

C.H.A.L.L.E.N.G.E.S.[®]

Working with Families in Business

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MAY 2008 NEWSLETTER

“Assumptions are the termites of relationships”

- Henry Winkler

RULE #7 Never Assume

How many times have you found yourself thinking when you are listening to others, “I know what you are going to say next” or “I know what you *really* mean”? Over the years we have discovered that these two assuming statements are usually at the core of most relationship and communication tensions. Sometimes the assumptions are correct, most often they are not.

Usually the assumptions are conclusions that have been reached based upon some past experience or perception concerning the other person. These experiences may lead us to assume what the other person is going to say and because of this we can fall into the trap of pre-judging their intentions without really listening. A good example of this is when a father in a family business announced that he was going to name his third son, Ronald, now 30 years old, as the new CFO of the company. The other two sons who were CEO and COO of the company voiced their disapproval in no uncertain terms. Dad was perplexed as Ronald had attained his CPA designation and had 5 years of experience with a nationally known family business as their head of accounting. After completing interviews with the brothers the reason for the “feelings” was uncovered. The brothers shared a paper route as children. In one instance Ronald, who was 12 at the time, took the monthly profits from the shared paper route and spent it on his friends. This instance became how the two elder brothers viewed Ronald when it came to trusting him with money. They were reluctant to have him handling their money again.

There are a few tips that can be used to improve relationships and communication while removing the tendency to assume in our decision making about another.

1. **NEVER** let assumptions be the basis for making decisions. Address your concerns in a rational, non-emotional way. Begin by asking for the other person’s help in your understanding of their past actions or words. Unaddressed assumptions (Rule #3

“Addressing the Unspeakables”) foster mistrust, suspicion and wrong conclusions.

2. NEVER believe that others understand your intent or that you understand theirs. Other people cannot read your mind and you cannot read the minds of others. Assumptions, more times than not, have individuals believing they know the absolute intent of another. This does not mean you should never trust your instincts, but it does mean to rationally think things through. It means getting the facts and making the effort to really understand what another’s true meaning is by their words and actions. By taking the need time to understand, relationships can improve, misunderstandings are reduced and potential conflicts never happen. In a family business it can result in better decisions and a better use of everyone’s time.
3. Always explain to others exactly what you want to say. This may mean restating your intention in different ways to improve clarity. Vague words create more assumptions because when people try to figure out what you are saying they impose their own ideas and “read between the lines”. It is always a good idea to have others communicate back to you in their own words what they have understood you to say. The second part of this tip is to ask for clarification. Don’t assume you understand their meaning. A good guide to remember is, “If you haven’t really heard the words allowing you to understand, don’t assume, just ask for clarification.”

Assumptions are usually a matter of perception. We usually judge a person, interpret words, intents or understanding just the way we think they are. We may be wrong. Out of caring and love for one another we need to do our best to really understand others and make sure that they really understand us.

Oh by the way, the brothers with the paper route openly discussed the long-held feelings and gained a better understanding and respect for one another as adults (Rule #1 Communicate as Adults). Apologies were offered and accepted. They now know each other as adults, make great decisions together and have become close friends as well.

Let us know if we can be of help to you and your family. When it comes to the well-being of your family and business, we are more than consultants.

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We would like to welcome Nathan “Smitty” Boros to the **C.H.A.L.L.E.N.G.E.S.®** family as a licensee of our family business process. Smitty can be contacted at 412-858-0342 or by calling our office.