Do They Even Care? Understanding the Many Faces of Commitment

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Whether spoken aloud or wondered quietly, a sense by one person that others do not "care" reflects a fear about misaligned priorities or values. When you are deeply invested in a cause, relationship, or shared responsibility, it is painful and unsettling to think that others, who you believe should be similarly invested, are not demonstrating the level of commitment or buy-in you believe is needed.

This tension, often seen among family members with varied types of involvement in their family business, grows more acute as the enterprise scales beyond being owner-operated. While we believe multi-generational family enterprises need engaged stakeholders to thrive, it is also true that successful families must learn to accept a range of ways of showing up and diverse levels of engagement.

What Does it Mean to "Show Up?" Different Styles of Caring

Mira was worried about the future and longevity of her family business. For 125 years, the Wheeler name has been well known for its legacy business, creating jobs and transforming local communities. Today, the next generation is geographically dispersed, and only a handful attend the shareholders' meeting. A few of them work in the business, but none of them work in the same location. This is a different reality from the one Mira grew up with, as she got to know several of her cousins working side by side with them in the business, and they all looked forward to the annual family gathering at their late grandparents' old farmhouse.

As the leader of the family council, Mira is concerned that the next generation doesn't prioritize these traditions. It almost feels to her as though they don't care for each other, nor do many of them take much interest in learning about the family business, even though it is a source of financial benefit to all. Except for David, who reached out to the family council career committee and shared that he wanted to become a board member one day and learn more about the company. Mira wondered why none of the other cousins ever reached out. She had always believed that the next generation would aspire to be a part of the legacy and seek the spotlight just like her generation did.

What Might Caring Look Like?

In many family businesses, people typically show their care and commitment through engaged participation, by asking questions, being prepared for meetings, and seeking opportunities to "show up" at a ribbon cutting, retirement dinner for a long-time employee, shareholder meeting, etc. As a result, caring often gets muddled with engagement, but it's not always the same. An engaged person may or may not care, but someone who cares will always find ways to engage. In the case of Mira's family, several Next Gens were engaged in the business at different job levels, but they didn't seem to care for the family business as future owners. Or at least, they didn't know how to show that they did.

Care and Commitment Look Different Over Time and from Different Seats

Gaining an appreciation for how both a person's role in the system, and some predictable ebbs and flows of what engagement looks like at different family or business stages can provide helpful context.

For example:

- Business founders (G1) and their children (G2) who are typically owner-operators often carry a lot of influence in both family and business systems because they worked hard and were deeply involved. People around them might believe, "Naturally, they care the most."
- In later generations, it is the business operators who are often the go-to knowledge center for the rest of the family, and this can give them clout and create an impression (in themselves and others) that they care more than non-operating family members, as they are showing up to do the work while everyone else is reaping in the benefits of their hard work and commitment.
- A family member who is not affiliated with the business directly as an owner/operator or manager can still show deep engagement by serving in governance roles on the board or family council. That's another way of showing up and expressing care for the enterprise.
- Finally, for a family member who is not engaged in any of these ways, it becomes particularly difficult for them to express care and commitment, even if they do care deeply. This stakeholder may have fewer ways of "proving" their commitment, and it can become very important that the family is able to "see" that they do care, even if they may not want, or be able to, engage in a more active role.

Why "Caring" Looks Different in Family and Shareholder Groups

Mira's story highlights how expressions of care are often shaped by external factors rather than a lack of heart. People show up differently, not just due to interest, but because of competing priorities that must be balanced:

Capacity and Life Stage: A college student's social focus or a parent's demanding job and young family can temporarily limit their bandwidth to show up prepared for meetings.

Geography and Exposure: Family members who grew up near headquarters, with a parent in the business, find it easier to engage than cousins living farther away, who find the environment unfamiliar.

The Weight of the Enterprise: Some see the business as an emotional burden that overshadows family time. This can lead to resistance or pulling away from governance as a form of boundary-setting.

Resource Disconnects: Frustration can mount when family members are expected to put in significant work as owners without receiving financial distributions.

Variations in the Need for Closeness: Some stakeholders may feel that being part of a family enterprise creates too much "forced family time" because they are naturally more private or want more personal boundaries than others. This can lead to behaviors that others interpret as not caring. The flip side of this is when family is limited to lineal descendants, which can alienate spouses and create family tensions around these gatherings.

Communication Styles: While older generations may value traditional retreats, younger stakeholders sometimes prefer the convenience of staying connected virtually via social media and text.

Ultimately, engagement differences can be addressed through education or empathy, but some are simply stylistic and must be accepted. No two generations will ever show their care in exactly the same way.

Caring is Important, but all Things in Moderation…

If the less-engaged shareholder becomes the dominant gene in the family, that will certainly put the long-term continuity of the business as a family-controlled enterprise at risk. That said, as families grow, you have to expect a range of attitudes and ways of expressing care among your stakeholders, and intense care can also carry some risks.

What if everyone cares a lot or there is a lot of jockeying for positions of influence and authority in the system? Having many deeply engaged stakeholders is a gift IF you can create a place for them. That is, if the family norm is strongly oriented towards deep engagement, do you always have the best-suited people in decision-making roles? Or do you end up with a structure where everyone feels they must have a say, and decision-making becomes ineffective? Not an ideal situation either.

Being overly emotionally sensitive might also be perceived as caring, but can be counter-productive to effective engagement and productive contribution. With such individuals, any conversation gets too difficult – because you are perpetually walking on eggshells, given the intensity of emotions being expressed.

Building Tolerance for Diverse Ways of "Showing Up"

While it might seem like "caring" is a simple concept, as everyone who is part of something cares, the reality is, caring, engagement, and showing up can manifest in a range of ways — and the evaluation of caring may sometimes be in the eye of the beholder. In our world, family business stakeholders demonstrate their commitment to the family's enterprise in myriad ways — some obvious, some subtle, some on and off, and some, unfortunately, absent entirely.

The question: “Do they even care?” is a natural but painful one, born from a fear that others don’t share our deep sense of commitment. However, as family enterprises grow across generations and geographies, demanding a single, highly engaged expression of care is a recipe for resentment and exclusion. The true work of continuity is not about forcing uniformity but about making the conscious shift from tolerance to acceptance.

We must learn to stop confusing a high volume of engagement with a high quality of commitment. Instead, the family’s focus should be on creating governance structures, clear roles, and decision-making processes that recognize and harness the diverse ways family members can and do contribute — whether they serve on a board, quietly maintain financial acumen, or simply choose to live a fulfilling life that benefits from, and honors, the family legacy. By valuing the many faces of commitment, the family can leverage a broader base of strength, ensuring the enterprise thrives for generations to come.

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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