

Individualism vs. Collectivism: “All for one, and one for all,” or should it be?

By: Jean Meeks-Koch, Ph.D.

One thing that piques my curiosity is the belief that to be a strong multi-generational family enterprise; we must embrace the greater whole, sacrificing our own needs. Collectivism, the practice, or principle of giving a group priority over an individual. (Merriam-Webster.com, 2021). The phrase “All for one, and one for all,” popularized by the A. Dumas novel *The Three Musketeers*, is another example of Collectivism. Every decade since the early 1900s has seen an adaptation of Dumas’ novel, so possibly most of our multi-generational families heard the battle cry, “all for one, and one for all.”

Or let’s shift to another famous collectivism quote dating back to 6th Century B.C. by storyteller Aesop, “United we stand, divided we fall.” So again, we see the cry for unity, solidarity, alliance, and groupism. And yes, groupism is a word meaning “the tendency to conform to the cultural pattern of a group *at the expense of individualism and cultural diversity.*” (Merriam-Webster.com, 2021).

As a family business advisor, my most challenging area of work is continuity planning especially between the Owner/Founder Generation to the Fourth Generation. I want to focus on groupism, about what happens when the next generation of shareholders perceive they will lose their individualism and cultural diversity. Like *Fiddler on the Roof*, when Tevye sings “Tradition,” there is a tug-of-war between what was and what can be. Individualism allows for moving from traditions that may no longer serve the collective family and creating a learning environment where family members feel safe exploring contrarian ideas and questioning the status quo. I am not saying that tradition has no place, and

collectivism is outdated. I am proposing a way of igniting curiosity and engagement while savoring traditions and core values.

Legacy vs. Individual Identity

So how can families be both individualistic and collectivist? Let’s discuss one of the most challenging family times of the year, the holidays. Here is my favorite fictitious family, the Morgans. The Morgans are three generations deep, with all generations of good health and wealth. Together there are two founders in their late eighties, 12 G2s including six married-ins, and 24 G3s including four married-ins. In total, we have 38 family members who live within a 20-mile radius of each other. Of the 38 family members, 19 work in the family enterprise. It has been the tradition to incorporate significant holidays around the G1s and their wishes. The 2020 COVID Thanksgiving, broke this tradition, and smaller nuclear family branches spent the holidays together. Mom and Dad joined the smallest family branch, enjoying an intimate and COVID safe Thanksgiving.

Brrrring! My phone is blowing up, it is October 6th, and I have a total of 10 text messages and five-voice messages from members of the Morgan Family. There is agitation, frustration, guilt, and shame in their voices. The issue is the same; no one wants to go back to the tradition of “all for one, and one for all” illustrious turkey dinner at Grandma and Grandpa’s house. The individualist branch affair that evolved in 2020 was magical; expressing the individualism within each branch created an intimacy the Morgans lost throughout the years.

Is “Either or…” the Only Way?

How can this be resolved to honor the past and create a new way of moving forward? Can family members be vulnerable and authentically share the importance of valuing each individual family branch and remain committed to the collective family enterprise? Would family members, especially the G2s, feel selfish by not wanting to be together at mom and dad’s home? Then sprinkle on some good old-fashioned guilt, “Mom and Dad sacrificed so much for us and have given us this amazing family enterprise, the least we can do is, be there for the holidays,” sound familiar?

I know you are wondering how this story played out for Thanksgiving 2021. Let me share our steps in this journey.

Step One: I asked each family branch to meet and answer the following questions, and then email me their answers:

- Share your favorite Thanksgiving experience. What makes it unique? What do you want to repeat in the future?
- What do you value most in the greater giant family oak tree, including the G1 solid trunk, each unique G2 branch, and the new G3 twigs growing off each main branch?
- If you had Aladdin’s lamp, and you had three wishes, what would you wish for this Thanksgiving season?

Step Two: I invited all family members to a video conference call, where I shared the answers to my questions by theming together each branch’s responses.

Step Three: I then divided participants into video conferencing break-out rooms into groups of six and one group of five. (Note: all family members were not able to attend)

I gave each break-out room 30 minutes to discuss the findings and come up with a solution for Thanksgiving 2021. I asked that there be a facilitator, note-taker/presenter, and a timekeeper for each group.

Step Four: All participants returned to the main session, where each group presenter shared their proposed solution.

Embracing “Both and…”

So how did it end? G1s gave an inspirational message on the power of creating solid branches and the joy they feel for each family member’s uniqueness. The Morgans unanimously agreed that the new tradition for the holidays would be called Holidays 2.0, where the emphasis would be on intimacy and connection within each family branch, and that G1s would rotate from one family branch to another as long as this was physically possible.

The last decision was to celebrate major holidays at the Annual Morgan Family Enterprise Retreat each year. Each day has a dedicated evening meal that represents each of their significant family “tradition” holidays. I suspect that one day, as the Morgans continue to prosper and grow, there will be the need to repeat this conversation and evolve into a Holidays 3.0.



Conclusion

As I reflect on the Morgans, I reflect on 38 individuals. Each one is unique with talents, strengths, and challenges. Breaking down decades of a holiday tradition respectfully and compassionately starts with four simple steps:

1. Acknowledge what currently exists. What are the things that we anchor around, and why are these important to our legacy? What things are we holding onto that no longer have meaning? See if you can come to a consensus around these questions.
2. Define the future state. What do gatherings look like as the family system continues to grow? What are we willing to try to do differently? Ask, what will the holidays look like in 2030? Be creative and empathetic to other family members’ needs.

3. Alignment is how you move from Acknowledgement to your Defined Future State. Put together a plan that identifies your goals and states who will be doing what and why it is essential to that individual, nuclear family, or family branch. Clearly state the actions for the collective group. What if you had a Zoom dessert party? An early Zoom coffee visit? Or...?
4. Passionate performance is when you take a leap and try something different. Move your actions from

above into reality. Is different a little scary? Yes! But if you don't push the edge, you will never see a new way of being.

Life is not this or that; life can be a sprinkle of this and that, tradition and new, individualism and collectivism. What it takes is for someone to start the conversation from a place of curiosity and exploration. So, make this holiday season filled with discovery and delight.

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