

Ties that Bind

Healthy Families

Part II in a two-part series on characteristics that create healthy families

MINNESOTA BUSINESS
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Did you know that the health of a family can be measured by the bottom line of its family business? (See my May 2007 column that highlights Ed Friedman's research on this subject.) This tells us a healthy family is good for both the family and the business. What characteristics make up a "healthy" family?

Fun.

Having fun as a family is often overlooked as a vital ingredient of successful families. Fun can be one of the first things to go when business tensions enter family relationships. Fun is important for its own sake. It relieves stress and tension. It also builds and maintains the family's emotional closeness and cohesiveness. Fun does not require spending lots of money. Family gatherings, picnics, reunions, outdoor activities, walks, playing board games, reading together and visits to a local museum are inexpensive activities that can lead to family fun.

Celebrating rituals.

Family "rituals" are important for a healthy family. Every family has them—bedtime routines, seasonal events and religious ceremonies, for example. A family's rituals are the glue that binds the family. The family benefits enormously by celebrating them. Updating or creating new rituals that reflect the current growth and evolution of the family are also beneficial.

I have come across many special family ceremonies in my work.

► Family members eat a special Christmas pudding in which a single, small hazel nut is hidden and the person who finds it gets a special gift.

► A member of the family who is celebrating a birthday is served their meal on a special plate just used during birthdays.

► Bonding through annual hunting or fishing trips or family vacations.

► A father and mother alternate taking their teen-age daughter (and soon a younger son) on an organized, week-long, 300-mile bike ride to raise money for the MS Society. It gives the individual parent exclusive time with their children.

► Finally, there is a family who gathers with close friends to celebrate Independence Day (July 4) by sponsoring a picnic to support a local non-profit that serves inner city youth initiatives.

Common Vision.

A family united by a common vision is a healthier family. Here is an actual example of one family's Common Vision:

"Our family circle is an unbreakable bond of support, belief in each other and unconditional love. It inspires us to live our lives with humility, integrity and philanthropy. We manifest this through our families, our foundation and our businesses."

With that thought, this family has crafted a vision that unites them while doing good for

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their employees and the world. It is a vision they hold “in common,” which means no individual family member ever gets 100 percent of what he or she wants. Each family member, at one time or another, will be called to contribute to the common good out of his or her generosity, love, sense of abundance and, most importantly, trust.

Praise.

All too often, praise is overlooked in family life. Family members sometimes assume because they love each other, praise is unnecessary. I suggest the opposite: Because you love each other, regularly recognize and express appreciation to each other for being special.

I have noticed that often the senior generation in a family business wants this appreciation and praise from their adult children even though they may deny they need it or care about it. But deep down, that is exactly what they want. They want to know their adult children appreciate their hard work and many sacrifices. That is also precisely what the younger generation wants. They want to be recognized and appreciated for their contributions and commitment to the family business. A healthy family is one where each member regularly gives and receives praise.

Beyond the key characteristics I've mentioned—fun, celebrating rituals, common vision and praise—there are others that develop a feeling of community. These include:

- ▶ Emotional support (being emotionally present)
- ▶ Esteem support (specific and exact praise)
- ▶ Networking support (belonging)
- ▶ Appraisal support (honest feedback)
- ▶ Altruistic support (giving to other people)

Being supportive is central to a healthy family. Nothing else in our culture can create the support that families offer. Healthy families regularly demonstrate these healthy behaviors in an environment that encourages and sustains them.

As you continue to build your business and your wealth portfolio remember a healthy family is vital to it. Your family, like your business, needs specific and purposeful attention. At future family meetings, brainstorm for ideas that nurture family fun. Look to create new family rituals. Share expectations with each other on how you want to be supported. Doing so will produce big rewards in your family, and likely increases in the bottom line as well. **MB**