

# Beware thy brother ...

It is inevitable that brothers and sisters will clash and argue. While this is bad enough at home, it can do serious damage to a family business. Tom Davidow explains why brothers suffer more than sisters and how these clashes can be avoided

Competition between brothers is as ancient as the biblical conflict between Cain and Abel. It is natural for siblings of the same generation to vie with each other for their parents' love and attention. When that competition transfers to the family business, however, it must be dealt with through effective communication, or it will endanger both the family and the business. Although both brothers and sisters must be aware of and deal with rivalry issues as they arise, the problem is much more dramatic for brothers because of the way men are socialised.

According to Relational Theory and Women in Sports, a research study on the difference between men's and women's performance in sports, women are as competitive as men, with one major difference: for men, achieving a goal is more important than maintaining a relationship. Men could have an argument before a game and put it aside during the game. In contrast, women, for whom a relationship is more important than the goal, would not pass the ball to a teammate with whom they were upset. Women, whose self esteem tends to be rooted in their ability to maintain relationships, are generally more driven to resolving sibling issues than men, whose self esteem tends to be rooted in their ability to achieve autonomy and independence.

I have found that sisters are driven to maintaining their relationships and are relentless in working through issues. I worked with two sisters who spoke to each other 10 to 20 times a day. They were very bright, capable and savvy about business. They spent 10% of their conversation solving business issues, and 90% of it arguing. The idea of breaking the relationship never entered either of their minds. After they learned to communicate more effectively, their business improved and, most importantly, each of them was better able to experience a sense of personal success.

Sisters will also keep the dialogue open with their brothers. Their willingness to address issues that might stand in the way of effective communication will prevent the dynamics of the sibling rivalry from spinning out of control.

Brothers are the most vulnerable sibling pairing. A relationship between brothers who are not inclined to discuss their

differences can and will deteriorate. They will ignore small miscommunications until they swell into an overwhelming mass of misunderstandings that seem impossible to sort out. It is essential for them to work through their disagreements for the sake of their relationship and the business.

## A PARABLE FOR OUR TIMES

I worked with two intelligent, successful brothers whose father had died when they were in their early twenties. The older brother dominated or "took care of" the younger one, which upset the latter. He believed that he could take care of himself and run the business as well as his sibling, but he decided that the relationship was more important than what he perceived would be a control struggle. Because he didn't want the relationship or the business to suffer, and because he appreciated his older brother's wisdom and business acumen, he took the path of least resistance.

The two families were very close, lived in the same neighborhood and shared backyards. However, the younger brother's resentment built up over the years, and eventually threatened the business and the relationship. The older brother sensed his brother's bitterness and was very upset. He believed his actions had made his younger brother a wealthy man and saw him as ungrateful. Each brother had mourned the father's death separately. They had never shared their feelings about their mutual loss. Since a meaningful discussion about their relationship would stimulate the sadness and pain associated with the loss of their father, they both unconsciously resisted discussing their differences.

The older brother's considerable intellect acted as a powerful defense against listening to anything that did not match his view of the world. After wrestling for some time with how to penetrate his resistance to hearing the truth about the emotional consequences of his dominance over his younger brother, I wrote the following parable and included it in a report which I presented to him and his family:

*Once there was a father who owned a magical flute. Anyone who learned to play it was rewarded with a feeling of great*

*confidence and the ability to exercise enormous power. One learned to play the flute only through trial and error. However, merely by holding it in one's hand, the owner felt so much confidence in his abilities that he never tired of practising. Herein lay the magic of the flute.*

*It was never clear which of the father's two sons would inherit the flute. The father had worked hard to build a close-knit family. He knew the value of family loyalty, which, for him, was the source of his family's success. His family's commitment and dedication had a mythical quality of its own, equal in power to the mythical quality of the flute. The father decided that the true test of the success of his life's work, which had been raising his sons with the values of the family, would be how well they could share the flute. He decided to test both sons. He hid the flute in one of two identical suitcases. When he got older he decided to pass the suitcases to his sons, not knowing himself which contained the flute. The sons went home and each opened his suitcase. One son discovered the flute. The other discovered ashes. Neither the father nor the sons were talkative men, so they never discussed the discoveries in the suitcases.*

*The son who discovered the flute became very attached to the feelings of power it gave him. He assumed the flute was meant for him. He understood the preciousness of the gift and believed it was his responsibility to keep the flute safe. His reward for protecting the flute would be his right to play it. Because he believed his father had intended the flute solely for him, he never shared it with his brother, and never fully fulfilled his father's wish. The other brother has never had the chance to experience the flute's special qualities.*

My next step was to discuss the report at a family meeting, to which I invited three generations of family members. The older brother arrived last. Concerned with how he had interpreted the parable, and for the sake of his dignity, we waited in silence for the first five minutes. Then he slammed the report down on the table, turned to his younger brother and apologised to him for his insensitivity.

The moral of this story: the brothers did care deeply about one another, but their inability to discuss their differences threatened everything that was important to them.

Society teaches men that strength is defined by their ability to endure. Men translate that message as a dictum to suffer the discomfort of difficult relationships rather than attempt to reduce the pain by addressing the issues that stand between them and others. Their conditioning distracts them from things that are more important than ambitions and achievement, and distorts their definition of success.

### THE LEGACY OF PREVIOUS GENERATIONS

My own anecdotal evidence, gathered from hundreds of cases in which I have worked with brothers, points to one distinguishing characteristic of brothers who worked successfully together versus those who did not: the modelling they received from the previous generation. In every situation where there was a potential schism between brothers, I discovered that there had been a similar schism in the prior generation. This phenomenon presents an opportunity and a responsibility for each generation to resolve the differences from the previous generation. When brothers take the risk of talking and listening to one another, the benefits extend beyond themselves and the business. By not addressing difficult issues in a constructive way, they pass on to their children the burden of dealing with those problems.

To paraphrase a favourite aphorism, the greatest tragedies in world and personal events stem from misunderstandings. Effective communication, which can resolve the deepest of differences, can also bring with it a sense of accomplishment. The satisfaction of fulfilling a task, attaining an achievement, and gaining independence can come from dedicating oneself to developing and maintaining a productive working relationship with one's brother. When brothers concentrate on that goal, everything else flows from there. ●

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