

C.H.A.L.L.E.N.G.E.S.[®]

Working with Families in Business

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“They say that blood is thicker than water. Maybe that’s why we battle our own with more energy and gusto than we would ever expend on strangers.” [David Assail](#) *Northern Exposure, Family Feud 1993*

Who is the obstacle?

Too many families in business reach a point where they don’t like most of the family members with whom they work. Family get-togethers have gone by the wayside. Most individual relationships between the family members are non-existent. Brothers and sisters find themselves at odds with one another in the business setting because the previous generation has set them up to compete with one another instead of teaching them how to work with one another. Competition instills the mindset that someone must win and someone must lose in every decision made. This mindset even carries forward to positions within the company. Many times it is thought that because the previous generation, usually dad, made the eldest son President, the other family members must not be good enough to run the company. Somebody wins, somebody loses.

It is also an interesting anomaly that when this takes place many individual family members working in the business get angry. An almost constant atmosphere of anger is felt whenever the family comes together to discuss family business situations. This anger limits how decisions get made and certainly limits the effectiveness of the business and the closeness of the family. It is also interesting that most families in business will keep operating this way as they may be making good money and are afraid any change may reduce this income! Their anger also comes from having the win/lose mentality so ingrained they just can’t move away from always competing with one another.

The anger spreads. It spreads to the family arguments in the hallways and loud, angry, family telephone conversations that are heard by employees. It spreads when the extended family doesn’t want to socialize with the rest of the family anymore because they, “Just don’t want to have to put up with the anger.” It also spreads to the next generation who sees the anger between brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles influencing their

decision to stay out of the family business to avoid that type of family life and constant stress and anger.

There are usually a variety of issues and perceptions that cause the anger to grow. As mentioned, it usually begins with the competition instilled by the elder generation. Unfortunately, the anger grows when the elder generation dies without teaching the next generation how to work together as adults. Because of this, they keep working together as if they are still in competition with one another. The family has a very difficult time “shutting down” the anger. They don’t know how to stop the competition and begin talking to one another. Believe it or not many are fearful of what will happen if they do! The anger is fed by a number of emotions including: ego, feelings of being treated unfairly by the previous generation, fear of being discovered that they really don’t know how to manage, fear of being taken advantage of by family members, fear of what change may bring and many other self-serving behaviors.

Can it ever change? If the family begins to realize that they are no longer little children in competition with one another it *can* change. If the family begins to understand the many things they should be thankful for because without working together they would not have gained the results they have, it *can* change. If the family commits to begin treating one another as equals letting go of the “big brother” “little sister” type of comments, it *can* change. If the family can realize that they may be the way they are today because of the way the previous generation “set them up,” they *can* change. If the senior generation will begin teaching their “next generation” how to work together instead of keeping them in competition with one another, it *can* change. If the family really stops to try to find out what are they really angry about, it *can* change. If the family decides to no longer allow the anger and competition to control who they are and how they act, it *can* change. When the family finally gets to the point where they just can’t stand it the way it is any more, it *can* change.

There is really only one obstacle stopping your family business from making the necessary changes to improve family relationships and make working in the family business fun again. The one obstacle could be you. If you decide to no longer be the obstacle to your family business (we are all obstacles in some way) and you are willing to change, your whole family can change. So before you are too quick to answer the question, “Who is the obstacle?” – take a minute and look in the mirror.

If you are ready to make the commitment to eliminate the “anger” from your family business, give us a call, we can help!

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*We are also available to speak
to groups and associations*