

Every family gets the in-laws they deserve

Owners are quick to blame in-laws for tensions, ignoring their own contribution to the problems.

By Ivan Lansberg

Few topics generate more interest among family business owners—and more heat—than how in-laws should be treated. At the risk of sounding like a fence-straddling social scientist, I'm afraid the answer to most questions about in-laws is, "It depends..."

At worst, in-laws are meddlesome, divisive, suspicious, and interested in only entitlements. At best, in the view of many business owners, they mind their own business and don't do anything to embarrass the family.

When talking with business owners and their spouses, I am always struck by how quick they are to blame the in-laws for being unable to get along with the family, while ignoring their own contribution to strains in the relationship. In many families, the in-laws are simply a mirror for the unspoken tensions and concerns of the business family. What the business family often sees in the mirror are mere reflections of their family dynamics.

Take the case of two brothers who have worked together in a family company for many years. They have a long-standing rivalry, but have managed to keep it under control in order to avoid disrupting the operation of a successful company. But one day they have a nasty argument over a business issue and both go home fuming. Each can't wait to tell his wife about the selfish and conniving behavior of the other brother.

By the next day, however, the brothers have usually forgotten their pique. They return to the office, make amends, and go back to work as if nothing happened. The trouble is that they neglect to tell their spouses. So the next time there is a family get-together, no one can understand why those disagreeable daughters-in-law "just can't get along."

Rivalries within a business family often get "displaced" onto in-laws in this manner. By letting their spouses do the fighting for them, the brothers, in effect, carry on their rivalry while maintaining the stance of innocent bystanders. This process enables them to avoid arguments and preserve their relationship at the office. They are probably completely unaware that they are doing it.

Communication between owner-managers and their spouses about developments at the office is often imperfect. Even when the business participants talk about disagreements, they may not tell the whole story and the spouse often overreacts. Naturally, in such cases, it doesn't take long for the in-laws to become emotional baggage-carriers for the family.

The fact is that in-laws are different. They have grown up in other families that may have had quite different values and perspectives. What many business families don't appreciate is that precisely this difference often enables in-laws to add value to the family and the company.

As outsiders, in-laws are quick to perceive the hidden side of family relations and its impact on the business. For instance, one very smart daughter-in-law who has an MBA from a top-notch school described to me her frustration at not being able to get the point across to her husband's family:

"For years I've been telling my husband and his family that they needed to revitalize their textile business," she recalled. "I even suggested that they sell it off and start anew in a growing industry in which foreign competition wouldn't be as stiff. However, in my husband's family, the textile business was a sacred cow that embodied my father-in-law's dedication and hard work. I quickly learned that it was heretical to question the viability of the business.

"In the end," she added, "they went into bankruptcy, and I was left feeling like Cassandra, condemned for seeing the future and invariably ignored. Worse still, I felt that my children's inheritance had been squandered and that I had not been able to prevent it."

Like this woman, in-laws are often the messengers who get shot for saying what the blood family feels but dares not say. Their perspectives on family or business matters, even when accurate, are either ignored or dismissed as motivated by envy of the family's power and privilege.

In one business family, the son-in-law was ostracized for questioning the competence of the successor, who was the founder's oldest son. In fact, the son's inadequacies were apparent to almost everyone but the father and threatened to sink the enterprise. But the founder continued to dismiss the son-in-law's substantive criticisms as simply reflecting a rivalry with his son.

In my consulting practice, I often work with exceptionally able sons-in-law and daughters-in-law, some of whom have proven to be more competent than the business owners' own children and have taken charge of the company. Of course, generalizations are risky and the extent to which in-laws, as outsiders, are able to offer new and constructive perspectives will vary. When their viewpoints are self-serving or destructive, their input probably deserves to be ignored. Too often, however, in-laws are shunted aside as intruders whose opinions simply don't count.

The consequences of ignoring or mistreating in-laws can be especially serious in family companies that are, or will be, owned and managed by siblings and cousins. In these usually later-generation businesses, cooperation between partners is a fundamental requirement for success. The possibilities of divisive rivalries and jealousies are multiplied by the number of families involved. For better or worse, spouses will have a great deal of influence on the whether the partners can forge collaborative work and

shareholder relationships. They can play a positive role by supporting collaboration or a negative role by aggravating conflicts.

But how can in-laws strengthen collaboration in the business if they have not been invited to share the family's values and aspirations? How can they play a constructive role if they are treated as meddling "outlaws?" Just as important, how can they teach the next generation about the family's values if they themselves have not learned what those values are?

The best way to enlist the loyalty and support of in-laws is not to think of them as "in-laws." Business families do a better job of managing the relationship when they treat in-laws as full-fledged family members whose opinions and attitudes are valued. In these families, in-laws are encouraged to participate in family discussions and meetings. Through involvement in the family council they can learn to appreciate the family's values and traditions. They hear first-hand about ownership issues that are likely to affect their children's future, rather than having their spouses interpret for them what the family is thinking and planning.

There is always an element of luck in whom one's children end up marrying. Whomever the children choose, however, the business family must do its part to ensure harmony in the relationship. The truth is that most families get the in-laws they deserve. If they hold up their end of the relationship, accepting their share of responsibility for whatever tensions arise instead of blaming in-laws for their own emotional entanglements, they will surely have fewer in-law "problems." They may even see themselves more clearly in the mirror.

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