

When Both Sides Are Right

Empathy is a powerful tool to help understand another's actions.



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I remember a situation many years ago in which a son told his “retired” father to stop interfering in the business, and he threatened to call the sheriff the next time Dad set foot on the ranch. Calling law enforcement? That sounded so extreme, I thought. But then I came to see the reasons why the son might resort to such alarming talk.

Even though the retirement transition had occurred some years ago, the son felt that Dad would not let go, that the farm's performance was always being scrutinized and judged. Dad's interference and seeming criticism was, he felt, another significant stressor at a time when crop and livestock prices, weather and interest rates were all working against him. He wanted to run the business on his own, to show he was indeed capable of making good decisions and could succeed without help.

TWO SIDES. However, as I considered Dad's perspective, I could understand his behavior, too. Dad was stronger financially and thought he could help during a tough economic time by being an extra, no-cost set of eyes, ears and hands in the operation. He even gave the employees some extra cash as a bonus to encourage them to work hard. And, his years of farming and livestock wisdom, he thought, could be valuable as his son navigated difficult circumstances. How could this helpful approach undermine his son, he wondered? He had the best of intentions.

Dad and son both wanted the best for the farm and probably even agreed on many of the goals. Yet, their patterns of communication and behavioral choices

produced significant conflict. In many respects, they were both right and both wrong. What they wanted and how they acted were simultaneously justified and unwarranted.

Family businesses are no stranger to this kind of conflict. It is bound to happen with the different roles people play, the history of family relationships, the transitions family members go through at various life stages and the uncertainty of work in an agricultural environment. The complexity of these intermingling dynamics creates multiple prospects for misunderstanding. **WALK IN THE OTHER'S SHOES.** A significant step in reducing the impact of such conflicts is to have a sense of empathy for other family members. Empathy is defined as the ability to understand another's feelings, to comprehend their perspective. It is the ability to see the world from their eyes, and it allows us to build and restore relationships with others. In recent years, an increasing number of researchers and authors point to empathy as one of the most important skills in business.

Particularly in a family business, one must use empathy to see why someone might have chosen a particular course of behavior. That is, amid being

offended, can you identify with the other person's feelings, understand the assumptions they made and see why they chose to behave a certain way? Surely, this must be one of the most difficult yet important skills required of a family business partner.

Understanding the behavior of someone is not the same as forgiving the behavior.

Having empathy for another

is not to excuse their actions. They (or you) may still need to apologize or make amends, admit wrongdoing and commit to different communication strategies.

But understanding why your loved one made the choices they did opens the opportunity for dialogue. It demonstrates care for the other person. In a way, it sets the table for a discussion, and that discussion can, in turn, lead to a renewed chance to work together.

The next time you find yourself in a difficult family business situation, consider your ability to empathize with the other.

Empathy alone does not resolve a conflict, but it paves the road for reconciliation. ●

“Every truth has two sides; it is as well to look at both, before we commit ourselves to either.” —AESOP

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