



Family Firm Resources

Family Business Strategies • Assessing the Present • Assuring the Future

968 Bromley Road, Suite B • Charlotte, NC 28207 • 704.334.3534

Stand Up and Be Counted in Your Family Business

Robert Caldwell

A great paradox of life is that we find it so hard to talk about intimate things with family members, yet, when we fly for three hours next to a total stranger we're likely to walk off the airplane knowing each other's detailed life history. It's somehow easier to vent real feelings on someone you'll most likely never see again, than with a family member we fear will construe heartfelt expressions of feeling as weakness, and use it to our detriment.

While it may seem risky in the beginning, the effect of honest communication in the family business is awe-inspiring. It often contributes to the breaking down of old barriers, just as the Iron Curtain fell partially because of the radical advancement of communications technology; new ideas could no longer be kept from people. Communication helps create a firm foundation for any business to survive and thrive.

Hard feelings and distrust among family members may go back decades. Instead of dealing with current situations while looking through the lens of the past, it's helpful to keep reminding oneself that age and maturity can have a softening effect if we let it. Sibling rivalry and jealousy can often be traced back to infancy. Parental circumspection with an adult child may date back to a teenage indiscretion. Generally speaking, people act in accordance with the way they're treated. If I'm treated as incompetent by a parent, then chances are that's the way I'll behave in their presence.

One thing that led to my interest in dealing with family business was the observation of how we adult children of entrepreneurs continue to act fearfully and obliquely with our parents. As James Hillman, the Jungian analyst and author once said, "We go home for the holidays as 45-year old men, but when we reach for the doorbell we become 10-year old boys again." The only thing that precludes us from feeling mature and equal with our parents is our unwillingness or inability to perceive ourselves as such.

If you're willing and able to stand up for yourself vis-à-vis the parent with whom you have difficulty, at some point that parent will usually recognize that you're an adult. It's important that every adult child in a family business situation learns to express him or herself honestly, otherwise the foundation of the business begins to decay and its stability is threatened.

This change in behavior isn't just about being nice or using the business as a platform for therapy, but rather a bottom line fact of life in a company. If I'm to be the successor, or if any aspect of the enterprise is to eventually be put in my charge, I had better feel capable and competent enough to manage it. If I'm hobbled by anxiety and fear that I don't measure up, there's a good likelihood I won't.

Years ago when my father and I started to work together, I got so frustrated by what I felt were his irrational demands and controlling methods I was ready to quit. My mentor friend, Arno Hart, gathered me up and took



Family Firm Resources

Family Business Strategies • Assessing the Present • Assuring the Future

968 Bromley Road, Suite B • Charlotte, NC 28207 • 704.334.3534

me to visit Carlyle Marney, the renowned theologian and pastoral counselor. After hearing my story, Marney stared at me with his hawk like gaze and said, “When you came here, I didn’t think you could continue working with your father, but now I think you can, but there are two things you have to do: First, you have to remain who you are and secondly, you have to come alongside this man as an equal.”

I didn’t want to leave the business, because I knew the value of our potential working relationship, but I couldn’t take it any longer the way it was. Ironically, it was not knowing what else to do or where else to turn that allowed me to hear what Marney had to say and to begin to act on it.

I began telling my father the truth about how I felt. I began to get more vocal. By doing that which I thought would endanger our relationship, standing up for myself and trying to see him as my equal, our relationship began to improve. Dad saw I was a stronger person than he had believed, and he saw that perhaps I did have the grit to succeed him as chief executive. We both began to realize that our real business was to become mutually supportive partners in this enterprise that had provided such a good livelihood to so many people.

My father died, our industry underwent rapid change, and I sold the business, but I’m convinced that by acting on Marney’s suggestion 20 years ago I became much better prepared to handle the subsequent challenges I’ve faced.

We in family business are fortunate. We have the opportunity to face up to areas of our life that need development and to deal with them in an atmosphere where some degree of love and support exist. We work in environments in which, hopefully, content is valued more than form. More often than not in Corporate America, standing up and expressing oneself honestly is at best discouraged and at worst professional suicide, because in those hallowed halls, the continuation of the business depends less on personal content and more on structural form.

Adult children in family business can begin to act as adults, to stand up and be counted by having the fortitude to overcome their childhood conditioning. Parents can begin to encourage their adult children who are in the business to express themselves more fully and directly by asking for, and listening to, their opinions. This simple act also encourages younger family members to begin thinking in terms of what is best for the business. After all, if they are going to be listened to, they’d better have something worthwhile to say.

Gratifying results can occur when even small steps toward change are taken. Though it isn’t easy and it may be frightening, and everyone involved may need to find some appropriate support, the fruits of this work are particularly sweet for both the family and the business.