

# Forgiveness Keeps Businesses Intact

*“The act of forgiving ... is the hardest trick in the whole bag of personal relationships.”*

—Lewis Smedes



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## Mixing family with business adds a complex

dimension to your closest relationships. While you experience the benefits of loyalty and commitment that come with family involvement, an unfortunate result is the pain people can cause one another through frequent interaction. At some point in your family business, someone close to you has, or will, hurt you. And, you will have an opportunity to forgive a family member.

Theologian and author Lewis B. Smedes outlines four stages of forgiveness in his 1984 book “Forgive and Forget.” I have found his description useful in thinking about my own—and the family business participants I know—personal struggle with forgiving those who have committed hurtful acts. The following are Smedes’ four stages.

### STAGE 1: HURT

Hurt can come from many sources in the family business, whether you are excluded from a discussion or ignored on an important topic, insulted by an in-law or sabotaged by a sister, overridden by a parent or backstabbed by a brother. On the hundreds of issues and daily interactions that occur in the family-owned company, the chances are high that you will be hurt. Smedes suggests that a significant hurt always has three dimensions: it is “personal, unfair and deep.”

### STAGE 2: HATE

Smedes describes hate as “our instinctive backlash against anyone who wounds us wrongly.” He goes on to mention both passive hate, which is the inability to have good wishes for someone, and aggressive hate, where we wish someone to be hurt. The irony in a family business is that hate often exists toward those we are supposed to love—a “love-hate” relationship. Left unchecked, hate can consume us. It becomes a sickness that destroys us.

### STAGE 3: HEAL

To begin healing, it is important to think of forgiveness for your own sake—not of the person being forgiven. Smedes says forgiveness is first performing “spiritual surgery inside your soul,” letting go of the hurt and trying to see that person with new eyes. When we do,



we often see the other as a broken person with his or her own pain and needs. Your current feeling about the person becomes disconnected from the pain that was caused you. Smedes describes this process as editing your own memory and suggests it is the most important practice, because it releases you from your hate.

### STAGE 4: COME TOGETHER

Smedes acknowledges that while your forgiveness may heal you, it doesn’t automatically rebuild the relationship with the person who wronged you. To do that, you must invite the person back into your life, and that person must enter with a level of understanding about how he or she hurt you—both what was done to hurt you and how it made you feel. In other words, that person must listen to, and hear, your description of your pain.

If both are committed to the relationship going forward, you need to trust the intention (which is not a guarantee) not to hurt you again. Your relationship will continue, perhaps in a different way, but you must devote energy to making it work in the future.

Stories of forgiveness in the family business are rare. We hear far more stories of family members estranged from one another. To keep the family and business intact, you will need to forgive a family member now or in the future. Most important, in order to maintain your own health, Smedes reminds us that “to forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover the prisoner was you.” ///