

The Challenge of Career Decisions: When There's a Family Business in the Family

By Leslie Dashew

Published in *Career Planning and Adult Development Journal*

Abstract:

Under most circumstances, young people have significant challenges figuring out who they are and what they want to do when they grow up. When you add the complexity of growing up with a family business lurking around you, it creates even more pressures and dilemmas. This article explores these issues and some of the guidance which can be given to families in business to assist in the career exploration process.

Leslie Dashew, an organizational development consultant and psychotherapist who has worked with families in business for several decades, shares her observations on the challenges and strategies which help.

Introduction

It has been said that "It is hard to find your place in the sun in the shade of the family tree." Growing up in the shadow of a family business is an example of this dilemma.

Young people often feel a range of pressures to work in the family business, to lead the family business and/or to be effective stewards of the family assets. Some youngsters would like to add value to the family business but feel that their role in the family (e.g. daughter, youngest son) might preclude them from those opportunities.

There are a range of overt and covert messages which influence the career decisions made by young people whose families own businesses and make this process even more difficult.

Some Examples:

- A brother and sister grow up in a lumber business founded by their grandfather. It was always assumed that he would go to forestry school and then go into the family business. He followed that path and was trained to be his father's successor as CEO. Sister, assumed that she was not welcome in the family business even though she had a sentimental attachment to it. She pursued a degree in education and became a school administrator. She stayed marginally involved in the family business as she was an

owner. At a young age, brother died, leaving a young family and an ailing father who was semi-retired. The sister, ill-prepared but motivated, came in to run the business.

- Parents who own a second generation chain of supermarkets hoped that their son would continue as owner/manager, but wanted him to have the opportunity to select his own career since they had felt compelled to join the family business. They always told their son to "follow his passion." The son was very interested in science and wanted to pursue the study of medicine. He struggled toward the end of college about what he should do. Although his parents overtly supported his thoughts about med school, he didn't want to let them down by not joining the family business.
- A man of 45 begins to suffer a range of physical complaints from headaches to heart palpitations to diarrhea. After going through months of medical tests, an insightful doctor explores his satisfaction with his marriage and family and finally his career. He finally realizes that he feels trapped: he never thought he had a choice but to go into the family manufacturing business. He never worked anywhere else. He now is making a very good salary and benefits and he believes he could never be hired by anyone else. So he feels he had on "golden handcuffs" and the frustration has led to physical symptoms.
- Three siblings aged 22, 25 and 29 and struggling with decisions about their future. They will own a substantial diversified family business. However, their grandfather had a rule: no family members could work in the family business. Yet in order to be effective owners, they must learn about the businesses, the role of owners and board members and must be available to attend meetings of the family council, board etc. This time commitment makes it difficult for them to pursue full careers in other fields (particularly jobs where time off would be limited) yet they can not work full time in the business. They are encouraged not to be "trust babies" but to occupy themselves gainfully. The practical dilemmas and the mixed messages make it difficult to gain clarity about their own identities and interests.

Conflicting Messages

Parents in family businesses often tell me that they have told their kids to do what they want and not to feel obligated to join the family business. This is particularly true of those parents who felt compelled to join the family business themselves and had "golden handcuffs" that kept them there despite their lack of passion.

Parents might give an overt message of "find what you want to do, and do it" but the covert message is around loyalty to the family, the value of cohesiveness or closeness which comes when you share in the daily endeavor of the family enterprise. Overtly, I want you to

individuate and become your own person; covertly, stay here as my little child and companion and share my passion. Or, go out there and take care of yourself, while the underlying message is “but I really need you to take care of me.” It is often difficult for young people to articulate the “hidden messages” but they feel them.

For example in the first example above, the young woman had the overt message that she “could do whatever she wanted with her life.” Yet, she felt that education was an acceptable field for women in her family, rather than the family business. She had never discussed the possibility of working in the family business with her parents.

Meanwhile, some young people struggle to determine what they want to do and look at the family business as a safe and available option. They may have sensed their parent's lack of direction, feel their confusion and anxiety and find it more difficult to leave and develop their own direction.

In some cases, the choice to stay “for a while” ends of being for a lifetime. In the case of the 45 year old man with physical symptoms mentioned above, he drifted into the family business and never truly clarified his own identity, purpose or occupation of choice. As the middle of his life approached, he began to feel uneasy about where the tides had taken him.

Although the “drifting” into a job may not be unique to family businesses, there are a greater number of pressures associated with employment in the family business: feeling like the extended family welfare may rest on one's shoulders; the legacy of the family and business is at risk if a young leader “jumps ship;” going to family events following a departure means facing not only your family but potentially your former bosses, colleagues and employees!

Perspectives and Strategies:

Families who own business can be encouraged to help their members in their career decisions with a number of guidelines:

1. **Importance** of all members of the family be clear about their own purpose as an individual, the role the business plays in their lives and the value of sharing that with the younger generation.
2. **Co-evolution of the family, business and individual**
In the healthiest family businesses, there is an evolution or development which occurs within individual members, in the family as a whole and in the business: what I refer to as co-evolution of the three components of the family business. However, we often find that the evolution of the business occurs at the expense of the individuals and/or the family. At times, the family evolves at the expense of the business or individuals. Paying

attention to the growth of each component is essential to the health of the entire system.

3. **Separating the circles:** clarifying boundaries between family role and business role; developing appropriate succession planning within the business to assure that it will survive with or without a particular family member working there. Make sure that a clear message is projected that you and the business will be fine no matter what the young person does.
4. **Family employment policy**
5. **Being a role model and resource for thinking about purpose and direction**
First, be sure that you are clear about your own purpose and are communicating that (through words and deeds) to those around you. Second, encourage family members to create their own statement of purpose, such as a mission statement. One helpful way to begin organizing thoughts about one's purpose is to think about death. For what would you want to be remembered after you have died? If you have lived a very fulfilling life, what would you have done and how would you have impacted people around you?
6. **Space time and Support for career exploration**
Provide access to relationships (e.g. opportunity to talk about options as a coach, rather than as an advocate for a position) through which to explore direction and opportunities including career counselors. Give them time to explore themselves and learn what matters to them, without the heavy influence of family members, i.e. the space.

And what if they decide not to work in the family business?

If their explorations take them elsewhere, and not toward work in the family business...how do you handle it? Celebrate with them that they have found their joy...maybe even their dream. Realize that our children cannot make our dreams come true; only we can.