

Emotionally Speaking

Exploring the poignant points of passing the torch

"Men know how to pass along the rules, the roles and the money, but they don't know how to pass along who they are as people."

— RICHARD ROHR, O.S.F.

BY TOM HUBLER

In the above quote, Richard Rohr, a Franciscan monk, captures the essence regarding fathers and succession planning. Many family businesses go through a terrible time when the leadership succession process is in full swing. There is not only the technical matter of learning the job, but also the emotional matters of loss and the need for validation and passing the torch. Too often, little time and preparation are spent on succession in family businesses. It powerfully contributes to the fact that nearly 70 percent of family businesses fail to make the transition from the first to the second generation.

The entrepreneurial founder carries the inevitable concern about the well being of the business. "Does my son/daughter have what it takes to run the company? If they take over, what will I do with myself?" Just below the surface is dad's secret expectation—never voiced—to have his adult children express some appreciation for what he has done for them and for the family.

On the other hand, adult children are eager to take over, ready to try their hand at running

the business. They may have educated themselves in business. They have invested years in the company hoping (waiting) to take over. They are eager to show their stuff, to demonstrate to their parents what they have learned. In their eagerness, they quietly bemoan the feeling that their parents really don't appreciate what they have to offer.

The kids secretly feel gratitude but are woefully unable to articulate it. The parents feel vague misgiving and loss, but are unwilling to mention it. Both sides feel underappreciated, or misunderstood, or worse. Unable to constructively, openly and directly discuss succession concerns, they polarize on the issue and blame each other for the reluctance to proceed.

In his Pulitzer Prize-winning play "Fences," August Wilson comments on this father-son dynamic. Speaking of the father near the end of the play he says:

"...he tried to teach you all the things that he wasn't, and at the same time you become all the things that he was."

While dad taught the rational, the child learned the emotional. While the child realized the rational, dad ignored the emotional. Given these dynamics, no wonder leadership succession planning can become so volatile. But how can the frustrations of the leadership succession planning process be avoided?


To my clients, I suggest that they create a

leadership succession planning task force to address the issue. The task force consists of the entire leadership team, current and pending, including non-family managers.

Start early and get the whole leadership team involved to explore, together, the options for leadership succession. Establish the criteria, skills, education and expectations the

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family has regarding the position. Interview the owner-entrepreneur about his/her expectations and plan. Evaluate and train the next generation so that they are ready. Use non-family managers to bridge any gaps while family leaders mature into their roles.

As you build a leadership team of the future, I also encourage you to simultaneously build the emotional equity of your father-son and father-daughter relationships. Make time in your busy schedules to nurture your relationships. Spend time with each other at weekly lunches, periodic nights out and sporting activities, for example. Use these shared times to explore your relationship and your expectations of each other. As Neil Chethik mentions in his book, *Father Loss*, take the time to share the words you always wanted to hear: "I love you, I appreciate you and I admire the life you're leading ..." 

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