

We Are ('nt) Family: What Netflix Can Teach Us about Organizational Culture

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By Rabbi Andrew Kastner

In 20 years as a Jewish professional, the trope of “family” has been used to describe nearly every Jewish organization that I have been affiliated with. For years I found this lovely. As a new employee, I’d be greeted with such warmth – multiple Shabbat dinner invitations, a hug, and a “welcome to the family” from veteran staff. There was a sweetness and comfort about working with “family.” The notion communicated an informality to the working relationship – a presumed openness of being at home, a permission to be a bit chummy ... sometimes even too chummy, as we have seen in the #metoo movement.

In recent years, however, as I have studied the models of organizational culture of top performing companies, I am now questioning the idea of organization as family. I wonder if the nomenclature of “family” presents a stumbling block to the continued professionalization of Jewish organizations, and perhaps, an impediment to successfully mending our hemorrhaging leadership pipeline.

We aren’t family when it comes to doing business. That is, when we shape our organizational cultures through the framework of family (read social and relational standards), we provide a confusing, and perhaps, deceiving script for the expectations of an office culture, how we behave, the way we communicate and the nature of accountability.

Organization as Family

While family can be, at its best, nurturing and forgiving, a family misguides as a frame for organizational culture. Challenges can arise around standards of hiring, firing, or even in providing performance reviews. This idea is captured well, albeit dramatically, in a 2014 Harvard Business Review article [Your Company is Not a Family](#), by Reid Hoffman, Ben Casnocha and Chris Yeh:

“In a real family, parents can’t fire their children. Try to imagine disowning your child for poor performance: ““We’re sorry Susie, but your mom and I have

decided you're just not a good fit. Your table-setting effort has been deteriorating for the past 6 months, and your obsession with ponies just isn't adding any value. We're going to have to let you go. But don't take it the wrong way; it's just family.'"

Unsettling, right? Would never happen.

On the surface, this example brings forth the unthinkable idea of firing a family member, *though we may secretly desire it at times*.

A couple of valuable insights emerge that shed light on the clunkiness of company as family. First, disappointment with Susie's performance has been brewing for some time. Her parents don't muster the "radical candor," the ability to challenge directly and care personally (to borrow a helpful term from Silicon Valley veteran and [author Kim Scott](#)) to address her sub-par performance in a timely and constructive manner. Not only is it critique avoidant, it's irresponsible. Susie's parents abdicated the opportunity to address her misses constructively, perhaps offering a treatment plan to support growth and course correction. Notice their decision to dismiss Susie seems to come out of the blue, without referencing performance benchmarks.

Families are groups built to offer not just unconditional love (in the best cases) but platforms of learning, with and without a net, as their growth trajectory demands.

Additionally, one can envision Susie's reaction to the above conversation. She certainly must be caught off-guard by both the critique and the draconian consequences, being kicked out of the family. How could she ever have imagined that?

Real family may be able to live with such quirks. But for a professional environment to be healthy, trusting, and achieving, there must be feedback loops, clear expectations of both the goals at hand, the terms of the relationship, and accountability to perform.

Organization as Team

More than 15 years ago, Reed Hastings, Patty McCord (and co.) began work on the first iteration of what is now known as the Netflix Culture Deck – an

unadorned set of approximately 120 slides that has been called “one of the most important documents to come out of Silicon Valley.” The [Netflix Culture Deck](#) set out as a living document, to shape how business was done, what communication and behavior was expected, how excellence is to be understood, and ultimately how employees will be rewarded.

Within the wisdom of the slides (all of which are worthwhile), there is one that I keep turning over in my head. Within the “High Performance” section of company culture the text reads:

We're a *team*, not a family
We're like a pro sports team, not a kid's recreational team

In the Netflix model of organizational culture, family and team are juxtaposed as foils. There is a guarding against family, as if its sensibilities would run counter to what a company seeks to achieve. Families are inherited. Teams are built, curated, and crafted. Teams are designed for performance – think of the legendary 1992 US Men's Olympic basketball team – the Dream Team.

The Dream Team included a collection of some of the greatest players in the history of the sport – Michael Jordan, Magic Johnson, Larry Bird, etc. Famously, this all-star roster did not guarantee success. During their first month of practice, the Dream Team lost to a group of college players in a scrimmage. “We didn't know how to play with each other,” Scottie Pippen said after the defeat. The team made adjustments to their strategy and communication and went on to win the 1992 Olympic gold dominating the competition, scoring over 100 points in every game.

The key here is that teams, in their pursuit of achievement, rejigger and course correct as needed. If the team is not performing, settling with the talent on hand would be anathema to what a team represents. Teams are always fine tuning. In a family, you get what you get. If it's not working, your best strategy is to manage expectations.

Level Setting Organizational Cultures

Teams and families have different (and some shared) characteristics that define the focus and culture of the group. In the study of leadership and group dynamics, social and personality psychologist, [Donelson R. Forsyth](#), highlights

two principal orientations of how leaders, lead, and by extension a dominant culture that shapes the dynamic of a group or an organization.

Task oriented leadership or culture places a priority on group work or goals – “getting the job done.” Success comes from achieving goals both effectively and efficiently.

On the other hand, **relational oriented** culture, focuses on interpersonal relations. In this model, relational harmony and loyalty become the currency.

Having an understanding of these two orientations is helpful in seeing the key forces that frame relationships and shape organizational culture. With this awareness, organizational leaders can recalibrate the prominence of their task or relational orientation to bring alignment to the culture. Most leaders, Forsyth notes, are inclined to favor one orientation over the other. The art then, of leadership, is in the level setting, knowing when and how much to prioritize task or relational orientation to keep a culture in balance.

Seen through this lens, organization as family offers a culture that is heavily weighted towards relational orientation. It's understandable for a Jewish organization to be drawn to the model of family – it is squarely in our DNA – part of the larger narrative of being Jewish. However, in framing an organization as family, the script that we provide is one that champions relationships above all. Relationships are a key ingredient to any healthy culture, but in an organizational setting it must be measured and balanced with task orientation. The consequence is that the focus on relationships eclipses the focus on outcomes. Additionally a family focus can impact the way we hire, fire, and develop leaders. In this way, on account of the relationship or sense of family obligation, we might make an inappropriate hire, or keep a colleague on staff longer than they are able to positively perform.

In contrast, the organizational frame of “team” requires the right balance of both relational and task orientation. Teams are engineered specifically to achieve a desired goal – focused task orientation. The relational character of teams depends on high-quality interaction, characterized by trust, open communication, and a willingness to embrace conflict.

While the Jewish people remain a family, how we do business shouldn't. Our organizations should be run as teams. It's time to level up and shed the frame of the Jewish organizational family. The future professionalization and impact of the

Jewish communal field depends upon our ability to bring into balance the need for both relational and task orientation as teams.

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