

Reconciliation For Past Injustice

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Our work with enterprising families often involves structures and processes that support the proper exercise of authority, collaborative decision-making, development of the next generation and fair allocation of family resources. Unfortunately, in some families, grievances about past injustice, resentments and grudges can interfere with and effectively prevent families from implementing these valuable structures.

Reconciliation for past injustice may be critical to the longevity of a family and to the perpetuation of their shared wealth, but families often seem helpless to overcome the obstacles involved. Occasionally, the emotional cutoffs that result from perceptions of past injustice can last generations.

Destructive Entitlement

Ivan Boszmormenyi-Nagy, a family systems theorist, observed that people create psychological "ledgers of give and take." When a person feels victimized or betrayed in a family relationship, he or she may later feel entitled to victimize others. Whether or not these "others" were directly responsible for the original betrayal is irrelevant: So long as the "others" have a relationship connection to the original perpetrator, they are held responsible for the historical abuses. Nagy called this dynamic "destructive entitlement."

The following illustrative vignette is based on a real family, although identifying information has been altered.

The founder's oldest son—Jack—had been a huge disappointment because he was not viewed as capable or as interested in leading the family's business. When the founder died, his younger son—Mitch—took over the business' leadership. Jack challenged Mitch's decisions on many fronts and was highly sensitive to perceived slights. When asked about this behavior, Jack mentioned

repeatedly the poor treatment he received at the hands of his father, and his resolution to not accept similar treatment at the hands of his brother.

As CEO, Mitch – who regretted his father's attitudes toward Jack—tried to compensate by involving his older brother in many key business decisions. Eventually, Mitch became so tired of arguing with Jack, that he began to treat him exactly as his father had: He frequently criticized him and excluded him from business decision-making. Of course, this exacerbated the feelings of victimization held by Jack.

When Jack's wife and adult children gathered with the rest of the family for family events or shareholder meetings, they shared Jack's antipathy toward other family members, his extreme sensitivity to perceived slights, and they too acted as though they blamed others for the treatment that Jack received at the hands of his father. As a result, the rest of the family distanced themselves from Jack, his wife, their children, and even from in-laws newly married into the family who barely knew any of the family history.

This vignette illustrates several fundamental aspects of destructive entitlement:

Perceptions of fairness in the present are determined in part by our experience of how we—or our families—have been treated in the past, even though these perceptions may not have a basis in the present reality. Destructive entitlement may thus be viewed as a variant of loyalty, albeit a pernicious version. This means that perceptions of fairness in the present are not simply a function of fair process in the present—what may appear logically and presently fair may not be fair in an historical context.

When victims of unfair treatment in the past feel entitled to abuse others in the present, they may create a new class of victims who will then feel entitled to victimize others. Thus, the dynamic of destructive entitlement may lead to

a self-perpetuating cycle of victimization and victimhood that is sustained over time.

Destructive entitlement is a vehicle in which legacies of unfair treatment may be sustained through stories that are passed from one generation to the next. Eventually, there may no longer be a person present in the family who actually experienced an injury. The stories themselves may contribute to a general distrust in the family system as a whole.

Reconciliation is a Process

Forgiveness is an essential part of reconciliation, but reconciliation is a process, not an act: Forgiveness in a family that has been handicapped by perceptions of past injustice must be introduced, shaped and integrated within an overall strategy of assisting a family to move forward. While no one approach is right for every situation, I illustrate below how a business family approached reconciliation after years of tense association with each other during which a barely suppressed past injustice affected family members of several generations.

Background of Smith Family and Smith Properties

Bob Smith acquired a single apartment building in 1924, and saw the business grow to several apartment complexes, office buildings, commercial retail space and a property management company.

Bob and his wife placed real estate acquisitions in trusts for their five children. Bob advised his children to stick together and continue their holdings as one enterprise, convinced them to plan their estates so that even in divorce all assets would stay with the group, and specified that inheritances should support the vision of one company owned only by Smiths. To reinforce his high control philosophy, he gave voting stock to his three sons who were active in the business and non-voting only to his two daughters.

The youngest of the children, Emily, always wanted to join the business. After her father's passing, she did. She was a lawyer and soon made sweeping improvements to the property management division. The distribution of voting and non-voting stock became a source of strained relations between the brothers and sisters as Emily became more active, when board members were elected and shareholder meetings conducted. Emily's brothers

understood that their sisters' were angry and felt like second class family members. Nevertheless, they were clear on the value of tight control in an expanding family, and refrained from discussing the injustice that had been perpetrated by their father.

Family events were awkwardly attended by the sisters and their children, but the reason for the awkwardness was not discussed; it was understood that the existing ownership arrangement was non-negotiable and no one wanted "to open Pandora's Box". Tension escalated at times and became acute when at Emily's daughter's wedding only her sister's family were seated in the front seats for the ceremony, an obvious snub to her brothers.

Reconciliation in the Smith Family

Every family that I have worked with has benefitted from the understanding that there is a structured process prescribed for reconciliation, described in general terms below.

Agreement to Proceed.

Hope for improved family harmony was finally produced when a Board Member whom I advised requested that the family seek reconciliation for the good of all. I privately counseled Emily and her sister that they should not go into the process seeking retribution or punishment, but to seek recognition that they had been victims of an injustice.

Shared Perspectives on "The Truth."

Different perceptions of a precipitating event can result in different versions of "the truth" which are never calibrated because most families lack a vehicle for communicating these perceptions. As a result, past injustices endure. In the Smith family, individual sibling meetings culminated in a single family meeting that began the family's healing. The siblings were advised only to listen. Through a structured communication process, they recounted how they first heard about the stock split and the reasoning provided by their father: While the brothers felt awkward in accepting the voting stock, they did not resist when father provided it. The sisters heard their brothers acknowledge, without making excuses or justifications, that the division of stock was unfair, and they heard the brothers ask for forgiveness. The sisters then shared their resentments toward brothers who, while beneficiaries, were not responsible for the initial injustice. Listening and requests for forgiveness were signs of true commitment to the process.

Forgiveness.

The family was advised that meetings were a first step toward reconciliation – nothing would be required other than listening to each other. However, in everyone's mind was the question, "Would something else be needed to heal frosty family relations?" A number of things were possible: The brothers could agree to equalize power by retiring their voting shares so that all siblings owned equal equity shares; the sisters could forgive their brothers and acknowledge that they had made the brothers suffer for something their father had done. Ultimately, only the meeting where they listened to each other occurred; there was no spoken forgiveness and the ownership structure remained intact.

The Smith Family Today.

A few years after the pivotal meeting, divisions which were previously pronounced among the cousins in the third generation have evaporated. They no longer feel they must be loyal to their parents' antipathy toward the other family branches. The sisters, still clear that they were dealt an unjust hand have let go enough for their children to notice. The brothers renewed efforts to treat their sisters' families as equals in all matters related to the ownership of the business, and voting shares are never used in making decisions; it is always a consensus or majority rules vote when one is needed. For their part, the sisters did forgive, albeit not openly to their brothers, just in that they let go of holding their brothers accountable for the past. Peaceful coexistence is now the rule.

Many of our clients have been connected to each other through generations of shared ownership. Over the course of a long shared history, it is likely that some past injustices have occurred, which could lead to dynamics of destructive entitlement and cycles of repetitive attempts to rebalance the scorecard. When these patterns take hold, they can keep a family from moving forward and can lead to escalating negative consequences in the family as well as in the business. The availability of a structured approach to renewal and reconciliation can help a family move out of stuck negative patterns, and toward more normalized relations. In cases that we have seen, this can mean the difference between success and failure in implementing plans to sustain the family's enterprise for future generations.

Useful Reading: The National Truth and Reconciliation Commissions (e.g., TruthCommission.Org; Charles Villa-Vicencio. The Road to Reconciliation: Truth-telling and the healing of South Africa. Sojourners Magazine/May-June 1997; Philip Gourevitch, A Reporter at Large, "The Life After," The New Yorker, May 4, 2009, p. 37). (Note: Thanks to Steve McClure for his observations, insights and assistance with this article.)

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