

The Family Business is Not a Life Sentence

By: David Karofsky, The Family Business Consulting Group

For many of us, being a part of our family's business is a deeply fulfilling experience. But for others, a career with the family can feel like a life sentence without parole. In my work as a family business consultant, I've been called in to advise in many instances in which the fit between individual and family business just wasn't right. And while the ideal is finding a way to make it work for everyone, sometimes that's just not possible. When the road chosen for you by your legacy diverges from the path you would have picked, what are your obligations to your family and to yourself?

Should I Stay or Should I Go?

When I first met Peter, he had been working in his father's manufacturing company for 15 years. An entrepreneurial CEO, Dad had built his business from the ground up and expected things to be done his way. Unfortunately for his son, Dad's freewheeling style was the opposite of Peter's very process-oriented way of approaching things. Every time Peter tried to bring what he felt was some much-needed structure to the business, his father shut him down for all he wanted was his son to appreciate what his father had built. Not surprisingly, Peter and his father were feeling frustrated and unheard. Initially, when I met with them, it was to help them create a transition plan for Peter's presumed ascent to leadership when Dad retired. But after working with them over the course of a couple of years, it was very clear they didn't need a transition plan; they needed a separation agreement.

Peter resented the fact that employees at the company took their cues from Dad and served as Dad's proxies in dismissing his suggestions and resisting any changes he tried to introduce. For his part, Dad felt like Peter didn't show senior management the respect they deserved. The formerly loving relationship between father and

son had deteriorated to the point that Peter was making excuses to keep his kids away from their grandfather. Even Thanksgiving dinner turned into a battleground, with Peter's brother and sister taking Dad's side in the dispute. The fact that these two were also part of the future ownership group made the situation even more difficult. Under the stress of all this, Peter's personality had taken on a Jekyll and Hyde quality; away from the office, he was warm and personable, but once at work, his tone of voice, body language and even his facial expressions hardened and became forbidding.

It fell to me to tell him that the only good solution was to manage himself out of the company so that a transition plan could be made that didn't include him. He was shocked at the idea, at first — but as we explored it, I could almost see the stress leaving him. He knew in his heart that it couldn't work; he just needed permission to make a change. To his relief, his father gave him that permission with a full heart, and we began the process of separating him from the company. Three years later, both Dad's business and Peter's new business are thriving — and Thanksgiving is back to being a joyous family occasion.

Feeling Like an Outsider

Sometimes, the family business comes calling when you've already established yourself elsewhere — but your sense of obligation makes it tough to refuse. That was Alex's dilemma. He'd been successful in the corporate world of sales and enjoyed his high-energy city lifestyle. But one day Mom called to say, "We need your help." Dutifully Alex stepped up, joining the family business in the sales department where his stellar skills quickly made him the top producer for the enterprise. Even so, after three years he found himself unfulfilled. The

move from a very polished and professional workplace to this exurban blue-collar business was a tough fit. His manager wasn't much help, so he had to figure everything out on his own and was stuck with a long-standing staff of workers he felt were unprofessional and unwilling to change. Frustrated and feeling trapped, he'd told his mother that he wasn't happy and that something had to give.

That's when his mother called me: Could I help them work through the issues that were troubling Alex and make the job tenable for him? I met with Alex, who expressed his resentment at having upended his life for his family's sake and being stuck in a job that made him unhappy and frustrated. Still, he was willing to give it another try, and agreed to make a yearlong commitment to doing what I suggested, although he wasn't optimistic. Together we worked through some of the challenges this situation presented, among them Alex's mother's conflict avoidance and unwillingness to accept his feelings. Alex kept his word and his commitment to try and make it work — but at the end of that year, he still wanted out. At that point, the focus of our work changed to helping him discover where his passion lay. I was able to coach him through that process, which ended with him leaving the family business to return to city life and a career of his own. That wasn't the outcome his mother had hoped for; as she saw it, she was losing her best salesperson and her son and now had to figure out how to fill the void that was left in the business. But even she agreed it was the right thing to do, because the stresses between them had threatened to derail their relationship.

As different as these stories are, the real issue for both families boils down to a lack of effective communication and unwillingness to change that prevented them from finding a workable resolution. By the time I was called

in, the family ties had been badly frayed. In creating the opportunity for both sides to speak frankly and openly about their wishes and frustrations, they were finally able to hear each other and come to the right decision for the family.

Don't Let Your Career Pick You

How can you avoid a similar situation in your family business? First, address these kinds of issues proactively, and don't wait for them to build up. Keep the lines of communication open and flowing in both directions. Resist the temptation to shut down unwelcome opinions. The fact is, you can't pick your family, but you can pick your career — and obligation shouldn't be used as a blunt instrument to compel obedience. And although you may not be able to see it in the heat of conflict, it's often in the best interests of the family for the business and the individual to part ways.

In most cases, families are able to work through these kinds of issues by defining roles and responsibilities, establishing clear boundaries, finding the right seat on the bus for that family member and opening yourself up to change. But in no way should these two examples be seen as failures. In both cases, the unhappy family member was able to find a better path for himself, the family businesses were able to course-correct, and most importantly, the family relationships were repaired.

These kinds of clashes are likely to become more common as the next generation is asked to step into their parents' shoes. Young people today are not their stoic grandparents, nor do they share their Baby Boomer parents' sense of obligation. They're looking for their own happiness first. That will create challenges for family businesses in which open communication between generations isn't established as the norm.



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