

Family Business

THE GUIDE FOR BUILDING AND MANAGING FAMILY COMPANIES

Resolving Conflict

Getting at the underlying issue can end the vicious cycle of pain that marks family fights.

By Kenneth Kaye

When she heard her terminally ill husband and two sons start yet another round of nasty squabbling, Grace Spyros could do little but mutter, "Here we go again." She knew the combatants' habits well enough. Any minor matter could provoke a sudden outburst. After the fighting ended, several days of stony silence would settle upon the household. Then the men would change into their best behavior, which they wore like overly starched shirts. Within days, the cycle would begin again.

Traditional methods of conflict resolution assume that people are truly fighting about what they say they are fighting about and that they want to resolve their problems rationally. Family arguments, however, are far more subtle and far less rational. Family members frequently conspire to sustain conflict because it helps them avoid something they fear might be even worse than the devil they know.

Conflicts that mask hidden fears tend to follow a predictable circular pattern. As anxiety builds, family members initiate arguments that distract them from critical issues. The encounters escalate into destructive battles, which create more anxiety. Eventually, tempers cool down. Sooner or later the family's unresolved dilemmas resurface and the cycle begins once again.

The only way to break this vicious pattern is for families to confront the very issues they have diligently avoided. Sometimes they know painfully well what those issues are and merely need a sensitive advisor to help them talk candidly and constructively. Other times families bury their most important problems so deeply that they need a family therapist.

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Unaddressed fears can often be identified by asking, "What would happen if. . . ?" For example, "What might happen if you weren't fighting about parking places?"

"We'd be fighting about something else."

"And what if you didn't fight about anything?"

"Then Dad wouldn't have any reason to yell at us."

In the case of the fictional Spyros family, son John thought he was making a wisecrack, which did indeed partly explain

the group's behavior. I asked the family a series of "what if" questions, concluding with this one: "What would it feel like if Ted weren't yelling?" The answer was startling. When the gravely ill patriarch yelled at his sons, the family could pretend he was well.

Analyzing a chronic circular conflict can accomplish several things at once. After family members have identified their shared fears, they can begin to isolate the triggers that divert them into unproductive battles. In the Spyros family, the surest trigger was Ted's decision to take a day off from work because he was feeling ill. One son would pick on the other, who would start a shouting match that would escalate until Ted got involved. A lot of angry words were hurled, but no one ever mentioned what was foremost in his mind—grief for a dying father.

Although conflict can hurt a family and ruin a closely held business, it can also create opportunity. The greatest benefit of analyzing the cycle of repeated clashes is that family members learn routinely to ask one another, "What would happen if... ?"

Here is how conflict and resolution played itself out in 'Ted's family. Doctors told Ted that he'd die of cancer within six months. One year later, Ted was still alive, but pain caused the 54-year-old to spend fewer



and fewer hours at his business. For years, Ted and Grace worried that their sons would never get along. Now they feared that Ted's illness would somehow make those fears come true.

The two boys invariably argued whenever their father was too ill to work. Ted, who could bellow with the best, would soon be drawn into the argument. The sons had thus resuscitated their tough, vigorous father, if only for a while. If the argument lasted into the evening, the sisters were sure to get involved, telling their brothers to stop acting like babies. This provoked louder shouting. Eventually, Ted would go into a coughing fit, the women would chastise the boys for "goading" their father, and then the arguing would cease. Within a few days, however, sadness and panic stirred the sons to new conflicts.

Curiously, the word "death" was taboo in this family. In our meetings, the family referred only to "the situation." I began to explore what might happen if the relatives acknowledged their grief and discussed the problems that lay ahead. I interrupted one of their shouting matches and asked everyone in the room what he or she was feeling. Ted felt "angry." The women felt "aggravated." One son felt "accused," and the other felt "happy because our personalities are finally getting dealt with." I then said I was feeling sad about Ted's prognosis.

I asked, "What might your family be like a year from now if your dad's not around? After a silence, one daughter replied, "I'm afraid we'll fall apart as a family." She thought that if her two brothers weren't forced to work together, both

would distance themselves from the family. The children also feared that their mother wouldn't be able to function without Ted. Grace assured them that she was stronger than they realized.

Only by talking about their concerns was the family able to begin a true healing process. Ted's sons have not become close friends or effective partners, but they finally broke out of their self-destructive patterns and began to talk about the serious matter of what to do with their father's business.

***Kenneth Kaye**, a Chicago psychologist, won the Family Firm Institute's 1990 Contribution to the Field Award for his paper, "Penetrating the Cycle of Sustained Conflict," to be published in the Spring 1991 issue of Family Business Review.*

