



A Duty To DISAGREE

How you handle conflict could determine if your business stagnates or moves forward.



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Conflict, in general, and particularly conflict in a family business can be disastrous. It brings tension to the workplace and to family gatherings, affects relationships between individuals and causes people to withdraw or lash out. The behaviors exhibited and statements made during conflict can have lasting effects on future generations; many family businesses can look back

to a split between siblings or parents as the basis for their current business or family structure.

Knowing the consequences of conflict, it might be tempting to keep disagreements bottled up. Staying quiet, not rocking the boat or sweeping it under the rug might seem like the easiest way to keep the family and business together. The problem is, those strategies almost never work in the long run. Consider these reasons why voicing disagreement—sooner rather than later—is a better strategy.

UNspoken Disagreements Boil Over. When a family member or business partner disagrees, and he doesn't have a vehicle for voicing that discontent, the issue often

lodges in his psyche. Think of such silent disagreements like a drop of mercury in a thermometer. Each subsequent, unvoiced point of contention raises the mercury level a bit more. When the thermometer gets too hot, the mercury bursts from the top, shattering the thermometer and spilling toxic liquid on the table.

In conflict, when the offended party finally bursts, the situation creates a mess for the family and the business. Forcing a tough conversation early may prevent the conflict from reaching a boiling point and creating more damage.

UNEXPRESSED DIFFERENCES HURT THE BUSINESS.

Agriculture is an old profession. Yet, agriculture businesses have changed dramatically in the last century. Change, however, involves upending the status quo, which can be difficult to watch if the status quo has worked for many years.

When “tried and true” clashes with “new and improved,” our feelings, roles and even traditions can appear under attack. But if family members don't find a way to challenge the current state of affairs, the business may not adapt and survive. Business participants should feel obligated to find ways to evaluate new ideas, different strategies and alternative practices.

UNSTATED OBJECTIONS SEND MIXED MESSAGES. Family businesses often involve people who weren't a part of the original family structure—in-laws and employees. The spouse of your sibling or adult child, or the nonrelated staff on your team, didn't experience the same practices around conflict that you did in your immediate family. And you better believe they're watching how you handle the tension.

If you pretend there's no conflict, that everything is OK and disagreement is bad, the result will be an underlying tension with lots of behind-the-scenes whispering and gossip. In short, you will experience the opposite of your intent. Conflicts on the farm will not fade away but will become what everyone talks about in twos and threes, precisely because no one is admitting disagreement at a larger level. A disconnect exists between “the talk” (we get along all the time) and “the walk” (we have disagreements). Creating a sense of responsibility to get disagreements on the table sends the message that you acknowledge conflict, and you want to work through it.

Conflict is inevitable and invariably difficult, but it can bear fruit. If handled well, conflict can move the business forward in trying new approaches. Disagreement properly voiced can provide a relief valve for the pressure building between family members. And differences appropriately acknowledged and processed can foster a better culture. Picking such fruit should be an obligation of every family business owner. ●

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