

# Empathy and Expectations in Family Businesses: What We Can Learn From Twins

By: JoAnne Norton The Family Business Consulting Group

From an evolutionary biological perspective, survival of the species has always been our strongest driving force. That's why it is crucial for family members to excel at contrasting skills. There had to be hunters *and* gatherers, tacticians *and* artists, brain *and* brawn all in the same family so the human race could survive to the next generation. This is especially true in a family business where there are so many layers of complexity in relationships: fathers and mothers can be parents as well as bosses; siblings can be co-presidents; cousins can be co-owners and on and on it goes.

In truth, there are no two people in the world who are *exactly* alike or who see the world in precisely the same way. A good example is identical twins—a topic I know a great deal about since I am one. My identical twin, Elizabeth, who was once my “wombmate,” and was at my side through elementary, high school, and college, sees the world very differently from the way I do.

We know that twins must possess different but complementary skills simply to survive *in utero*. Even more importantly, they need to have empathy for one another. Daniel Goleman's definition of empathy is: “Having the ability to sense others' feelings and how they see things.” Twins have to sense each other's needs from the very beginning giving them the opportunity to learn empathy before they are even born.

## Learning Empathy

In order to understand ourselves and others better, Elizabeth and I have taken numerous personality assessments over the years, which have helped us both personally as well as professionally. For family business owners wanting to improve their relationships and

value each other's signature strengths, it can be fun and rewarding to compare personality types and to celebrate innate differences.

A case in point is a set of fraternal twins, Katie and Jenny, new second-generation Co-Presidents of a thriving family business. In a recent interview, they reported they had not always communicated well. When they began the succession process a decade ago, they knew that for the company to thrive in the long run they would need to understand and appreciate each other's strengths. That's when they turned to personality assessments.



Author JoAnne (right) with her identical twin Elizabeth

As a result of what they learned about themselves, Jenny has concentrated on sales and marketing, while Katie has focused on streamlining processes and finance. They explained that the last 10 years of working together have been a journey in learning to trust each other's decision-making and intuition, and they believe the business is better for it. As Jenny said: “I don't think this company would be as successful if it didn't have both of us.”

Thanks to the personality testing Jenny and Katie did with their entire family they now have more empathy for their analytical, data-driven dad, the entrepreneurial founder of the company. Daniel Goleman claims that being skilled at empathy contributes to a leader's performance, so it's not surprising that the company's bottom line continues to grow steadily.

**Daniel Goleman claims that being skilled at empathy contributes to a leader's performance.**

## Having Difficult Conversations

Katie and Jenny also used personality assessments to open conversations with employees in order to determine what they could expect from them and to give their employees realistic expectations of Katie and Jenny. They found that empathy improved both ways: the twins' empathy for their team and their team's empathy for them.

As Katie explained: "Empathy is not a one-way street." She and Jenny have worked very hard to help their parents and their employees understand where the new leaders are coming from, what their strengths are, and what their vision is for the company. They believe leaders also need to feel understood and appreciated.

In addition, Katie and Jenny figured out they needed to personalize communication according to the needs of their employees. While their team shared their overall goal, when it came to how they were going to reach that goal, employees needed different things. Some needed to know the end goal; some required just the details; and still others wanted to know why they were doing what they were doing. Prior to the assessments, the twins felt they would have gotten resistance from some of their employees, but finding out what motivates them has gotten the whole team on board. This was critical when explaining that they needed everyone to take an active part in growing the company and keeping it successful.

Their employees appreciate that Jenny and Katie are getting to know them more deeply, which has caused the employees to become more engaged in the process. The twins report they can now have open dialogue and constructive conversations with their employees about

everything from conflict to collegiality because they truly appreciate and applaud the differences.

## Tools are Helpful

When asked to recommend some effective assessments, Katie and Jenny suggested: "The Motivators Assessment" from Gostick and Elton's *What Motivates Me: Put Your Passions to Work*; Buckingham and Clifton's *Now Discover Your Strengths*; and DISC, a behavior assessment tool based on Marston's work that was later developed into a behavioral assessment tool by Walter Vernon Clarke. Some assessments require professional assistance, and others can be taken online, but all give the opportunity to begin the conversation about how we each have unique talents and strengths.

Katie and Jenny agree that the payoff for the work they've done with personality assessments in their family and their business has been huge. Specifically, they said they have "more clarity about our own goals for the company." Katie went on to say: "communication has improved between ourselves as well as with our parents. We feel we have deeper communication with our staff, a greater appreciation of our employees, and better buy-in of our vision for the future from the staff."

Jenny explained their overwhelming achievement and great growth period: "We've communicated with our employees in the way they need to be communicated with." She is quick to point out, however, that it takes more than personality tests: "Assessments are not the be-all and end-all for our success, but they are important tools in our toolbox."

Author Anne Lamott writes: "Expectations are resentments under construction." Finding a way to help family members and employees have more realistic expectations of others is a way to decrease resentment and to increase empathy. I am haunted by the story of a family who brought in an expert to help them understand their personality types. I watched a man well up with tears as he told me how much he wished he and his siblings had explored personality types before they started fighting and then stopped talking. Eventually, his brother's branch completely sold out because they felt disrespected — a move that was devastating to the business. After just a couple hours the man finally realized how unrealistic his expectations had been for how his brother *should have* behaved, and

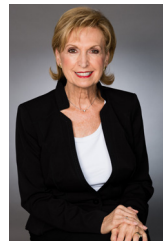
he finally appreciated the different strengths that could have helped the family and the business. Now, it was too late.

A good place to begin learning about the various personalities in your family is with the traits associated with birth order, specifically with the landmark work of Walter Toman, who wrote, *Family Constellation: Its Effects on Personality and Social Behavior*. Even though my twin entered this world only five minutes earlier than I did, my parents treated Elizabeth as the older sister, which affected our relationship with each other and the world.

Dr. Susan Dellinger's *Psycho-Geometrics* is a very simple and insightful tool my twin and I have returned to frequently in the last several decades because it is so easy to use. My all-time personal favorite is the *Enneagram*, which has been around for centuries, and has been developed further by Helen Palmer. Palmer's *The Enneagram In Love & Work: Understanding Your Intimate & Business Relationships* explains how various personality types work together, which gives us more realistic expectations and makes empathy easier.

## Complementary if not Identical

Often I joke that if Elizabeth and I, as identical twins, don't see everything exactly the same way, what hope is there for the rest of the world? As my twin and I discovered long ago, the reason for personality assessments isn't to label us or to put us in a box. It is to begin the discussion of how our individual talents and skills can get us to where we want to go together, what we need to know about each other to get there, and how we want to be treated on the way. These are lofty goals for sure, and yet there is an even higher one. Daniel Pink wrote: "Empathy is about standing in someone else's shoes, feeling with his or her heart, seeing with his or her eyes. Not only is empathy hard to outsource and automate, but it makes the world a better place." Twins teach us that we are all different and that it takes work to develop empathy and manage expectations. The rewards are worth it though because we can better our families, our businesses, and ultimately the world.



**JoAnne Norton, Ed.D.** is a consultant with The Family Business Consulting Group, Inc., and can be reached at [norton@thefbcg.com](mailto:norton@thefbcg.com) or 714.273.9367.

To learn more about The Family Business Consulting Group and how we serve families like yours, call us at (773) 604-5005 or email us at [info@thefbcg.com](mailto:info@thefbcg.com). There is absolutely no obligation.

The copyright on this article is held by Family Business Consulting Group Publications®. All rights reserved. All forms of reproduction are prohibited. For reprint permission, contact [editor@thefbcg.com](mailto:editor@thefbcg.com).

THE FAMILY BUSINESS CONSULTING GROUP, INC. and FBCG are registered trademarks and the FBCG logo is a trademark of The Family Business Consulting Group, Inc.

Reprinted from The Family Business Advisor®,  
A Family Business Consulting Group, Inc.® Publication

The  
**Family Business  
Advisor**