

Helping Family Businesses Prosper Across Generations



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Respecting 'Close Enough' in Family Business

by Stephanie Brun de Pontet, Ph.D.

While one should be wary of over-generalizing about business-owning families, in my experience many families who own and operate businesses together tend to be on the "close" rather than "distant" end of the family togetherness dimension. By this I mean that families who own businesses together tend to have a family norm centered on closeness.

Members of "close" families tend to want to spend a lot of time with one another (even outside of work) and confer with one another on most important decisions (again, even outside the context of their work responsibilities). The term from psychology is a family that tends to be more enmeshed, rather than more disengaged, where individual family members have very little contact with one another. While these close-knit, business-owning families are not conflict-free-in fact, some are very argumentative-they genuinely enjoy one another and derive great satisfaction from these deep personal bonds. In addition, many are glad that the business provides a natural platform for more, rather than less, family togetherness.

Though these bonds are clearly a source of strength in these close-knit families, a challenge regularly emerges for them over the generations, as the desire for family closeness is something that varies even within families, and is unlikely to be equally endorsed by all members of a family over time. This is particularly true of family members who join by virtue of marriage. Individuals who marry into a family where there is a strong bond are sometimes overwhelmed by all the "togetherness" time or joint decision-making that is expected in their spouse's family. In particular, if a spouse grew up in a more disengaged family, he or she may find this degree of close-

ness to be overwhelming. Some spouses perceive the extended family's closeness as a major intrusion of privacy on their need for personal space. What I frequently see happen is that the spouse who is uncomfortable with so much closeness will often try to set boundaries to limit the intrusion of the broader family into their personal space, or the space of their nuclear family (their spouse and children). While this is a natural reaction, problems emerge when the broader family sees this behavior as a rejection, and then start to question the commitment of this person to the family at large.

Different norms of family closeness often generate intense tension, as this gets at the very core of how we define family. The family that owns a business together must invest time and energy to developing the personal bonds that facilitate the shared work of the business, and sometimes must make complex personal decisions (e.g., around estate planning) as a group, not as individuals. In this context, we have found, the family member who wants more boundaries and personal space is often seen as cold or distant, or simply as a person who "doesn't fit in." Sometimes these spouses are cast into the role of the trouble maker if there is a perception that they are pulling away the blood family member from the broader clan. At the same time, the individual who wants a little separation does not understand why the extended family cannot respect this need. The extended family, on its part, has a hard time understanding why anyone would not want to be as deeply committed to the wonderful close family system in which they grew up.

What is often needed in these situations is a little mutual empathy and understanding of different points of view. To that end, it

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is important to invest time and energy in helping a spouse to understand how a shared asset like a business has an impact on family time and commitments. Individuals who did not grow up in a family business cannot be assumed to simply know this, and if we do not proactively set expectations on these points, it is more likely to create problems down the road. At the same time, the family which has a high need for closeness does need to develop a healthy respect for appropriate boundaries so that they can accommodate the diversity of preferences that is likely to increase over time. As a small example, if you used to regularly drop in for social visits with your adult child, assume that a change in norm is in order once this child is married; i.e., you should call to ask permission to visit!

Though some families resist adjusting their norms or behaviors to accommodate the needs of new members of the family (the famous "out-laws" rather than in-laws), it is important that all families develop some understanding that not everyone will want to relate to their extended family in the same way, or with the same intensity. While the example of the spouse is an obvious one, the truth is that blood-descendants will also vary in their own comfort around closeness. Some children are eager to continue the traditions and norms of their parents, while others will move away, have strong interests that require major time and effort away from the family, or otherwise simply want more personal time, rather than family time. This should not be seen as a rejection of the family; it is simply a desire to relate to family in a different, less intense, way. If a close-knit family makes these family members feel guilty about their needs or preferences, it is likely these individuals will simply pull away further, as they will feel their extended family cannot accept them for who they are, boundaries and all.

Families who manage this paradox of togetherness vs. individuality are those who:

1. Invest in "on-boarding" new family members. Many families develop an orientation program around the business and the role of owner for those who will take on that role; yet might not think to do a same kind of orientation to the family circle. Just as being an owner of a closely held business comes with privileges and responsibilities, being a family member in such a system also comes with some unique benefits and expectations. Making these explicit early on can help reduce conflict around this.
2. Can get comfortable with true transparency. While you may not need or want to share every last detail about the family enterprise with spouses, the more you can demonstrate trust by sharing some information about the business-and finding ways to include spouses as appropriate in activities like shared learning or philanthropy-the more likely they are to grow in their appreciation of what it means to manage the complexity of a family business, and in their tolerance for the time and energy commitment this may require of their spouse, or even of themselves.
3. Genuinely seek to appreciate other ways of "being a family." Families who can recognize that their way of interacting with one another is not the only way families can or should behave as "good families" will likely have an easier time integrating spouses into the system. When the experience and views of spouses are truly sought as a source of learning and richness that is being added to the system, spouses feel more genuinely accepted. In addition, the family may evolve or add new traditions from this person's life experience that will actually enrich the whole, rather than threaten the unity of the family.
4. Foster acceptance and a live-and-let-live mentality. While many close-knit families would prefer that all spouses and members of the next generation buy into the vision of extensive togetherness, it is unlikely that all members of the family will desire the the same level of togetherness. Harmonious families are those where this is simply accepted, and not seen as a problem that somehow needs to be addressed. No one wants to feel their family wants them "fixed" somehow; unconditional love in family comes with this capacity for acceptance of how that love will be given and received. This true acceptance is a sure way to strengthen bonds, and its absence can put family harmony at serious jeopardy.

While a reasonable argument can be made that a family that genuinely enjoys spending time as a family may be more likely to find success in business together than one that would prefer more interpersonal distance, as families grow and evolve over time, they must find ways of accommodating diversity on this need for closeness within their family, to ensure that all can find a place at the family table that is truly comfortable for them.