

# Using the business to reconnect with family

*Entrepreneurs in middle age may embark on misguided efforts to repair the emotional damage from the past.*

**By Ivan Lansberg**

Building a successful and thriving business is truly a miracle. It takes extraordinary energy and endurance as well as relentless determination to succeed against formidable odds.

During the formative years of a business, many entrepreneurial families live on the brink of potentially serious economic losses. With their home and savings as well as their credibility and reputation continuously at risk, these families experience high levels of stress and anxiety. The entrepreneur's obsessive preoccupation with business matters and prolonged absences from home can easily strain marital and family relationships.

The consequences for the family of these stressful years often do not become apparent until the children are grown and the enterprise has achieved a degree of success and stability. Typically, as the demands of the business begin to slacken a bit, entrepreneurs reaching middle age may yearn to reconnect with family—a longing that may lead to misguided efforts to repair the emotional damage from the past.

Consider the case of an Armenian immigrant-entrepreneur who single-handedly built a thriving chain of retail stores. Upon reaching his late 50s, this man felt he had finally accomplished a level of success that permitted him to spend more time with his family. He wished to rekindle his relationship with his wife, who had grown apart from him. For years, the wife had focused her energies on community and philanthropic activities in which he took little interest.

At the same time, the patriarch was beginning to be more conscious of the many things that he disliked and did not understand about his two grown sons, ages 35 and 39. The older son had drifted from one occupation to another, and the younger was mired in an academic job with no prospects of promotion. A powerfully driven man himself, the father puzzled over why his seemingly capable sons had turned out to be so lethargic. "I sometimes feel that I've worked so hard over the years that my children were born tired," he once told me, only half in jest.

He was equally puzzled by the sons' intense rivalry with each other, which led to constant fighting over seemingly trivial issues. The father's biggest disappointment, however, came when both sons turned away from the Armenian Church to which both parents were devoted—the oldest son married out of the faith and, not long after, the youngest became a member of the Rev. Sun Myung Moon's Unification Church.

Outwardly, the patriarch expressed anger and disappointment toward his wife and sons. Inwardly, however, he could not help feeling somewhat responsible for the sad way that things seemed to have turned out for his family. Even though he felt the family owed everything to the business, the thought that his unswerving devotion to it over the years may have harmed them filled him with guilt and remorse.

In hopes of bringing the family closer together—and to deal with his own inner turmoil—the patriarch at this juncture invited both his wife and his sons to join the board of directors. Though he knew that they had no business experience, he hoped that bringing them on the board would give them a greater appreciation of his accomplishments. Secretly, he hoped that a fuller appreciation of the gains from the business would convince them that the pain they had suffered in the early years had been well worth it. Soon after, moreover, he invited his two sons to join him in the business, offering them senior executive jobs with generous salaries and stock options.

Not surprisingly, neither his marital difficulties nor the sons' intense rivalry was eased by bringing them into the business. Indeed, the wife and sons' sense of powerlessness was only reinforced by their increased exposure to the patriarch's controlling nature and hard-driving entrepreneurial style. This heightened their defensiveness and led them to adopt a united front against the father on most issues brought to the board.

Outside the board, the rivalry between the two brothers intensified to the point that they began to sabotage each other's projects, a pathetic and destructive pattern that demoralized many of the senior non-family executives.

According to the psychological literature on adult development, the late 50s is a time when people often reassess what they have, or have not, achieved in their lives. It is a time when concerns for nurturing the development of the next generation—what Erik Erikson termed generativity—should, if a person has successfully negotiated previous stages of maturity, reach a peak.

While business families certainly vary in their ability to absorb the strains of building a business, it is rare for even the healthiest to emerge totally unscathed from those strenuous years. Like the father in the case above, those who experience guilt over the damage done may then engage in futile efforts to make amends. Such efforts are typically not well received by family members, who are often suspicious of the business inducements offered them.

This does not mean that such attempts to heal wounds in the family are not well intended and necessarily hypocritical. In some ways it is perfectly natural for an entrepreneurial parent to try to fix family problems through the business. After all, for most entrepreneurs the business is the primary psychological lens through which to view their reality; it is also the closest and most practical medium for reaching out to others.

The problem with such efforts lies in what the anthropologist Gregory Bateson used to refer to as "a category error"—meaning, a failure to recognize the appropriate realm in which to diagnose and intervene in a problem.

The healing of the family must be done through the family, where the appropriate language is that of emotion and caring. If real progress is to be made in laying the past to rest, family members need to acknowledge the damage they may have inadvertently inflicted on spouse or children. They must seek ways of openly discussing one another's grievances that will enable them to mourn what has been lost and move on to what they can accomplish together in the future.

Families who feel unable to tackle this process alone should seek professional help. For entrepreneurial parents, healing requires the courage to acknowledge their contribution to the family's problems as well as the maturity to allow their children, from that point forward, to make their own choices and live with the consequences. For the younger generation, healing requires a willingness to move beyond blaming their parents for what they may have suffered and a readiness to take charge of their own lives.

None of this can be successfully accomplished through the business, which will only be dragged down by determined efforts to do so.

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