

C.H.A.L.L.E.N.G.E.S. inc

Working with Families in Business

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“Imagine how much easier it would be for us to learn how to love if we began with a shared definition.”

– Bell Hooks, Writer and Critic

Rule #3 “Address the Unspeakables”

Those issues everyone knows about but no one wants to address because it will just cause more family anxiety.

Silence is not always golden. In many family businesses silence is a standard practice used to avoid addressing business or personal issues that may cause family conflict. Avoidance is more prevalent at the holidays when families want to “come together” in the hope of doing so without the strain of interpersonal conflict. The avoidance strategy usually does not work. At the family gathering everyone will be “silent” but the “coming together” hoped for never really takes place. Stress grows and conflict spreads.

How can individuals in a family business effectively address the issues causing stress and/or conflict without further eroding individual relationships? Over the years we have observed a number of techniques families use to address stress and conflict issues without destroying individual relationships. Although, it is understood by all family members that addressing stressful, unspoken, conflict issues is a process not an emotional event to be *blown out of proportion*. In many cases, this actually results in a strengthening of the relationships. The following are some of the successful techniques we have observed families using. They are not in a particular order as they are all vital to the resolution process.

1. It begins with each family member making a commitment to be honest about the feelings, perceptions or issues causing them stress with other family in business members. This honesty is addressed in a calm, straightforward and practical way. It is important that the concerned individual write down their impressions about the behavior/s causing them to believe or feel the way they do, how this behavior affects them personally and how they would like to see the issue resolved. It should also be understood that only ONE issue will be addressed at a “sitting.” In most cases, if more than one issue is presented in succession it is perceived as complaining and few if any issues are ever seriously addressed with this perception. One issue well thought out and presented in a calm, caring manner has a better chance of being

addressed then several issues presented from a jumbled emotional point of view.

2. An impartial facilitator is a must if the tension and interpersonal conflict has reached a level that negatively affects the communication of the family and the business. They are also helpful when presenting especially personal issues. In every case, a third person who is trusted by both parties should be present when the “unspeakables” (the issues brought on interpersonal conflict) are addressed. The choice of facilitator must be agreed upon by all parties in advance of the first meeting. The goal must be to come to an agreeable resolution without fear of retribution.
3. Each person must come into the process with a forgiving heart. That does not mean you are going to simply forget about all the “hurts” you may have felt but it does mean that you will “let go” of *getting even* or the emotional need for, “my turn to win one!” A forgiving heart practices the art of truly listening to the other person’s point of view. That does not mean you have to agree but it does mean you will be open to others thoughts, feelings and reasons for why they may have felt or acted the way they did toward you. Frequently, if you *really* listen, you will discover that family members are really trying to protect one another from something they view as “not right” for the other. They may no longer have the right to make that decision, but understanding why, may pave the way for realizing it is caring for one another that created the stress in the first place.
4. Families that ignore the stressors between family members, families that hold onto the “unspeakables” and those that believe “silence is golden at all cost” ALWAYS end up with more stress, more conflict and a family business that will never quite be what it could be. DO NOT let conflict fester. It will destroy family relationships and eventually the business.
5. Develop a family in business Code of Conduct. Define how family members MUST treat one another in the workplace. Define how problems are going to be addressed and how solutions will be decided. Use your board or other trusted outsiders to assist in this process. Establish accountability measurements for each member of the family. Families can rarely do that without assistance. That is where the additional help can be a real asset.

Emotion can begin as the motivation to turn a dream into a business. It can also help move an operation into a family business and family business into a family legacy. Emotion can just as easily destroy the dream, pull the family apart and end the legacy. Learning how to effectively deal with the emotions that cause the “unspeakables” is key to family and business harmony.

Heading into the December holidays is a great time of year for each family in business to make a commitment to one another. A commitment insuring the love of the family will come before the stress of the business. A commitment that defines the need of each family member by recognizing that the success of the business is just a means to assist the family in achieving a secure, stable future.

*Establish your family Code of Conduct; contact us and let us help you put it together.
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