

To Be or Not To Be: Should an In-Law Join the Family Business?

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Throughout history, marriages have been about more than the joining together of two people in love. They also have been strategic, emotional and sometimes economic mergers of families. Now that you've married into a family business, your good fortune seems about to multiply; your in-laws have asked you to join the business.

But before you decide to accept the offer, there are some important matters to consider. Remember, history includes successful family blendings and alliances, as well as protracted, vicious wars. Are you walking into a golden future or a bear trap?

Why are they asking you to join? Everyone needs to be clear about this, including your in-laws. A successful family business is, first and foremost, a business, and any decision about your joining should rest on business considerations. A family once called me in to untangle an in-law mess. Having invited an in-law into the business, the family now wanted him out and for good reason. To put it delicately, his responsibilities far exceeded his capabilities. Why had they originally invited him? When he married their daughter, he had just graduated with an MBA and was looking for a job in a different part of the country. The family didn't want to see their daughter move away, so they offered their new son-in-law a position.

An offer to join a family business may be financially or emotionally attractive, but make sure it's based on solid business considerations. The fact that they like you is

not sufficient reason to tender or accept a job offer; if you can't help the business succeed, your performance will quickly curdle their affections.

A 2003 survey of over 1,100 family businesses conducted by the MassMutual Financial Group and the Raymond Institute found that in the past five years, over twenty percent of family businesses suffered at least one family divorce. The last thing you want is that a few years down the line, your primary identity within the family business has become that of ex-in-law. Consider and discuss clearly with your in-laws what they expect you to bring to the business, other than your personality. Make sure that everyone perfectly understands your prospective responsibilities. This discussion should focus on concrete issues.

Insist on being regularly evaluated, and of course be clear what those evaluations will be based upon.

What can you bring to the business? However flattered you may feel, an offer to join the family business is different than being invited into a family club or to regular family social gatherings. Know your strengths and make certain that you will be able to utilize them. Know your weaknesses and make certain you're not walking into waters that are too deep for you.

In addition to thinking about what you can bring to the business, think about what role in life you'll be giving up. Sometimes your skills and affinities are transferable, and sometimes they'll present conflicts. If you've

owned your own business, you can bring a spirit of entrepreneurship and sense of responsibility to your new position, but you may be uncomfortable with not being able to make the big decisions by yourself. If you're teaching high school and have an opportunity to join a family business as a manager, think about the similarities and differences between managing adults and teaching adolescents. Make sure that the fit, not just the offer, feels right.

Understand how the family communicates. Just as family businesses have unique advantages over other businesses, as an in-law contemplating joining the business, you have an advantage that you wouldn't have if you looked for a job somewhere else. You have an opportunity, before you join the company, to see how everyone communicates. Successful family businesses may be businesses first and foremost, but they are indisputably family businesses.

Watch how family members relate to one another at social gatherings. Do they genuinely respect and like each other? Do they allow everyone to speak? Do they listen to each other? Is there constant backbiting, behind-the-scenes maneuvering or face-to-face shouting? Tune in to yourself at these gatherings and see how comfortable or uncomfortable you feel. The social communication patterns you observe will also be the business communication patterns.

None of these patterns even the backbiting are necessarily good or bad if the business is doing alright, but a particular communications pattern may be good or bad for you. If you can't get a word in edgewise at family dinners and you feel angry or frustrated about that, then you have some valuable information about your prospective life in the business. Don't expect that the family will behave differently when dealing with business matters than they do with social matters, and above all, don't expect to try to change how they communicate. More likely, the powerful gravitational communications pull of families will either draw you in until you become part of their pattern or you'll get buffeted, thrown around and flung back out.

If a family likes to fight and you envision coming in as a peacemaker, you'll likely find that they will eventually make peace by allying themselves against you. If you

know how to maneuver, strategize and scheme in your family and your in-laws are open and cooperative with each other, you will come to be regarded as unfavorably as the snake in the Garden of Eden.

As you observe social communication patterns, remember that families are a bit like icebergs. The bulk of what really matters is below the surface. Do your in-laws bicker, fight and argue? You may see yourself as a potential mediator or a manipulator who can use all the arguing to your advantage, but you may not realize that underneath the apparent contentiousness is a cohesive, loyal family, and that fighting binds them together.

Likewise, a peace-at-any-price family may be seething underneath. You may think you're walking into a picnic and find yourself in a jungle. So as you gaze with fascination at the iceberg and can't wait to come closer, remember to look below the surface and remember the Titanic.

Bring your unique gifts, but bring them cautiously.

The family and their family business have a long history. You are the newcomer. People and organizations are ambivalent about change, even if they ask for it. You and the family business have one thing in common: your strengths are also your potential weaknesses. The family brings to the family business a heightened sense of loyalty and internal familiarity; these invaluable attributes can also lead to an insular perspective. As an outsider, you bring a fresher and broader perspective, but you may under-appreciate the power of the family's habitual patterns and forget that change often carries the faint whiff of threat or invasion. Approach cautiously. This not only shows respect, but it gives you sufficient time to understand more completely what you're walking into.

Just as marriage begins with the excitement of an amusement park ride and the glow of a moonlit cruise, an offer to join the family business always begins on an optimistic note, but you wouldn't get on a roller coaster without a safety harness or on a cruise ship without a lifejacket. If you consider these points carefully, you and the business may have a lot to offer each other, and you may find that marriage has led to a surprising new merger.

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