

The Transformation of a Tradition

We've often discussed here the two-edged sword of "tradition." It is both a special strength and an Achilles heel of a family business. Tradition fosters ownership commitment and management pride. Tradition can also block progress and discourage the interests of younger family members.

Often our counsel is to confront this paradox with an interpretation of tradition that embraces and promotes change. As one family puts it, "change is our tradition."

In the book, *Chimayo Weaving : The Transformation of a Tradition* (Lucero and Baizerman, University of New Mexico Press, 1999) offers a fresh, fascinating perspective on this classic family business issue. The book graces the 400-year tradition of Hispanic blanket weaving in New Mexico, near Santa Fe. The control cases in the book are the Ortega family who have passed on the craft since 1720, the Trujillo family, which is now in its sixth generation of the weaving business, and the Martinez family, which now has 64 active family weavers spanning five generations. Certainly these are remarkable stories of family and business continuity.

The intriguing thesis of the book is that what's kept the craft of Hispanic weaving alive, the families intact, and the culture of the region durable is that "tradition is not something that originated in the dim past, something fixed and immutable. Rather, the weaving tradition is an open-ended phenomenon, a renewable resource, a reflection of its changing social context." In fact, the authors argue, successful families "invent tradition" as they go along, as the social context changes.

The key idea is that long-lasting families in business create new interpretations of tradition that allow them to synergistically integrate the changing market conditions with the pride and identity of the family. In other words, as the world changes the products of these businesses change, yet the family still feels connected to the past.

Or, "the great power of tradition is to be flexible while seeming immobile."

Let's illustrate this in the Hispanic weaving industry.

Over the past two centuries the industry has faced as many fundamental strategic threats and changes as can be imagined. The original raw material locally spun yarn became obsolete and replaced by mass produced "imported" yarn. The original use of the product, blankets, was threatened by commercial products. The nature and sourcing of dyes changed, too, and new products including clothing, curios and decorations were developed. Customers shifted from local Hispanics, to Anglo tourists, to global fine art collectors. Producers became required to train new weavers and opened retail shops. Standard product designs evolved to become more custom and creative.

In short, everything about the business changed except for the names of the dominant families who were the merchants, and the cultural pride and identity of the Hispanics who were weavers. The original design and ingredients and use of the product all adapted to suit the changing market conditions.

The tradition was reinvented constantly to stay relevant and to hold the community together. It is this adaptation that preserved the culture rather than a desire to cling to past practices. Many Hispanic weavers remained in the area, developed their skills, supported their lifestyle, and reinforced their religious and historic identity. The craft grew in significance and beauty. The tradition was open-ended and integrated with the circumstances. The leaders of the principal families led these transformations, rather than resisting them. Rather than the culture being threatened with extinction, it remains remarkably strong. Heritage, ethnicity, self-reliance, skill and, fundamentally, versatility remain the traits of that culture.

The authors conclude the book saying:

“To view ethnic art in this fluid fashion poses a certain paradox, because it is customary to think of ethnic art as linked to ethnic traditions. Traditions are thought of as stable and unyielding, passed on from one generation to the next. However, studies in recent years have challenged this view of tradition and have offered a more fluid view of the phenomenon... Ethnic artists are not merely passive reactors to outside forces,

but active participants in a system, seeking out and developing symbols that can communicate with outside groups that can be palatable and digestible by outside consumers, but that can still maintain the integrity of the artist’s group.”

Perhaps rather than seeing “change as our tradition,” families in business might be wise to focus on constant adaptation, the versatility of their culture, and the transformation of their tradition.

To learn more about our firm and how we serve families like yours, call (773) 604-5005, email info@thefbcg.com or visit www.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. 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

