

In the Shadow Of Guilt

Positive feelings are what usually surround a family farm. Sun-filled images of grandparents walking with grandkids on family land. Original land deeds or old seed or feed dealership signs adorn office walls. Pride, history, tradition and legacy are a few of the words that come to mind as we think about the family business.

But, there can also be a negative side to family businesses. Conflict, secrets, drama, nepotism, avoidance, privilege and bias can float just under the surface in many family-owned companies.

One of the most complex notions is guilt, the idea of thinking or committing an offense. While guilt is generally created by the person feeling it, guilt can be triggered by another family member, as well. Consider the following ways guilt shows up in a business-owning family.

You Must Carry It On.

For multigeneration businesses, perhaps no feeling carries more weight than that of having to keep the family business going. The blood and sweat of your ancestors are manifested in the current farm or ranch. To stop the business is an insult to their efforts and will be seen as a disgrace to future generations.

The reality, however, is that there are often legitimate reasons to stop a business in its current form. You may have no family members returning, or those who have returned may not get along. The industry and competitive dynamics may have drastically changed. Considering a split or sale of the business your ancestors could not foresee may in fact be a wise business or family move. But, guilt gets in the way of good strategy.

You Must Come Back. Most parents want their children to pursue a vocation that makes them happy. However, many parents who own family businesses also hope that one, or all, of their kids will return. Depending on the verbal and nonverbal communication about this desire, the next generation may feel required to return. It may even be subtly hinted that they will be “missing out” on their inheritance if they don’t come back.

If a young person returns sheerly out of a sense of obligation or only for an inheritance, he or she will not be happy. There is a high likelihood that person’s unhappiness will be reflected in poor business performance, relationship challenges or problems such as addiction. I’ve met family members who gave up their dreams of working or living elsewhere out of a sense of obligation. Guilt got in the way of personal and professional happiness.

You Must Lead. Having the same last name as the business owner creates an expectation that a family member will lead the company. Regardless of intelligence, self-awareness, skills, goals or level of respect from others, it is assumed the namesake will take the helm. Consequently, a strong sense of guilt is associated with not wanting or having the desire to lead the family company.

The best person to lead the company may not be a family member. While being part of a business-owning family may create an affinity for the organization, DNA does not guarantee a family member will be a good leader.

Getting past the guilt implicit in family businesses requires two skills. First, it requires broadening your definition of stewardship from simply keeping “this business” going or keeping “this asset” intact, to taking care of family wealth and values in whatever form that might take.

It also requires broadening your definition of personal and business success. If you keep a business going regardless of the cost, if you guilt someone into returning, or if you choose a family leader when a non-family leader is a better option, you risk ruining family relationships. If that happens, have you truly succeeded? ///



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