

# Conflict Resolution in Family Business

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Being in a family business can be both joyful and agonizing. How is it that the people we care for the most can become the recipients of the very worst we have to offer? We usually have the best of intentions when we talk to our spouse or a family member about a challenging business issue. So how is it that our good intentions are misunderstood?

Every message we communicate occurs on two levels simultaneously. One level (the one which we tend to be most aware of) we call the content level. This is the information component. The other more subtle and powerful part of the message is the relationship level of meaning. Anger and conflict are usually caused by subliminal relationship messages.

These covert messages are active in all communication, but they are particularly potent within families since we bring the entire history of our relationship into the communication transaction. We selectively pay attention to behaviors that confirm our theories of what we think our family member is like. We subconsciously ignore examples of behavior to the contrary. We may be in our forties, but to our parents, we're still their youngest child.

In the business environment, when we start acting toward our family as if they are still the way they were years ago at home, we nail them into a pattern that's very difficult to break. We call this phenomenon "selective perception."

Too often, people avoid raising delicate family business issues, fearing the pain of confrontation. Conflict in family business fre-

quently ends with the problem unresolved and the relationship bruised. How do we get out of this kind of tangle? How do we bind our relationships and solve the problems at hand? We get so involved in patterns of communication that have evolved over years—even decades—of encrusted repetition, that breaking through them can seem insurmountable.

Consider the manner in which Janet raised a delicate issue with her business partner and husband, John, about his brother, the firm's Production Manager.

Janet: You know I don't like to beat around the bush, so let me get right to the point. You just can't let your brother keep dominating you the way he is. I mean, you're the President. He's only the Production Manager, but he can do anything he wants. He's just running the show.

John: Here you go again. We've been married twenty-six years and you're still jealous of the relationship I have with my brother. It's okay, honey. You can let it go now.

Janet: You think I'm jealous of the relationship you have with your brother? What relationship? He tells you what to do and you do it!

John: That doesn't even warrant a response.

Janet: Your Neanderthal brother is totally ruining the morale of everyone on the staff. He goes into the plant, he intimidates people, he puts them down, he harasses them—and you act as if nothing's happening!

John: Hey! Ralphie is a little rough around the edges. He's not going to win any personality

awards. I know that. But he's basically doing a decent job. He doesn't let the crew get off early, he makes sure they return from their breaks

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## CONFLICT RESOLUTION

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on time—he's running a tight ship, and sometimes the morale. . .

Janet: Morale is in the toilet!

Much went wrong in this conversation. Janet's good intentions were never heard. Neither she nor John was successful in this dialogue, and their relationship suffered. When we push on people, they push back—often harder. Now consider our five-step approach that has demonstrated its ability to motivate people to want to change.

### MOTIVATING CHANGE: A FIVE-STEP APPROACH FOR RAISING TOUGH ISSUES

#### 1. Describe your feelings

Edit accusations that might make people feel put down. By becoming accountable for our own emotions, by owning our feelings, our communication becomes less threatening to other people. Rather than saying,

*You can't let your brother keep dominating you the way he is.*

a personally accountable feeling description might be,

*I'm worried about Ralph's relationship with the production crew.*

#### 2. Pinpoint details

Avoid general patterns and accusations. Even if a problem occurs repeatedly, describe a specific example. Most people are willing to concede that on one occasion they made a mistake. However, few of us are willing to accept the "fact" that we regularly screw things up. Pinpointing details means accurately describing observable behaviors without evaluating or interpreting them. Rather than saying,

*Your Neanderthal brother is totally ruining the morale of everyone on the staff.*

a more pinpointed statement would be,

*Yesterday Ralph ran on to the production floor, threw a wrench against the wall and shouted, "It's my way or the highway!" Two of our best people are filing harassment charges.*

#### 3. Acknowledge your part in the problem

Remember that every issue has two sides. When we describe how we contributed, even unintentionally, to the problem, this allows people to gain some distance from their mistakes. Their self esteem remains intact, and it encourages us to see the world from their point of view.

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**Side stepping issues or burying things under the carpet can lead to an undeclared war that can ravage your enterprise and take its toll on your relationships as well.**

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*I know that I own part of this problem, because things like this have happened before and I've been afraid to tell Ralph myself. I've even had trouble mentioning them to you. I've also allowed Ralph's crew to complain to me about this problem without encouraging them to speak directly to him.*

#### 4. Agree on a solution

Every solution, like every problem, requires participation by both people involved. It is important to reach an explicit, collaborative agreement about what each person will do differently from now on to correct the situation.

First say what you will do.

*I'll meet with Ralph and share my thoughts and feelings about this problem. I'll also encourage his people to communicate directly to him about problems they're having.*

Then, ask if the other person wants anything else from you.

*Is there anything else you would like me to do?*

Next, ask the other person what he or she might do to help the situation.

*Can you think of anything you might be willing to do to help make this situation better?*

Finally, be explicit about what you want from the other person.

*And I would appreciate it if you would talk to Ralph about the impact of low morale on safety and production, and encourage him to enroll in a leadership course or in some other way to learn a new approach for managing people.*

#### 5. Follow-up

Agree on a time to get back to each other and be sure it happens. Since many attempts at resolving conflict end in failure and fighting, this evaluation appointment is important. Agreeing in advance to assess the workability of the solution at a specified time allows you and the other person to alter and modify a particular solution before you allow it to fail. It also means that you are viewing conflict resolution as a continual process rather than a one shot trial that either ends in success or failure.

*Let's meet again after we've both had time to speak with Ralph and then, perhaps, have a meeting between the three of us to let him know that we see success in this area as a team effort.*

Confronting delicate problems with your partner or other family members is never an easy matter. But avoidance is worse. Side-stepping issues or burying things under the carpet can lead to an undeclared war that can ravage your enterprise and take its toll on your relationships as well. Carefully orchestrated directness produces creative solutions, increases closeness, and leads to a joyful and productive family business team.

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