

Including In-Laws: A Different View

By The Family Business Consulting Group, Inc.

We typically advise second generation family businesses to include in-laws as equal participants in family meetings and decision-making and as active members of the family council. Usually, they can bring fresh perspectives and diversity of thinking and it's better for them to hear news first-hand. By empowering and fully accepting in-laws, trust is built throughout the family.

In some cases, however, families are very hesitant to involve in-laws. And we know of several cases where the in-laws themselves have proposed or sought the privilege of opting out of the family business planning process. There are several possible explanations.

Not Fully, Equally Accepted

No matter how hard families try, real differences remain between in-laws and offspring, especially while the parents are still involved. Most in-laws do take at least a slightly "back seat" position. In a sibling conflict, they either defend their spouse or don't take part. When the family process becomes either emotionally or time intensive, the in-laws might say, "This isn't as much about me, I'll take a pass."

Another possible scenario is that an in-law makes a mistake in an interaction with an offspring or the offsprings' parents. Many families seem to be much less forgiving of mistakes by in-laws. It's as if the relationship with in-laws is more a courtesy than a deeply sought goal. The adage, "Blood is thicker than water" often seems not to apply to in-laws.

In either case, being "second class citizens" can bring depreciated feelings. Why voluntarily subject one's self to that is a legitimate question by in-laws.

Risk of Cross Fire

Sometimes in-laws, quite incorrectly, are the brunt of emotional brush fires. The most common seems to be a conscientious in-law taking "too much" leadership in the eyes of the siblings.

The offspring of entrepreneurs can be reluctant to take leadership in family meetings as they may doubt their leadership competence. An in-law, unencumbered by that reluctance, may take some leadership initiative — honestly believing that they are helping. But an offspring may resent and resist that leadership initiative as he or she struggles with their own reluctance. After that happens a few times the in-law retreats from leadership.

Uncomfortable Reality

In-laws may well not enjoy the family meetings because they don't like to witness the behavior of their spouse in that setting. The in-law may have worked hard during their marriage to coach their spouse to be less emotionally dependent on his or her parents and to be less vulnerable to family-of-origin behavior patterns. For example, back in their family, the offspring may revert to old stereotypical family roles such as, court jester, or rebel, or everyone's problem-solver, etc. The in-law spouse may not like seeing this behavior and wish not to be there to observe such reversions. He or she may believe that when their spouse is with their family they behave as they did growing up. Not witnessing that behavior or not endorsing it by silence at a family meeting may lead the in-law to wish that he or she wasn't in attendance.



Frustration With Slowness

Just because a family's behavior patterns are well entrenched it's a slow process to change them. The in-laws can become frustrated because they see the behavior patterns clearly but wonder why it takes so long to facilitate the changes.

Disconcerting Objectivity

Families have long held deep behavior patterns that become almost unconscious to one another. When others (i.e., in-laws) observe a family interacting, the family becomes more conscious of their natural behavior and therefore more uncomfortable. That discomfort is usually felt by the in-laws. They sense that they are interlopers or less than fully welcomed participants.

Emotionally Consuming

While sibling generation meetings are usually more emotional for the siblings themselves, there is frequently a lot of emotional intensity for the in-laws too. They become highly involved after the meetings when their spouses need support, insight and coaching. So in-laws can leave the family meetings feeling drained and tired. After a while they may find reasons not to attend.

Summed up, family meetings can be trying for the in-laws. They may reason that the meetings are really more for the blood family than for the in-laws. After one or two years, their attendance may start slipping because of the "press of business" back home.

Make It Easy for In-Laws

Many business owning families are very sensitive to the complexities and emotions of in-laws. They further realize that the in-laws have responsibility to and for their own families of origin.

Therefore, these families have an informal "agreement" that they will do all they can to make it easy for the in-laws. They treat in-laws as "special guests" at family meetings and family functions. They welcome in-laws' help with family tasks and committees, but attempt to minimize expectations of them. They make extra efforts to listen attentively when in-laws speak, recognizing that comments may be expressed subtly or reluctantly.

In short, the family's attitude is to act as "hosts" to in-laws, to assure that they feel relaxed and comfortable when they're with the family.

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. There is absolutely no obligation.

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