

# Sibling Synergy

**Beyond the bygones lies a better family business**

*When family members are thrown into business together, relearning how to communicate is the first step toward building trust.*

**Y**ou'd think the five Abbott siblings would be peas in a pod. After all, they were born within a six-year time frame and raised together on a relatively isolated Nebraska ranch. But, if anything, they are proof that proximity and familiarity does not always make brothers and sisters alike.

"All of us are independent and hardheaded," says Chris Abbott, Hyannis, Neb. "Everyone has their own ideas and they don't always agree." His sister, Diane Shadbolt, Alliance, Neb., puts it this way: "When you grow up that close in age there is a lot of sibling rivalry." That can cause problems in adult sibling relationships.

When the Abbotts' father died in a car accident in 1986—and the five found they were suddenly business partners in the family ranch—the transition was not smooth sailing. Within months, and for years to come, some of the siblings found themselves emotionally deadlocked—confused or resentful about the nature of their business relationship, who should do most of the hands-on management and how inequitable ownership of cattle should be handled.

Trying to hash things out themselves didn't always help. "There were definitely some volatile moments when things blew up," adds Shadbolt. Between some siblings, communication broke down completely, threatening not just business but family relationships as well.

Today, the business partnership has been transformed. The five partners, who include Shadbolt, Chris Abbott, Mike Abbott, Helen Feller and Andrea Berger, now feel able to handle tough business issues.

They recently completed a restructuring that separated the land from the cattle and allowed all five to be equal owners of the stock. They also realigned management responsibilities. All five have other jobs or business interests. In the ranch busi-

ness, each has specific areas of authority and responsibility. Last year, they even decided to purchase an adjoining ranch property together—a decision that would have been unthinkable just three years ago.

**Transformation.** What changed? Not the personalities of the five. Instead, they learned how to talk with and to each other. "There were just big barriers to communication," says Chris Abbott. "We realized if we started to communicate, we would be halfway home."

The family also realized they couldn't manage to open the lines of communication on their own. So they called on Lance Woodbury, conflict resolution specialist with Kennedy and Coe in Wichita, Kan.

The first step was a two-day meeting designed to help the brothers and sisters get on more solid footing. They spent the time airing grievances, identifying common business issues and learning general techniques that promote civil communication, says Woodbury.

"Family is a double-edged sword," he says. "You typically have a lot of history and good feelings, but you have been around each other so much, you make assumptions that aren't true." Ron Hanson, family business expert from the University of Nebraska at Lincoln, calls this "talking to the fence post—people talk but no one actually listens."

**New habits.** The first step is building or rebuilding trust, says Andrew Keyt, executive director of the Loyola Family Business Center in Chicago. "A facilitator can help because all family members can have their say in the safety of a setting in which they know abusive, trust-destroying talk will not be tolerated."



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By Laura Sands



Growing up together doesn't guarantee siblings will see things the same way as adults. The Abbott family of Nebraska rebuilt their relationships.

Keyt suggests that, after ground rules are set, the family begin by discussing easier questions that allow members to get to know each other in their new relationship before tackling really tough issues such as control.

Once truly difficult issues are in the open, the experts say, communication can be improved with tried-and-true strategies, including:

- Hold regularly scheduled meetings with a written agenda sent out ahead of time. After the meeting, adopt a written "action plan" with follow-up assignments.
- Allow equal time. In any family relationship, some parties are more loquacious or forceful than others. Set rules to give each five minutes to discuss an issue so no one feels shut out.
- Don't interrupt; let others have their say.
- Create professional distance. Don't say anything to family members that you wouldn't say to a professional colleague.
- Rethink the question. "About 99% of the time, families are actually in agreement, but don't know it," says Woodbury. Sometimes, changing the way you address the issue is enough to promote unity. For example, instead of saying "Should we no-till this field?" which has only a yes or no response, consider asking "How can the field be farmed most profitably?" "That generates possibilities and inclusion," says Woodbury.
- Agree to discuss "undiscussables." Difficult partnerships may have "taboos" that threaten to take control of the business relationship. For example, has one sibling had preferential treatment? Does everyone pull their weight? Is a

spouse a problem?

Woodbury doesn't claim he can solve these problems, but he can teach partners strategies to "manage the conflict" well enough to allow the business to function. He recommends these ground rules for family business meetings:

- Be open. Don't keep secrets from partners. Prepare regular financial statements and share them.
- If you say no, explain yourself.
- Decide whether decisions will be made by majority vote, or consensus, which requires unanimous agreement.
- Discuss how decisions will affect each family member.
- Try to develop a plan to resolve conflict before it exists. Farm families may want to turn to advisory boards, a mediator or another close business adviser for help.
- Appoint "acting mediators" in case discussions get heated.
- Discuss the painful. Be willing to hire a mediator or seek help from someone trained in conflict resolution.

The Abbotts say their communication hasn't solved all problems. "But we do have a sense of reassurance that we are all on the same side of the fence," says Andrea Berger, who lives in New York City. "Many of the threatening aspects of communication are gone."

"We have built trust, and each of us knows we are there for each other as a family," says Shadbolt. "And that will allow us to make much better decisions about our business now and in the long run." ■