



BONNELL EXECUTIVE CONSULTING

WWW: www.bonnellexecutiveconsulting.com

Email: info@bonnellexecutiveconsulting.com

Telephone: (512) 345-2282

Family-Owned Businesses: Is There a More Difficult Type of Business to Run?

The Good News

Creating, building, and sustaining a family business is not only a fundamental American dream (over 20 million family businesses in the U.S. – 092% of all U.S. businesses), but is also a powerful dream in most other modern capitalist economies (for example, over 75% of all U.K. businesses are family owned). The benefits of family businesses are manifold, genuine, and in many cases psychologically profound.

Consider WIFF (What's in it for the family). A family business:

- Creates a heritage for the family and serves as a medium for perpetuating a family's history, traditions, pride, and core values and beliefs
- Serves as a powerful testimonial to the success and potency of a family
- Provides the ultimate career and financial safety net to one's children and grandchildren
- Offers participating family members greater independence and control of their fate than a more traditional career path
- Establishes a very special glue (a bonding material, as it were) that can hold a family together around a common set of interests, activities, challenges, opportunities, threats, milestones, relationships, and daily schedules
- Demonstrates to an entire community (and various sub-communities) that this is a family to be admired and respected
- Makes it more certain that individual family members will have the fullest opportunities as adults to "stretch" developmentally and to self-actualize
- Improves the chances that family members will be able to involve themselves in meaningful philanthropic activities and become pillars of their communities
- Makes it more likely that financial advantages, non-trivial net worth (a.k.a. wealth), and "security" will accrue to the family
- Provides greater stability and welfare for its employees and for the community in which it operates

The Bad News

The odds are very tough. The head of an FOB faces a daunting array of dicey challenges, many of which are never faced by the head of a public company. So, besides all the common competitive marketplace barriers and obstacles that confront all business leaders, the head of a family business must also contend with a parallel set of near radioactive, family-based issues that inevitably arise in family businesses. Consider the import—for *real* people in *real* families—of the situations and questions below:

- Most families prefer to create some version of an egalitarian family culture. However, in their *business* the family head must operate based more on meritocratic principles, which often demand that children in the business end up with different-sized roles. How does the founder or current head resolve this family vs. business paradox?

- Founders generally grow more conservative as they age and approach that time when they need to pass the baton to G-2 (i.e., the second generation), which is perhaps the most supercharged process of all family business transitions. How does G-2 handle this sensitive and supercharged issue and how do founders get out of their own way for the greater good of succeeding generations? How does the founder let go of his/her “baby”? How does the founder confront mortality (a.k.a. retirement) under this stark set of circumstances?

(By the way, are we talking “family *dynamics*” here, or would it be more apt to say “family *dynamite*”?)

- Family “dynamics” (to put it politely) typically heighten and exacerbate problems and conflicts at work. In the business, how do the family head and involved family members handle such family dynamics as rivalries, feuds, jealousy, selfishness, rebelliousness, passive-aggressive behavior, playing of one family member off another, and so forth?

- Not infrequently, a fundamental charge for the founder and the founder’s spouse is to rear their children into mature adults *and* into mature business people, as well. A tall order, to be sure. How does the founding couple navigate these waters? (Jack Welch didn’t have to do that!)

- How does the head of the family business balance and manage the needs—and, too often, quite subjective needs—of the family members in the business *and* the “outsiders” (i.e., the non-family members) who play key roles within the company? How does the family even go about making sufficient “room” for the outsiders?

- How does the founder or current family head realistically, practically, and proactively deal with *The Future* and make all the hard decisions—succession, retirement, ownership, wealth distribution, lines of authority—involved in ensuring that the FOB does not wilt on the vine.

- So, as is apparent, the “opportunities” to make Solomon-like decisions are virtually endless. For example, to what degree are hiring and promotion decisions based on an offspring’s “birthright”, as opposed to their competencies and true potential? Are family members brought into the business for their own security or because of how well their talents, interests, and personality fit the requirements of the business? Should we reinvest in the business *or* siphon cash out of the business to fund my future retirement *or* ensure my adult children’s lifestyle and quality of life now? And so on.

Managing for Continuity: The Safest Approach

For better or worse, many of the most fundamental challenges that confront the family business head are psychological in nature. (This is not so different in kind from what a CEO in a publicly-owned environment faces. However, the “family-owned” dimension creates a multiplier effect on the psychological challenges that confront the head of a family business. Hence, the “Jack-Welch-didn’t-have-it-so-tough” remark above!) By examining the schematic below, you’ll readily see why there’s a critical need for *psychological savvy*, leadership finesse, and adroit relationship management if you’re going to be successful using the ten fundamental levers required to steer an FOB.

Managing for Future Generations: The Ten Levers Needed to Steer a Family Business

Shared Vision & Values: Regarding strategy, relationships, work ethic, money, and success

Shared Influence: Across generations, among spouses, and among siblings/cousins and geared to individual capabilities

Valued Traditions: That are characteristic of this family and set it apart from other families

Receptivity to Learning and Growing: Being open to new perspectives and new approaches; embodies a critical orientation that underlies mastering change and overcoming obstacles

Investment in Relationship Enhancement: The most robust families have traditions and mechanisms they use to play together and enjoy one another; these accumulated playful experiences serve as a buffer during difficult times

Demonstrative Caring: Open demonstrations of empathy for family members during good times and bad; making the clear statement, "You are important to me."

Mutual Admiration: Earned by building trust, based on a track record of being consistently accountable and true to your word

Being There: Especially at times of grief, failure, or embarrassment; how a family interacts with a distressed family member is highly correlated with long-term family harmony and business success

Maintaining Space: Respect for individual privacy and for the privacy of each family unit within the extended family constellation

Circumscribed/Managed Conflicts: Feuding members all too frequently bring in "reinforcements". The family needs to know how to prevent members, who are tangential to a given conflict, out of the middle and then address the conflict with finesse.