A sepia-toned photograph of a woman's profile on the left, blowing a dandelion seed head. The seeds are captured in mid-air, drifting towards the right. The background is a solid, light beige color.

# Family Systems and Issues: It's all about empathy



# A few family systems basics

Why do I need to know this?

- No one exists outside a family
- To navigate the relationships (yours and theirs)





# Key concepts

- Family is an emotional system that should be considered in its entirety
- The dynamic of families, like other systems, is to return to homeostasis or equilibrium (resistance to change)
- Boundaries – the psychological distance or proximity between two or more people
- Alliances
- Triangulation
- Cutoff
- Differentiation vs. Identification

# The primary task of family continuity

## Balancing differentiation and identification

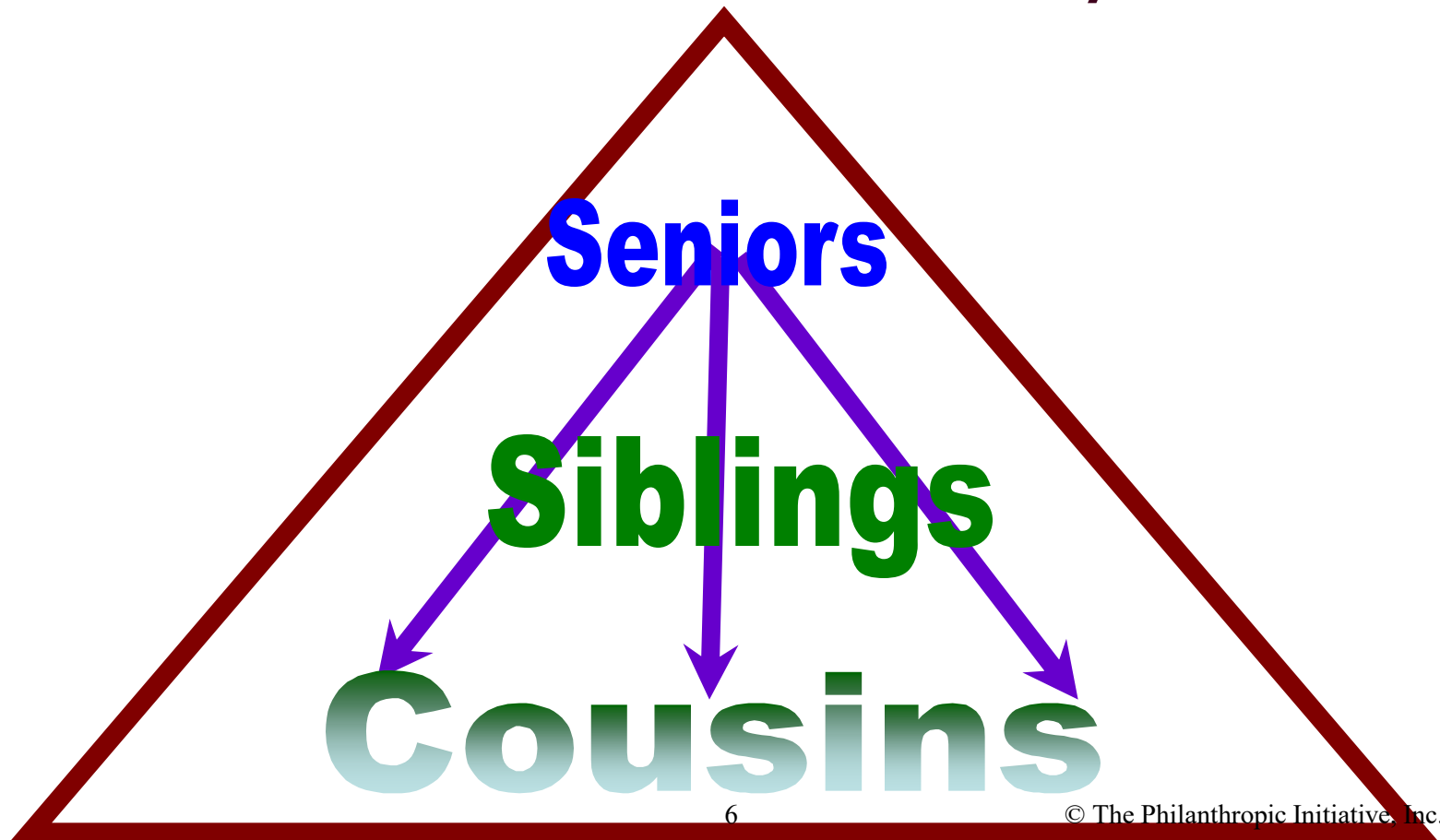
Centrifugal force:  
pushing out  
toward  
individuation  
and self-  
determination



Centripetal force:  
pulling in  
toward  
collaboration  
and family  
identification

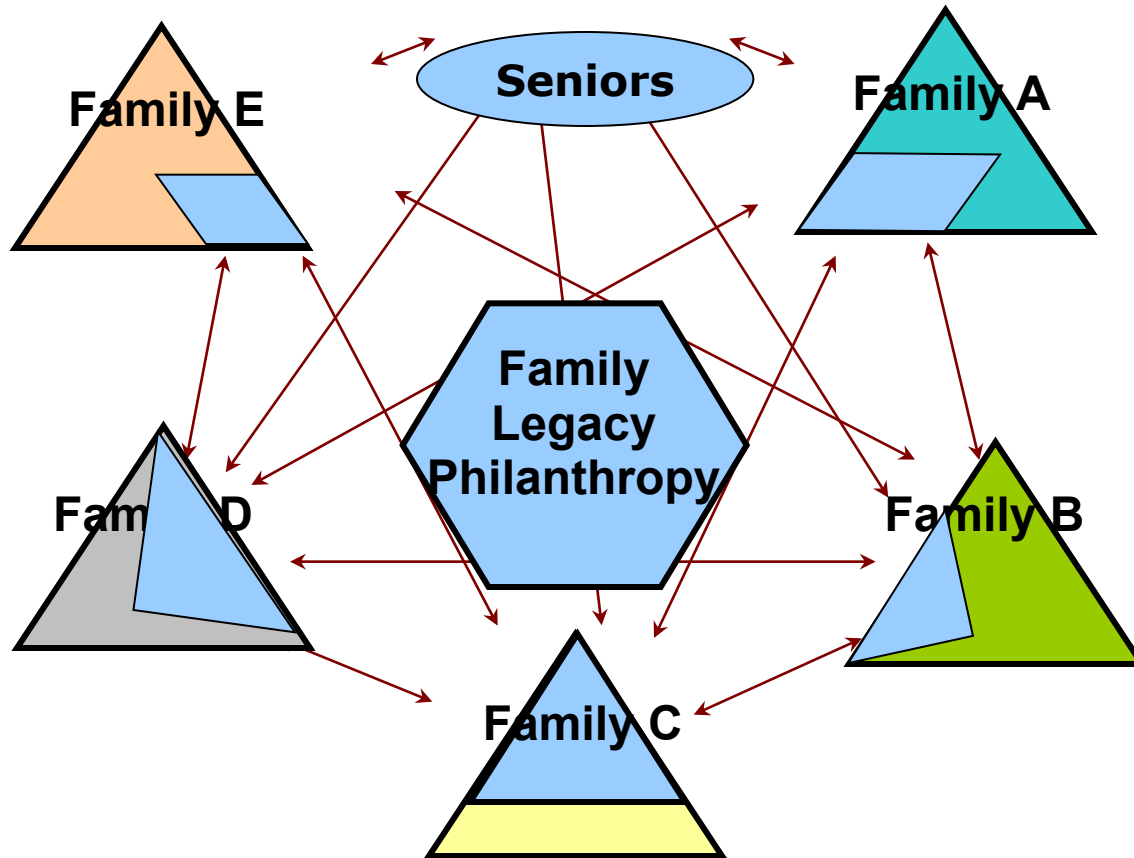
# The senior generation's perspective:

## The Unified Family



# The junior generation's perspective:

## The Network of Families





# Typical events in the family life cycle

- Addition of a new family member through marriage, birth or adoption
- Death of a family member
- Significant change in economics
- Children moving out of home
- Divorce or separation
- Anticipation of any of the above





# Key findings

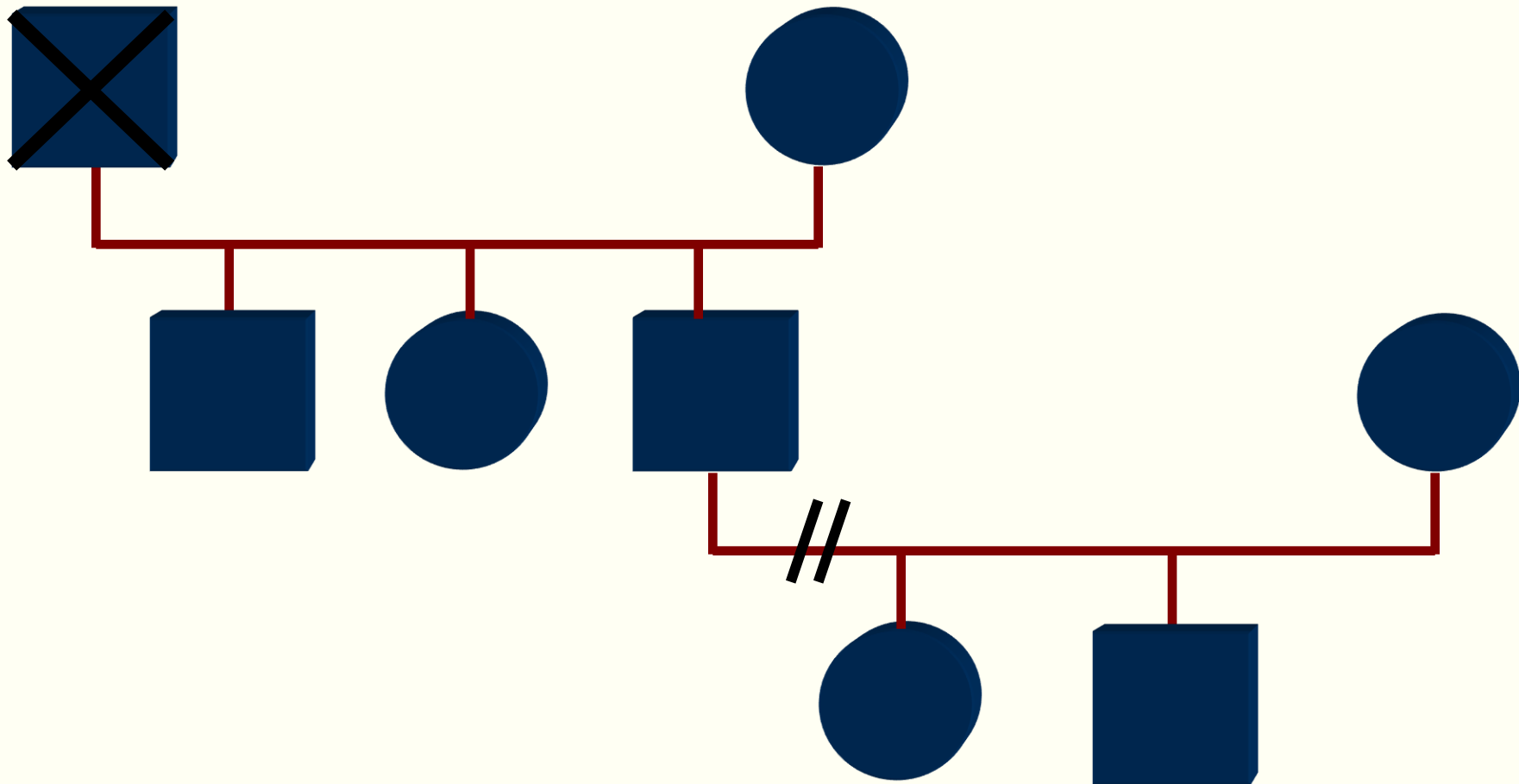
- Every family system is rule-governed
- Rules are often not known or spoken about
- Frontal challenge to unspoken rules result in attack
- Need to understand rules to use them creatively



# Helpful tools

- Genograms – to help make visible the relationships
- Identification of explicit and implicit information
  - Explicit
    - Information
    - Behavioral expectations
    - Goals and objectives
  - Implicit
    - Values
    - Alliances
    - Taboos
    - Secrets
    - Morals
    - Finances

# Genograms





But I'm not a therapist!

Or a specialist in family systems, so....

What can I do?



# Communications Tracking

## Who is talking to whom?


- Who is in charge of internal and external communication? (It may not be the same person)
- Map the patterns
  - Who is left out?
  - Who doesn't talk?
  - Who always talks?
- Know whom to speak to when and about what
- Identify the rules of communications



# Recognizing boundaries

(Though they may not be fixed)

- Usually visible in the communications system
- How fixed & rigid are boundaries and roles?
  - How much do they let you in?
  - Rigid – closed communication, “each and everyone in his/her place”, be respectful and wary
  - Loose – shares everything, don’t get hijacked
  - Be aware of your own boundaries and style
  - Triangulation is inevitable



# Understand the stage in the relationship

(And be sensitive to what is allowable)

- Developing trust is key
  - With each other as well as you
  - Be aware of going too fast
  - Trust must be established before action can take place
  - “You can’t make a pickle by spraying a cucumber with vinegar”
- Focus on the process and relationship, not on outcomes



# Common warning signals

- Member of the family has been cut off
- Triangulated communications
- Rigid hierarchies
- Prodigal or favored child
- Family secrets
- Avoidance of any and all conflicts





# Things not to worry about

(Too much. Though many do.)

- Expressions of anger or open conflict – covert conflict is more damaging
- Family members' attempts to have you take sides – triangulation is inevitable
- Intergenerational disagreements on family's priorities