

Communication in the Family Business ... Talk about Courageous Conversations?



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Those who know me, have attended my workshops or have read my writings know that I am the strongest advocate there is for courageous conversations in organizations. Courageous Conversations are necessary when there are tough issues, opinions vary, emotions run strong and the stakes are high. They are the essential element of an organization's DNA.

While turning around the culture of an organization to one encouraging and supporting courageous conversations is difficult in a non-family owned business, it pales in terms of the difficulty in a family business. Did I say tough issues? Opinions vary? Emotions run strong? Stakes are high?

I contend that an environment permitting courageous conversations is essential for growth and long term survival of organizations. What that requires is creating a safe environment where everyone in the organization can contribute to a shared-pool of meaning, disagreements can be aired and conflict can be resolved. So how can the leaders of family-businesses create an environment like that in their companies?

- 1:** Make sure every family member in the business understands and agrees that the business must be run by business norms – not family norms. There is a big difference and too often family members cannot separate that out. For example, Business Norms provide that compensation is based upon merit and market considerations. Family Norms say compensation is based on the concept of allowance and not necessarily business related. It is the role of the leaders of family businesses to hold that separation sacred and courageous conversations on that topic must be held.
- 2:** Heads of family businesses must accept that their role in the business is separate and distinct from their role in the family. Not the mother or the father – but rather the leader, the entrepreneur, the boss. Business decisions such as promotion, performance appraisal and training must be made on that basis - courageously with direct, unthreatening conversation.
- 3:** You can reinforce this by not being the boss in off hours, family time. There you can be the mother/father, sibling, caregiver, supporter. Not to say that courageous conversations are not important in family relations, too. But those conversations typically take a different tone than business conversations.
- 4:** Be aware of your communication style and how it impacts your environment. Do you discourage disagreement? Punish those who speak up? Ridicule opinions you disagree with? Totally block out the words of siblings, parents, children? All these behaviors are the most severe roadblocks to courageous conversations in your organization. And they often set the stage and model such behavior for others in the organization. The idea is to say what you mean (i.e. don't avoid saying what's important), just don't say it mean.
- 5:** Build self-esteem in your family members by encouraging their opinions, listening to what they have to say and provide feedback (not harsh criticism) when you disagree. Nothing will block a courageous conversation more than a personal attack on the speaker and nothing will impact non-family employees like public arguments amongst family members.
- 6:** Acknowledge and reward those who contribute their thoughts and ideas. Especially recognize creative thinking. Experiment with the ideas of other family members even though you believe you know best. As long as there can be no disastrous consequences, allowing a junior member of the family to try out something is a great learning experience and even in failure will make them more willing to listen to the ideas of those more experienced, as long as their ideas were shown respect.
- 7:** In all of the above steps, enlist the support of all your family members. Let them know what you are doing and call on them to help you achieve the results you all want. While keeping a business-normed culture alive in a family business can be difficult, the special relationships of family members in supporting each other can be of great help if addressed properly.

While I admit that turning around a family culture is difficult, I can gladly say that I have seen it successfully accomplished with many of the clients I have worked with. And the changes that resulted made all the difference in helping companies attain a new level of growth and success.

One quick example: A father (founder) and son (president) in a distribution firm employed a son-in-law/brother-in-law who was paid enormous sums of money, produced essentially nothing and was highly disruptive to the success of the business. Through consultant-facilitated career counseling and very courageous conversations (which included the daughter), the son-in-law was guided out of the business, found an alternative source of income and was supplemented by allowance from the father (not the business.) Daughter and son-in-law happy and a grateful father and son are convinced it saved their business, their sanity and preserved harmony in the family. Contact us at www.cooperperson.com for more information.