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All in the Family

Tips for working with relatives

By Matt Firestone

IN TERMS OF THE NUMBER OF U.S. FAMILY-OWNED BUSINESSES, the construction industry is second only to agriculture. While working with family can be meaningful and rewarding, there can also be strife and resentment between members, which can also be felt by nonfamily employees working in these businesses.

Nearly 25 years ago, I was given the opportunity to work for my father. When I started, it was part-time during school breaks and over the summer. I would help in the warehouse gathering and delivering material for the various projects we were building, and, of course, manning a broom from time to time.

As a high school student, I didn't have a lot of real-world experience in construction or business, but I knew everyone was watching the boss's son. From my first day on the job, I knew I would have to work harder

than anyone else to prove that I deserved the job and was not just receiving a handout because of my father. I knew I wanted to gain respect for my work ethic and not because of my last name.

During my time in the industry, I learned a lot by working with family, both mine and in other family businesses. Some of these lessons are what not to do, but most of them are what works and how to keep a healthy balance between family and business.

Whether you realize it or not, the lines between home and work start to blur once relatives start working together. This isn't just among those working together. It includes the extended family—spouses,

parents, children and other relatives. From my own experience and through observations of others, having the ability to leave work at the office makes for a better home life. The last thing everyone wants to hear about at Christmas dinner is a project that is behind schedule.

This is connected to another challenge: family-owned business without a clear division of priorities. These are the situations where decisions are made for the betterment of the family group at the cost of the company. This is typically when someone is brought on board who

doesn't contribute to the success of the business. The individual now has a job, but the company has more overhead, and, if the individual isn't participating, everyone else must pick up the slack to cover the added costs. Such a balancing act, which is obviously more complicated than this example, can become even trickier when ownership is changing hands or other significant decisions must be made.

Whether you are working for a small family-owned business or a large company with multiple family members, setting clear expectations for everyone can help alleviate more than a few headaches. Not only does this ensure everyone is pulling their weight, but it also aids with the balancing act.

From my own experience, misperceptions can derail progress in the blink of an eye, so communicating explicit guidelines is crucial. I am sure we can all think of a time that something was misperceived—maybe someone received a benefit because of their name instead of merit, job duties were unfairly allocated, the list could go on. Managing these expectations and perceptions is a juggling act in itself. The best way I have found to handle this is through open and honest communications.

Many times, when working in a family-owned business, we don't consider the nonfamily members who are part of the company. In some cases, these colleagues may be treated like family, but at the end of the day they are not related. This creates another dynamic to work life, which is probably more noticeable in smaller companies. By establishing everyone's role in the company and accurately defining ground rules with open communication, everyone will feel part of the team and work for the success of the company.

Whatever your situation is, as a family member or an employee of a family-owned company, the experience can be a great one. Effective communication and, in some cases, outside resources, can help you navigate these waters so the company can provide you and your family with a rewarding future. ⚡

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