

Ties that Bind (How to keep the family in family business)

Happy Families

Part I in a two-part series on a trio of characteristics that create healthy families BY Tom Hubler

Research, as well as common sense, tells us family businesses perform better and are more profitable when the family is in harmony and family relationships are solid. (You may recall my May 2007 column where I highlighted Ed Friedman’s research on this subject.) With that in mind, it is beneficial to explore what harmony is.

The condition known as “happiness” itself is somewhat of a mystery. Happiness in a family may align around what a family values and a “common family vision” that springs from those values. Powerful stuff. But there is more to happiness than aligning values.

In his research on families, David Olson, Ph.D., specifies three characteristics that create healthy families: flexibility, togetherness and communication. The structure, below, relates the first two, and good communication brings them together.

Dr. Olson’s model suggests “happiness” generally occurs when a family is flexible and balanced in its structure and togetherness. Happiness is implied within the encircled area. The goal is to avoid being unstructured on the low end or too rigidly structured on the high end. The middle position allows the family to adapt to changes. Similarly, on the horizontal scale, having too little or too much togetherness can create a problem. Balance lies in the center of this diagram—but not necessarily direct center.

For instance, if your children are young, you might want to structure the family’s flexibility and togetherness toward the lower right portion inside the circle. This attitude offers more structure (more consistency) and more togetherness (which helps a child feel safe). On the other hand, when chil-

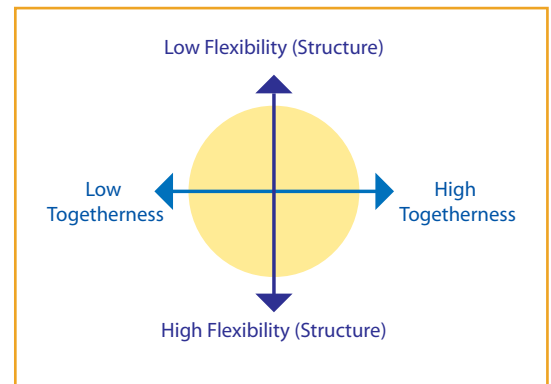
dren are teenagers or emancipated adults, the family’s happiness is best represented by the upper left portion with- in the circle by giving the older child greater independency by allowing more flexibility and less need for togetherness. The diagram also indicates that the farther you move away the center area the more likely you are to find unhappiness in the family.

Good communication is the third characteristic of happy families. The most important communication skill is *listening*. Listening permits understanding, which is essential to happy families.

Whenever we share our perspective, we should try to speak from the heart. Make “I” statements to help others understand our concerns. “I” statements help people speak for themselves, and not for others.

Another aspect of effective family communication is to manage differences as they occur. The rule of three is to attempt to share your truth (concern) within one day. If this is not possible try for two days and then wait no longer than three days at the outside.

Having a common approach to effective communication not only strengthens the family, but also helps family members refrain from emotional disconnection both at home and the office. This is certainly critical for a family, and is even more important to the success and prof-



itability of a business, according to the research of Dr. Olson.

There is no one model for happy families. But it is most important to recognize that happy families are the “secret ingredient” of successful business families. I will discuss this further in my next article. In the meantime, at your next family meeting, take a moment to share your individual perceptions about how your family relates to togetherness, structure and communication. How balanced and flexible are you and your family? You might also visit www.hublerfamilybusiness.com to take a confidential Hubler Family Business self assessment. Compare the individual results at your next family meeting. It will offer insights on your family business and communication. **MB**



THE CONTRIBUTOR

Tom Hubler (hubler@mm.com) is president of Hubler Family Business Consultants (www.hublerfamilybusiness.com) and an adjunct professor at the University of St. Thomas.