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FAMILY VISION; THE ANTIDOTE TO CONFLICT

1 Every family business begins with the founder's particular vision of success. It is the strength and passion of that vision, driven by the needs, wants, dreams and values of its envisionser, that are ultimately responsible for the initial success or subsequent failure of the business. The beauty and power of that original vision come from its singular and undiluted focus which forms the fundamental core of the business and the foundation of the family's life.

Ironically, however, when it is time to transition the business to second generation leadership, it is often the founder's unadulterated vision that now paralyzes the family and prevents the business from moving forward into a new era. Relevance—or the lack thereof—is, of course, the obvious and major reason for the breakdown; times, markets and opportunities change, as do our family systems. If beliefs, values and attitudes remain static and entrenched in the past, a sense of disconnection and irrelevance intrudes between the generations which can eventually poison the entire family business system.

The creation of a shared family vision is a well documented and acknowledged remedy for the progressive cycle of disenfranchisement, dissention and outright conflict that challenges so many families as they face generational transition. So why is it that so few families engage in this constructive—some might even call it life saving—exercise? Part of the answer may lie within the idea of vision itself. Vision, after all, is a BIG idea. At its biggest and most expansive, vision has founded religions, inspired poets, felled civilizations and created hope amid despair.

Even ratcheted down a notch or two from those lofty heights, the idea of a vision remains as a fundamental organizing principle for all serious endeavors. By their very nature, founding visions are particularly susceptible to this aura of gravitas and significance. The result is, that over time and through lore, those visions assume an air of permanence and self-righteous authority that discourages their evolution. This affect is so effective that the idea of questioning, let alone revising, founding principles can feel like an act of treason. After all, if they were good enough for father to build the company on, they're good enough for us.

This weighty attitudinal component of vision is also at odds with today's lust for instant gratification and the quick fix—both of which have achieved an almost cult-like status. Speed and convenience are no longer regarded as luxuries or even as a value-added component of customer service; they are simply an integral part of doing business. Planned obsolescence is now such a well-established idea that we routinely expect the products we buy, no matter how expensive they may be, to break, simply stop working or be out of fashion within an increasingly brief amount of time. The idea of vision doesn't fit comfortably into those categories; having a vision of business success harkens back to a time when "built to last" was a guiding principle rather than a catchy slogan. So, while

2 vision was important to father, that was then and this is now. We don't have time for vision, we need action!

Not true! When perceptions block exploration and expedience drives decisions the result is demise by default. In order for a family business to thrive and successfully pass to the next generation, the founder's vision must be explored and transformed from a singular and personal idea into an inclusive and "living" version which reflects the family's present and expanded vision. This is one of the defining moments in the history of every family business, for with the transition from founding to second generation ownership, the legacy begins and the business truly graduates from its status as an entrepreneurial enterprise into the exalted ranks of a Family Business.

The transition of leadership not only signals the beginning of a new management and style, it is also the indication that the business is no longer bound solely to one person's values and dreams. There is a deep connection between the succession process and vision amendment which is too frequently overlooked. In a perfect world, the designation of a successor for the business would go hand-in-hand with the adaptation of founding vision into family vision. These two actions are mutually dependent upon and supportive of one another and as such, they need to be in synch with each other.

Procrastination at this juncture is the certain precursor of confusion, dissention and feelings of disenfranchisement within the entire family business system. While the succession process is neither the only time nor situation that the family will ever encounter when the review and revision of the family-business vision is possible, it is, unquestionably, the most favorable time to collectively engage in this task. It is during this period of relative instability and flux, before positions, policies and politics are set in stone, that the consideration of new ideas and different ways of doing things is both possible and necessary. This is also a "carpe diem" situation because while dissent and conflict may be acceptable, and even encouraged during times of change, those same qualities can be destructive, divisive and are generally discouraged when the leadership is established and the direction has been determined.

Clearly there will be elements of the original vision which are and will remain fundamental to the core values of the business and the family, and which should, therefore, be honored and preserved. Those are bedrock. The areas of the founding vision which require serious scrutiny are centered on its scope and focus, which until now have been united in purpose and direction by the founder's singular vision.

Times change, however, and families expand and in some cases extend, and in doing so develop needs and perspectives that may differ from those of the senior generation. The unity

3 of founding mission and vision can easily be diluted by the different paths and purposes of the family members. Additionally, the expanded family constituency and their accompanying diversity of needs, ideas and perspectives, have a very fundamental impact on the original and highly personal relationship between the family and the business. This changed relationship requires an expanded vision which acknowledges and reflects the quantitative as well as the qualitative circumstances of the family as they exist in the present.

The development of an inclusive family vision is not a secondary concern that can be tackled sometime later “when we all have a minute to think”, because, as we all know, those minutes never come. Just as Nature hates a vacuum, so too, do family businesses; the opportunities for conflict fester and flourish where there is no relevant vision to unite the family together. Those conflicts nest within faulty assumptions, inaccurate perceptions and unnamed expectations. They implicate decisions already made and decisions yet to be made and center on issues of power, control, loss and, of course, money. Conflicts create fissures between the generations and among the generations, and thrive on jealousy, injustice, loss and, most especially, on a lack of communication.

The ultimate antidote to this parade of problems is the shared family vision. Its strength comes from the process of “visioning” itself, which engages and unites the family and the business together in positive and meaningful way and, in doing so, counteracts the inclination towards separation and conflict that can arise when divergent needs and feelings are not acknowledged and addressed.

The goal of revisioning the vision is to bring a sense of clarity and relevance to the connection of family and business. If that vision is to have and to maintain significance for its constituents and to truly accomplish its mission as an antidote for conflict, then it must not only be a shared vision it, it must also be a dynamic and living vision which reflects both the spirit and the circumstance of its envisioners.

At its best and most expansive, a family vision revitalizes the original sense of deep connection between the family members and the organizational mission. It provides a way to engage diverse elements and to unite the family together. At its most minimal, a family vision provides a benchmark for individual, family and organizational behavior and is a model for change.

The process begins, quite logically, with the family members and its success hinges on their willingness to participate both individually and collectively, in a questioning process that is respectful of the past, inclusive of present circumstances and attentive to the future

4 relationship of the family and the business. That commitment requires the readiness to address and explore whatever notions of permanence and obligation may surround the founding vision and to test the unspoken expectations and implied assumptions that often lie embedded within family communication. This is when family involvement and dialogue can effectively displace detachment, isolation and lip service.

Envisioning the future requires honesty and understanding of the present. The need for relevance and inclusion is the catalyst for the task. The options, opinions and possibilities that are explored now and the changes that are made at this critical point in time will determine the direction and success of the business and the relationship between the business and the family for years to come.