

Caring for One Another in a Divided World

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Today's world is a divided one, ruled by boundaries, opinions, experiences, and ideologies. This is nothing new, really, since the first caveman to many civilizations later, there always have been different ways of looking at things. What you take away from an experience, conversation or event may be vastly different from what the person sitting next to you takes away, even though you witnessed the exact same event.

Family enterprises are not immune, even though the bonds of family generally provide a common foundation. Yet, as anyone in a family can attest, being raised in the same household by the same parents provides no guarantee of agreeing on important matters.

What does seem to be more prevalent is a relentless pressure to take sides, highlighting differences rather than what we have in common. Whether it be the age-old "Kids these days!" or "Girls/Boys just don't get it!" wedges are driven between us, distancing us from one another and our connection together. At times, the distance is borne out of frustration with results or missed expectations. More often, they spring from our pride and protecting what's ours rather than what's the collective or shared good that lies outside of ourselves. It's all too easy to get carried away in the self-importance of "me, my and mine" — my generation, my gender, my department, my branch of the family.

Points to ponder around Caring:

- Finding common ground: Philanthropy, ownership alignment, next gen education, onboarding and engagement, family philosophy, values, and traditions
- Caring for family system: Effective communication
- Self-care
- Seeing others



In the era of information overload, instant gratification, and people's ever-narrowing focus, the divides appear to run deeper than they actually may be. Being thoughtful of different opinions is harder but it also opens a world of possibilities. In this article, we will discuss how we can see and better care for one another in this divided world.

Common Ground: The Key to Building the Bridge to One Another

For as long as there are people, there always will be opinions, varying perspectives, and different thought processes. In the face of these differences, how do we make sure that we see and care for the other person as human beings despite the choices that one makes?

We seek out and find common ground. Moving your focus away from disagreement and bringing it to things you can agree on is a great way to strengthen togetherness and harmony. We quiet ourselves in the debate and listen for the things we can agree on — our shared values, purpose, and vision.

Universal values of kindness, self-direction, accomplishment, security, giving for the good of others, and love are examples of values that permeate across

families, borders, and cultures. When we start a debate on the firm foundation of common values, our chances of having patience with someone else's perspective go up. The more we actively commit to and actually listen to someone, the better opportunity we have to understand their reason for their position. This leads to a much higher chance that a debate will be more constructive and lowers the likelihood of a difficult conversation spiraling into destructive name-calling or a hurtful shouting match.

We know from experience that being a part of a family enterprise comes with a more charged dynamic than other business enterprises because of the overlap of family relationships and life history. It is normal to experience differences driven by generational, financial, gender, educational, ethnicity, or a wide array of other potential factors. We also know from our work with families that some wedges get driven deep and can be painful.

But many enterprising families find their way back. They acknowledge their differences and recommit to caring for one another in divided times. They accomplish this through a process that:

- **Reaffirms the family's shared values:** Think about the things you do agree on as being important such as honesty, being kind, hard work, etc. Leverage these values as a foundation and starting points.
- **Explores differences through inquiry, conversation, and active listening:** Rather than blowing off somebody's perspective and position, receive it with a sense of curiosity and caring. Ask them how they came to this perspective, and what factors they believe are most important about the perspective.
- **Deepen your understanding of how others communicate best:** We all have our own style when it comes to taking in and sharing information. Some people are quick decision-makers based on high level information. Others need more detail and time for reflection. The more we appreciate what is needed by all parties, the more able we are to set the stage for better communication.
- **Makes a commitment to norms of behavior and communication:** Many of our families agree on rules for family meetings, ranging from no profanity, no cell phone distractions, and permission to call a time out if the tension gets to a certain level. This approach can be very successful to diffuse the risk of tension and

potential for pushing buttons or reopening wounds.

- **Rallies the family members around a family constitution, vision, and goals:** Document what the family enterprise wants to accomplish in a forward-focused, positive way instead of the negative differences. Use the vision and goals as the backboard for bouncing off ideas, debating initiatives, and resetting to take the next shot at challenging decision-making.

Effective Communication: Caring for the Interpersonal Dynamics

For the family system to flourish, everything begins and ends with communication. When done well, communication builds family harmony and growth for business. When done poorly or is non-existent, problems predictably multiply. Without information, it's human nature for us to fill in the gaps with our assumptions, rumors, or partial understanding. If wounded, we might pick at it and make it worse. On the flip side, a family may be expert conflict avoiders, never wanting to bring up sensitive topics or issues, which can also make it worse.

Such was the case with a family of three fourth-generation cousins. All three cousins inherited their shares in the family business. None of them had much connection, knowledge or even influence within the family enterprise prior to their ownership. The operations of the business had been run by non-family management since their fathers' time. They had no interaction with the leadership team. Lastly, the culture had historically been male-dominated and the cousins were female. These factors led each to feel that they hadn't "earned it" and didn't belong. They struggled to find their voice as individual owners and as a group. They were victims of their own biases and assumptions about the way things "should be." This family and business culture prioritized harmony, even if it was an illusion. None of the three said anything about their concerns so their silent fears paralyzed the system.

The non-family leadership infrastructure was well established and in place. However, in the spirit of "harmony," there was a substantial void in governance and direction from the family and the owners to the leadership team. The prior generation had mastered the interpersonal dynamics and created a strong culture and sense of stewardship. When the fathers passed, that valuable shared understanding also went away. The

cousins struggled with how different they were from their fathers, what their new roles entailed, and how their skill sets were vastly different from what theirs were. They were so focused on the negative, they couldn't see that they shared values and goals for the future. With the focus on differences, everyone throughout the enterprise floundered.

The CEO advised the sisters to seek external help. Once they engaged a consultant, the first order of business was to create platforms for communication. A shareholder's survey opened the doors to have multiple intentional and productive conversations. The cousins explored critical areas to identify where they agreed and where there were important differences, such as:

- What do we want as a family? As an enterprise? What's the purpose that drives us?
- What do we want as shareholders? How will we best serve the enterprise?
- What am I proactively choosing to be my role? What are you proactively choosing to be your role?
- Are you comfortable taking on this responsibility? What is needed in the form of training and development to enhance our comfort with it?

These conversations helped the cousins become more aligned at the same time it fortified them for their new role as shareholders. They bridged their differences, embraced their shared view of the future and gained confidence as leaders in the process.

From Interpersonal to Personal: Self-care

Be a light unto yourself. ~ Buddha

From the world at large, through societies, communities then to families, the ultimate unit is the individual. Each person within any framework inherently holds a position within the system and wields an influence on its outcomes. The well-being of each individual lies at the heart of all systems. Every person requires attention and care for the overall health of the ecosystem.

In a family business, discussions are almost always around business growth or family togetherness. What we sometimes fail to acknowledge is the fact that enterprise alignment can only thrive when the individual needs are, at a minimum, acknowledged and the person feels — connection, a sense of contribution, and personal growth.

When everyone can see how they fit into the overall system, the system itself enjoys greater success.

Nonetheless, there are times when being a part of a family business is stressful. There are times when family champions and more active, engaged owners find themselves tired, burned out or exhausted from managing all the different roles. Others may be juggling other family or work demands.

Regardless, it's a good practice to invest in self-care and have an objective sounding board to check for personal biases. Every announcement of airplane safety includes "put on your oxygen mask first before helping others." This holds true for members of a multi-generational family business. Caring for oneself is an important piece of a person's journey of growth and discovery.

Self-care entails two critical aspects. One is recognizing your own state, biases, barriers, and triggers. Self-knowledge allows you to be human and understand your needs better. The other aspect is to invest time in reflection and create intentional spaces to breathe. Allocate resources to support your overall mental, physical, and emotional health. Some of the best tools for self-care are meditation, exercise, eating healthy and giving yourself the gift of "me" time. Blocking out chunks of time for yourself to pursue your hobbies, learn new skills, spend time with friends, and other activities can be therapeutic.

The Secret Sauce: Seeing Others with Humility, Openness, and Curiosity

One of the most powerful ways to care for someone is in your ability to see them for who they are and where they are in a given moment. Seeing others outside of our biases, prejudices and their situations is 'care' in its purest form. Our ability to do this successfully is directly proportionate to our own humility, openness, and curiosity. Humility is reflected in our ability to quiet ourselves and recognize that the world does not revolve around us. Openness is embodied in our ability to actively listen, be curious and learn about the other person and what's important to them. As Stephen Covey taught us in *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, "Seek first to understand, then to be understood."

When someone is different than us or shares a perspective that is completely opposite our own, it should not pose an instant barrier. It is, in fact, an opportunity to be curious

and empathetic, placing ourselves in their shoes will expand our understanding and humanize the differences in a more productive way. That doesn't mean the differences will be resolved, but they will be understood with more respect than if everyone immediately went on the defensive.

Seeing Others

When you find yourself on one side of a divisive matter, try this:

- I am curious to understand why you support the position you have taken." Understanding the why.
- Followed by, "Can I explain why I chose what I chose?"
- Does this differing opinion gives me a window to learn something new?
- Accepting what you don't know as sign of humility.
- "Tell me more about you, why this is important to you." Listen.
- "I see you are passionate about this stance, tell me more what moves you."
- Check in questions at every meeting are excellent for knowing each other better.

Parting Thoughts

*"Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference."*

~Robert Frost

These powerful lines are about someone's journey and choices. What would happen if there were two people or many? How many would have followed the less traveled path and how many would go down the trodden track?

There will always be two roads, differing opinions and world views, and ways to look at an issue. In the face of all these differences, we owe it to our family, coworkers, and neighbors to see and care for others as human beings, despite their foibles. Opinion differences and conflict are inevitable. It's what we do in the face of the conflict that matters. Productive debate and conflict are healthy. It opens conversations, new ideas, problem-solving, innovation, and understanding. Productive conflict allows people to show up authentically. All divides are not bad as they give us an opportunity to self-improve, see others in a different light, and the space to grow into a better functioning society. Rather than caring only about ourselves and what divides us, we hold the key to finding the common ground that unites us.

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To learn more about our firm and how we serve families like yours, call us at (773) 604-5005, email info@thefbcg.com or visit www.thefbcg.com. There is absolutely no obligation.



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