

Imitation, Our Parents, and Transference

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

Several years ago, I was at dinner with a man and his wife, both of whom used to work for an advertising company that did business with Ralph Lauren. Since Lauren was their main account, they had spent years getting to know him and his staff and observing his business. And since Lauren is such a famous man, I was interested in their impressions of him.

The couple was most struck by how Lauren's *inner circle* of employees (the people who spent all their time working directly with him) were "eerily similar." This had made such an impression on these two people that, over the course of a three-hour dinner, they related one example after another demonstrating the similarities between Lauren's employees--and Lauren himself. Both the husband and wife thought it was so unusual that they actually wanted to write a book about it. They felt that Lauren's success as a designer had a lot to do with the fact that he had a *cult* sort of following among his closest employees. Lauren's employees were able to pick up his tastes to such a degree that they could be alone in a bazaar on the other side of the world and could immediately tell what Lauren would like and what he would not like.

This couple worked in a marketing role and their contact with Lauren was not daily, or even weekly, but they said they were always amazed whenever they went to meet with him, because he was always surrounded by several "insiders" who all appeared

- to act like Lauren,
- to dress like Lauren,
- to talk like Lauren,
- to adopt virtually every mannerism of Lauren.

For example, if they were all sitting in a room and a certain fabric were pulled out, they would all say the word "fabulous" or the phrase "that's horrible" in unison. If someone walked into a room where they were meeting, they would all lift their heads and look up with their eyes in unison. Lauren apparently even had certain phrases that he liked to use, and if the marketing people called the company, they would often find even the receptionist answering the phone using these phrases. It was as if every single person around Lauren were imitating him.

Lauren's company is not alone, of course. We all attempt to imitate the people we rely on and look up to. Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery and it is something that we all do. Children learn to imitate their parents. People inside of companies imitate their bosses. Many people imitate their neighbors and friends. Everyone learns how to behave and how to act through the art of imitation. In fact, our survival is largely dependent on how well we learn to imitate others.

Everyone wants to be loved and approved of by others. We want to be loved by our relatives, friends, and employers. In the employment realm, it is important for almost everyone to be liked, and people go to great lengths to make others care about them. The main reason for this is that we are dependent on our jobs to meet many of our emotional and financial needs. We need to feel safe and connected. If we do not feel connected and safe, we may become extremely nervous. Everyone has the fear of being fired, and when people are fired, it is basically because they are not meeting the approval of their employers. In order to get and keep a job, using imitation to gain approval is more often than not, an unstated requirement.

One of my favorite movies is *Philadelphia*, starring Tom Hanks. In the movie, Hanks plays an up-and-coming attorney working inside a law firm. The viewer quickly learns that Hanks's character, Andrew, is gay and that his coworkers do not know this; they would clearly not approve of him if they knew. The people Andrew is working for seem to like him a great deal. Andrew seems to meet his supervisors' ideas of how he should perform. One afternoon, the partners in the law firm bring Andrew with them to the gym and they are all sitting in the sauna. Someone makes a joke about gays and Andrew laughs, pretending to be amused. A short time later, one of the partners sees some lesions on Andrew's skin and surmises that he has AIDS. Realizing he has AIDS and is gay, the law firm fires Andrew from his job a short time later. Ultimately Andrew sues the law firm for wrongful termination.

When people are promoted in jobs, it is often due to their ability to imitate and stand for the same values as their supervisors. Similarly, when discrimination occurs inside of any organization, it is generally because the person who is being discriminated against is not enough like their bosses or supervisors. Employers generally want people working for them who are similar to them and who model after them. When employees do not model after those they work with, they may stand out as being *too different*, and they might find themselves being discriminated against. Look at American politics: Democrats want to work with other democrats; republicans want to work with other republicans, and so on. In order to advance in organizations, it is incredibly important to fit in.

The way that most people earn approval is by imitating others. We assume that if we become like our employers, then they will approve of us and "love us." Many people act out the behavior of their bosses as they perceive this behavior, and in doing so, they are saying, "*Look at me! I am very similar to you and am doing the right thing! Approve of me! Promote me! Love me!*" And many times, the employer does respond positively.

Other times, the employer does not notice our positive behavior. When the employer does not notice us, we then go to even greater lengths to be more like the boss or employer. In the process of this, we may begin to adopt the negative characteristics, habits, and beliefs of our employer as well as the beneficial ones. We begin to act out what we adopt in a compulsive, negative, and even unconscious way, and we do this over and over again. These behaviors soon become a part of who we are.

This fact that employees imitate and adopt the beliefs, attitudes, and thoughts of their employer, is a concrete truth. Employers evaluate [future hires](#) in their organizations, knowing that an employee's performance is going to be influenced in

large part by the attitudes and beliefs the person picked up at his or her last job. It is largely for this reason that people who come out of certain organizations are often promoted and hired faster than those who come out of other organizations. People from some companies are often avoided in the hiring market because it is assumed that they will have picked up bad habits while working for their previous employers.

The highest performing employees in virtually every industry have established a history of being *in tune*, and are able to model the people they are working for. The best employees are generally people who might be called brown-nosers or sycophants, because they have the habit of being close with their bosses and others. They do everything within their power to become friendly with the people they are working for. They get close to these people and often *imitate* them, presumably to gain favor and approval. If their boss enjoys surfing, they may take up surfing. If their boss likes to go out and drink, they too will go out and drink. If their boss likes Mercedes cars, they too will develop a fondness for Mercedes cars.

Several years ago, I had an extremely high performing employee working directly for me, who had an absolutely stellar record. He had had a near perfect academic record and had worked for the very best employers in the past. He was so successful that by the time he was 35 years old, he had already made several million dollars and did not need to work. He wanted to keep busy, however, and he came to work for us. He moved to California and bought a house right down the street from me. He asked for various recommendations from me, for finding a mortgage broker, and other various service providers. He always used the people I recommended. He purchased a car that was similar to the one that I drove. He started coming into the office at the same time I did, and if I were working on the weekends, he would do the same.

One day, he walked into my office and said something I will never forget: "You do not seem yourself. What's wrong? Are you sure everything is okay?"

What was so astonishing about this was that he was right. However, no one else around me would ever have picked up on this. There were little things he may have noticed, like I was not laughing as much in daily meetings or making as many phone calls. He was correct that something was wrong, although it had nothing to do with him or my job. He had picked up on something so subtle that it really struck me. In short, he was very in tune with me and my mannerisms, enthusiasm, and overall attitude. My guess is that he had been in tune with every employer, his professors, and others over his entire career, and this enabled him to get good grades, do well at work, and more.

As I have viewed the most successful people throughout the years, I have seen that they are always able to be extremely in tune with their supervisors and imitate those they work for. If you look at the highest-performing people in virtually any organization, you will find that they have been excellent followers throughout the majority of their careers.

When we are young, we learn the importance of imitating our parents. The underlying assumption is that if we act and reflect back the behavior, thoughts, and attitudes of our parents, they will love us and give us the validation we need. When children do not feel they are being noticed and appreciated, they may try even harder to be like their parents. Children may fear that if they are not like their parents, and do not reflect back their behavior, they will not receive love and could even be abandoned.

As we grow older, most of us end up adopting the behaviors, attitudes, mannerisms, and so forth of our parents, subconsciously. Even when our parents are not around, they are influencing us in subtle ways. Regardless of where we are, our parents are exerting a constant influence over us. People who know our parents and meet us for the first time will tell us that we sound like our parents, that our reactions are similar to those of our parents, and that we are like our parents in a variety of ways.

The fact that we adopt our parents' behaviors, attitudes, and so forth even later in life, should not come as a surprise. What is so remarkable about this, though, is that we begin to see other people as if they are our parents. We come to a belief that we understand what another person's thoughts, motivations, feelings, and so forth are. In virtually every relationship I have had with a woman, the woman has early on in the relationship told me something like "my father got along with everyone," or "my father never worked hard enough," or "my father did not care about me," and so forth. It does not matter what the overall guiding characteristic of the father was; what is important is that every woman at some point told me I was "just like" her father in some way. It is uncanny how many times I have heard this.

Several years ago, I was in New York City with my girlfriend at the time, and a man I had not seen in years walked up and said hello to me. "You're just like my dad! You know everyone everywhere you go!" she said. This could not be further from the truth, but she projected this characteristic onto me and believed that I know people everywhere.

This sort of behavior is called *transference*. With transference, we believe that we have an intimate and in-depth understanding of another person and their motives, thoughts, and beliefs. Many people believe their spouse is just like their mother, their boss is no different from their father, and so forth. This sort of transference is something that ultimately blinds us to the reality of the people around us, because in using transference, we are often wrong. When we are seeing our parent, our former employer--or whomever--in another person, we are not seeing what is really in front of us.

Because people adopt the behaviors of former employers, parents, and others on the job to survive, a person's background, their parents, and former employers are often a very accurate determinant of whether or not the person will succeed on the job. People will subconsciously, in most cases, adopt a way of looking at the world, which will determine the person's outcome.

People who are abused as children, or have had horrible relationships with their parents, or terrible experiences with an employer, often carry this into their jobs as adults, and through transference, they might view their new bosses and others as they saw their parents. They might subconsciously mistake a current employer for a previous employer, and instigate in themselves a whole series of negative or reactive behaviors, all due to transference--not out of a direct response to the situation they are in.

- If their parents were always lying to them, they may not trust their employer. This lack of trust may hurt their ability to get along in the workplace.
- If someone they trusted suddenly fires them, they may carry this distrust and anger, aiming it at an employer in their next job.

This transference is an ongoing force in everyone's employment. In my experience, the better someone's relationship with their parents was, the more harmonious their relationship is likely to be with their employer.

As you go through your life, it is important that you adopt the behaviors, attitudes, and so forth of your superiors, but you also

need to be aware that this will shape your approach to the world--even in a [future job](#). Incredible as it may seem, reconciling with your parents if you are estranged from them can even help your performance at work, because it may prevent you from acting out any sort of negative transference.

While imitation, our parents, and transference may seem to be topics that are out-of-bounds when it comes to your career and life, I believe that these are among the most important concepts to understand, in analyzing career performance. The more you understand who you are, why you act the way you do, why you see the world in a certain way, and how this helps or hinders you--the better off and more successful you will be.

THE LESSON

Everyone seeks to imitate the people they look up to, and with transference they believe that they have an understanding of other peoples' thoughts, motives, and beliefs. Transference, however, can blind yourself to the true nature of those around you and can lead you to make wrong judgments or assumptions. You will be much more successful with a better understanding of who you are and how your perceptions of the world help or hinder you.

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