); *Path of the Novice Mystic – Maintaining a Beginner's Heart and Mind* (2013); *Shadow Marriage – A Descent into Intimacy* (2006); *Temptation in the House of the Lord* (2004); and his latest offering *Wisdom – Apprenticing to the Unknown and Befriending Fate* (2021).



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