

Recognize Loss To Help Heal

“Our hunger for absolute certainty is rarely satisfied even in the relationships we believe are permanent and predictable.”

—Pauline Boss, *“Ambiguous Loss: Learning To Live With Unresolved Grief”*

We have all felt loss and the pain that results

from it in our lives. Losing a loved one, a job, a friend or a business are some of the situations in which we experience pain. Usually, there is a ritual or a process that signifies the permanence of that loss: a funeral, a final goodbye, a last payment or the sale or closing of a business.

But, what happens when a loss doesn't have a sense of finality, when it isn't clear that the person is gone or the situation is resolved? Pauline Boss, a family therapist and researcher, developed the theory of “ambiguous loss” to define those conditions in which people may physically be present but are psychologically absent. The person may still be around, but something is missing from your interaction with them.

An example of ambiguous loss is Alzheimer's disease: A loved one may physically be with you but is mentally gone. He or she may interact with you but without the normalcy of prior conversations. We really have no ritual to demarcate our loss as that loved one gradually slips deeper into the disease, but sometimes our grief at this loss is more intense than even a death.

CONFLICTS AND DISAGREEMENTS

As I consider her theory, I'm reminded of two family-business situations in which ambiguous loss causes family dysfunction. The first is the loss of a family relationship because of business conflicts or disagreements over assets. The second is the loss of identity associated with one's decreasing business role or contribution. Consider the following situations.

First, the loss of a relationship. In several instances I know of, family members have stopped interacting with one another because of fights in the business. Disagreements about how daily business responsibilities are carried out, struggles over decision-making authority or frustrations with how to deal with vendors, employees or community members build until a blowup occurs.

After such emotional explosions or even less-dramatic expressions of disagreement, family interaction begins to recede. Members spend less time at family events



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or engaging socially. They begin steering clear of one another in the business. Over time, the tension becomes part of the business, and people adjust their daily patterns and family routines. Avoidance of people and important issues becomes the norm. In some cases, grandkids are withheld from grandparents. In others, adult children are lost to, or become absent from, their family of origin.

In all cases, people feel the pain, but the loss is not clear or final. There may still be a physical presence, but there is little social or psychological attendance. We grieve the loss of relationships even while knowing the other person is still around.

IDENTITY DURING TRANSITION

The second kind of ambiguous loss is the loss of identity or role during a generational transition. The senior generation has been intimately involved in the daily workings of the business for decades. But, as the next generation takes over operations, the parents struggle to define their best contribution to the organization. As they move from making all the decisions to watching others make most of them, or from physically doing work to being less able to do so, they often grieve the loss of their prior role in the business. They are still physically present, but they are not fulfilling the specific role they once held. And, if they are unsure about how best to contribute in the future, their confusion, their loss and their grief show up as stress or tension in the business.

When considering all the ways loss might affect the family business, a more complicated picture begins to emerge. Acknowledging the loss is the first step in beginning to heal. ///