

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

Working with Families in Business

www.challengesinc.com info@challengesinc.com

1888-273-8307



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“A quarrel is like buttermilk: once it’s out of the churn, the more you shake it, the more sour it grows!” - Irish Proverb

RULE #5

Forgiveness fosters stronger family relationships; the lack of it gives birth to revenge.

As children, most of us were not very good at apologizing or accepting an apology, especially when it involved a family member. Yes, there were times that we said the words “I’m sorry” but most of the time that was because dad or mom told us we *had* to. It was rare to offer or accept an apology on our own without prodding.

A “Lack of forgiving” attitude tags along with us as we become adults and can be a source of frustration within the family business. We have the tendency to use our individual feelings, based on past impressions, as the only benchmarks when evaluating, making judgments, forgiving or accepting forgiveness from family members. We have fallen into the habit of not addressing issues as our way of staying away from conflict. With no one to “prod” us, forgiving becomes more of an afterthought. Most of us don’t think of forgiving or accepting forgiveness when considering our options in dealing with others. We have already concluded that if we are forgiving it won’t *really* be accepted even through the other person may say it is. We are also not going to accept forgiveness because we know the other person doesn’t *really* mean it. Remember that is how we always offered or accepted forgiveness in the past. No one *really* ever meant it including us. Our next thought usually involves “revenge” in some way. We don’t consider the best interest of family relationships or how lack of forgiveness may affect the success of the business. If we want the family to be stronger and business decisions to be better, we have to give forgiveness consideration. It won’t be easy.

The act of forgiving and/or accepting forgiveness requires a certain personal humility. In the act of forgiving, we have to be able to put aside past hurts and let go of the “need to get even.” We have to let go of our internal desire to punish another for what they have done, or we think they have done. We have to let go of focusing on “what is in it for me” each time we forgive or accept forgiveness from another. We have to let go of the belief that if we forgive or accept forgiveness we will be seen as weak.

In the family business, all of these feelings and beliefs can be a real disruption. Interpersonal communication is weakened or lost, business

decisions are not made in a timely fashion, or worse yet, made in spite of what others in the family desire. We have to bring trust back into family relationships. Trust that others are not “out to get us” or to purposely “make our lives miserable.”

Start by being more tolerant. Communicate as equals and take the time to get to know one another as adults (Rules 1 & 3). Allow the love of the family to be our first thought when dealing with family members. Give others in our family the benefit of the doubt while being open to “listen to understand” (Rules #4) others feelings and beliefs. Again, it won’t be easy.

Employees *do know* when the owning family is in conflict. Many times we have heard “no one in the company knows.” “We always put up a good front to others.” Most of the time we find that the employees do know and the family is deceiving themselves.

How to begin the act of forgiving: Your task.

You have to begin by writing down the feelings or beliefs of family members that are “stuck” in your mind as examples of how another family member was or has been unfair to you. This *writing thoughts down* is not easy for many individuals but it is a key part of the act of forgiveness. Next, you must identify by name the family member and the behavior that is creating a problem for you. Write it out. Write out what affect these behaviors have had on you. Write out what you would like to happen to change this behavior and how you can help (being more available to them?). Next, you have to establish a dialogue with the family member by explaining that you don’t like the relationship the way it is and you would like the two of you to get over these negative feelings and beliefs. Tell them you listed your issues. Go over your points while listening to what they have to say. You may, in advance of the meeting, tell them what you plan to do in this dialogue meeting and ask them to write out their feelings as well. You may be surprised to find out they don’t even know they are affecting you in a negative way.

If you don’t think about your feelings and beliefs, and if you don’t write them out, almost every time the dialogue will turn into a confrontation because you are unprepared and emotion will obscure the details. If the meeting turns adversarial just state you both need a break to think about what has been said and set another time to get together. Get a facilitator if necessary. It should NOT be a person who will take sides. That will never work!

Most animosity toward others is based on misconceptions, a word, or an action that is stated or displayed out of context. Forgiveness and accepting forgiveness for the family in business can change lives and accelerate the growth and success of the business. But it takes work and personal strength. As Mahatma Gandhi once stated, “The weak never forgive. Forgiveness is an attribute of the strong.”

Are you strong enough to forgive and accept forgiveness?

Let us know if we can be of assistance.

Jim & Ann Marie Kwaiser

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ann@challengesinc.com

jim@challengesinc.com