

A new psycho-genealogy tool to reveal environmental crises as transgenerational challenges

A new coaching method goes straight to the collective unconscious of family businesses, revealing the key to successful intergenerational transition.

The related challenge for specialists in family governance is to identify barriers to emotional ownership that disengage the next generation. For the current generation, response to the climate crisis is a crucial determinant – but few businesses are equipped to understand the dynamics governing their survival in the face of this generational challenge.

Combining drawing and genogram in coaching

Clients' tendency to treat their business as 'part of the family' signals a potentially fertile line of enquiry into the character of this ever-present relative - and individuals' emotional bond with it over time. What insights can we gain by treating an organization as another family member? In my study, I explore ways to understand the lived emotional relationships of individual actors, not only with each other but also with their own image of the family business through time.

A psychodynamic coach seeks the most direct path to the unconscious, and employs tools that capture conscious cognition^[1] so that the unspoken can emerge. Two such tools are the *drawing*^[2] – frequently used to access non-verbal, unconscious narratives, and the *genogram*^[3] – a pictorial family tree that reveals the dynamics of relationships across generations^[4]. Both are commonly used by trusted advisors in family business governance.

My study is *the first to merge the two methods to create an entirely new psycho-genealogy tool*: taking the persona of the organization as revealed by the drawing and using the genogram to locate it in an individual's unfolding constellation of family relationships over a 20-year period.

The genogram is widely and successfully used not only to explore the relationships and conflicts affecting a family's governance, but also to facilitate discussion about its future^[5]. The method has a hidden flaw however: by reducing an organization to the sum of its individual actors' relationships the method fails to account for their emotional link with the family business itself, as they perceive it. *Merging the genogram with the drawing tool illuminates this hidden relationship* and allows us to analyze its influence upon psychological currents in the family and wider organization. I will show how this can be done with a four-step process below.

A four-step process

1. Begin with the classic genogram exercise with the participant(s) and take a moment to observe the dynamic at the individual and the family levels.
2. Ask participants to draw first a representation of the family business today. Then move on to the second drawing that represents the family business in 20 years. Take a moment to observe what emerges.
3. Next ask the key question: Now imagine that these two drawings represent 'imaginary' members of your family. It cannot be one of your parents, your brothers and sisters, or your current cousins - it must be a new fictional character of the generation of your choice, a man or a woman. Can you integrate them into your genogram and trace the emotional relationship between you and this new person? The easiest way is to indicate inside the round or square, 2020 for first drawing and 2040 for the second drawing.
4. Compare, as a group or as an individual, the representations of what the drawings have become and observe both the potential emergence of imbalance between conservatism and innovation and the difference between the emotional bonds.

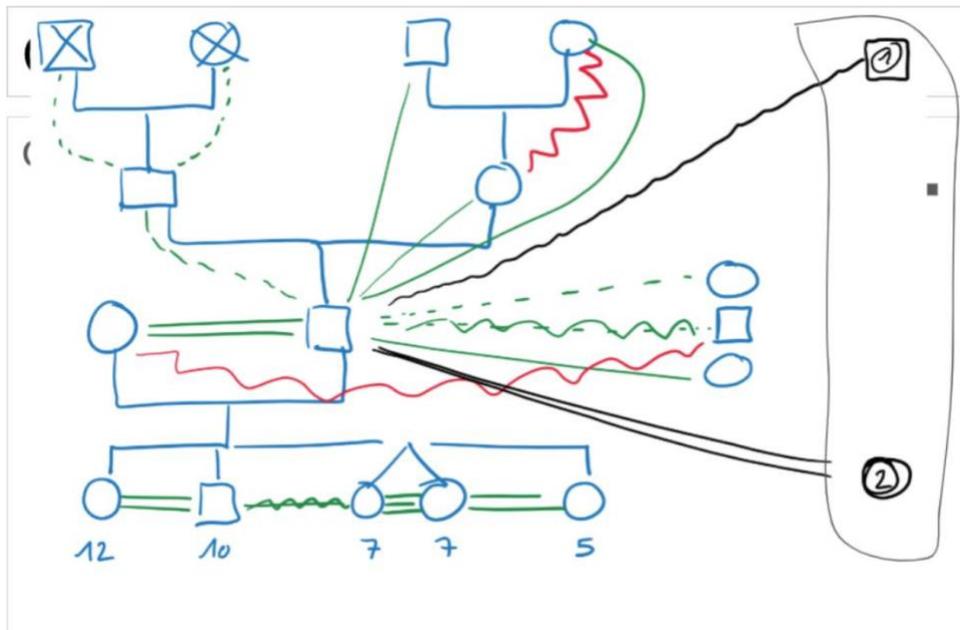


Figure 1. An example of a drawing merged with the genogram

Figure 1 shows one of the drawings from my study. The Family Business today (marked by “1” in a rectangle) is represented by an old man from the earlier generation with a slightly conflictual relationship with the interviewee. The Family Business in 20 years is depicted as a young lady with a fusalional emotional bond with the interviewee.

The participants in my study were drawn from French entrepreneurial families across a wide range of sectors. Several family members from each organization, balanced evenly by gender, took part. Without priming participants around environmental issues, we were eager to see whether this theme would emerge throughout the process – and most importantly, where. I highlight two opposing forces identified from my study below.

Older masculine vs youthful feminine representations⁹

1. We were surprised when our preliminary interview revealed that *hardly any participants named the environment among their personal values*.
2. Their drawings however told a different story. Most depicted the business in its current incarnation as *dark and polluting* – more so than in reality – while in 20 years the picture had transformed to a *bright persona* in harmony with nature.
3. The story became even more interesting when these characters took their place in the genogram. *The darker, polluting organization almost always emerged as masculine, a number of generations in the past*. The ecologically optimistic *future projection was represented as young and feminine*.
4. Without exception, participants revealed a *stronger emotional bond with this youthful feminine representation* in the future, than with the older masculine figure in the past.
5. The climate crisis is confirmed as a locus of emotional ownership, and potential catalyst for younger generations breaking with the family business. Failure to take the environment into account in the 20-year strategy impacts emotional ownership, with *potential for rupture within the family* itself.

The conservative vs the innovative

1. Viewed through a depth psychology lens, the constellations mirrored the Jungian archetypes of *animus* and *anima* with striking regularity^[6]. Applied to organizations, *animus* (masculine)

represents order, direction, goals and planning whilst *anima* (feminine) represents creativity and innovation.^[7]

2. The participants' drawings tend toward symbolism rather than realism; dramatically exaggerating both negative and positive qualities. The radical difference between the two positions reliably points to Klein's classic *splitting* of anxieties and defenses (see Figure 2 below).^[9] The greater the disparity between the two positions, *the greater the imbalance between conservative and innovative forces* within the organization's unconscious.
3. Participants depicted *anima* - appearing as a young feminine presence - as environmental harmony. The relationship with this figure emerged overwhelmingly as more positive than with the *animus* figure. Thus the latent entrepreneurial orientation surfaces as *a call to creativity* in the face of the environmental crisis.

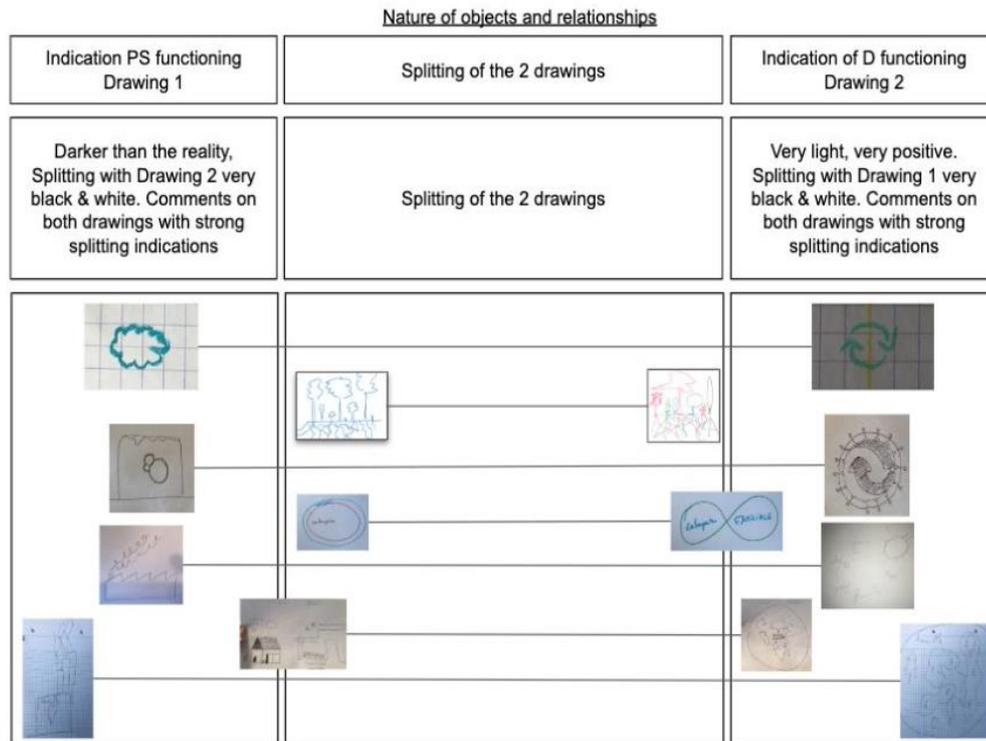


Figure 2. Klein Paranoid-Schizoid (PS) and Depressive (D) positions

Environment crisis: Obstacles or calling?

The emerging insights into emotional bonds and schisms provided a framework for analysis with clients, facilitating a deep dive into their emotional ownership and potential misalignments with the family quest.

Success in family business transitions can be intimately linked to unconscious societal and generational challenges. Currently the environmental crisis is predominant in the collective unconscious, but *any* such issue may manifest as a major threat to family unity and an organization's resilience if not well-addressed.

This new approach forms the blueprint for a powerful intervention for family governance consultants specializing in lifecycle and intergenerational transitions. Where environmental and other collective issues appear as a catalyst for either rupture or renewal in an entrepreneurial family, the business is treated not as an object but as a *subject*, inquiring into its unconscious needs as a gestalt entity and allowing the relationship with its actors to emerge. By revealing the unconscious dynamics of conservative and innovative forces, advisors can guide clients to restore balance, and discover the key to their entrepreneurial orientation.

This unique process can help families understand the consequences of failing to engage properly with unconscious generational challenges. By illuminating the relationship of each individual with the organization, it points the way to healing a generational divide.

For family businesses with an intention to survive, the environmental crisis is not just an obstacle but a calling: to bond generations with a renewed family vision, and to discover a powerful entrepreneurial orientation, aligned with planetary needs.

About the author



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