

Stop Acting Like Children!

How to Transcend Childhood Roles in Your Family Business

Laura Michaud, MBA

If you think building your professional image in the corporate world is difficult, imagine how hard it is to establish yourself professionally in a family business. For 90% of all businesses in the United States, such an issue exists. This forces now-adult children to forge new roles for themselves within the family unit in both a personal and professional context.

Of all family business issues, finding ways to transcend previous childhood or family roles is one of the most crucial. To fully understand the magnitude of this challenge, think of it this way: When you work for a non-family member business, you enter the company with a "fresh slate." Your new co-workers don't know your personal background and have no idea that you may have been the kid who was not assertive or who always made excuses to get out of school projects. This enables you to build your professional image in a reasonably short amount of time.

However, when you work at your family-owned business, you come into it with your family co-workers knowing all your good, bad, and ugly traits. You are, in essence, pegged to have certain characteristics. Even if you have outgrown your old ways, your family may still regard some of your emotional responses to situations as a transgression, ultimately not letting you live down past indiscretions.

In a real-life business setting, such a challenge may play out as follows: In preparation for retirement, one family business owner moves his eldest son into the president's position. The owner's daughter, who also works in the business, always felt inferior to her brother. As a child, she would whine and complain when her brother was favored for an activity. As an adult, she resents the fact that she is again a "lesser" figure in the family, as she now has to "report" to her brother.

Her brother has been talking about promoting her, so when he asks her to do a project, she agrees even though she doesn't know how to handle the assignment. Frustrated when she cannot complete the project, she storms into her brother's office stating that he set her up to fail. In the process, she loses control and begins telling her brother that she thinks he is not running the company well. Rather than see his sister as a co-worker just blowing off steam or as someone having a bad day, the brother immediately rationalizes that his sister is reverting back to her childhood ways and that there is no way he can promote her. In his view, his sister hasn't grown up yet and can't handle the family/business dynamics.

Had such a scenario transpired between non-family members, childhood roles and expectations would never have come into play. The key then is to establish ways for family business members to think and act like non-family members and transcend those previous family roles. Only when this happens can family members work together in a harmonious and productive environment.

Fortunately, there are steps all family business members can take to move beyond previous familial roles. By following some simple suggestions, you can effectively

work with those co-workers who may have pulled your hair on the playground, shot you with their BB gun, or spied on you and your date during romantic moments.

1. Senior generation should act as scout and coach.

At every opportunity, the senior generation should be telling the junior generation about the opportunities available in the family business. As they do this, they should also be observing the junior generation and determining the specific strengths each child has. The senior generation can then encourage the children to hone those skills where there is potential talent and best serves the business in the future. Doing this allows the junior generation to develop certain skills and gain proficiency and credibility at specific tasks, such as computer work, graphic design skills, engineering capabilities, etc. When the children do enter the business in the future, they can be assets to the company from the first day of their employment. This also gives other family members the opportunity to observe their future co-workers honing their skills. They'll know that the family member wasn't "handed" the position, as they watched him or her prepare for it for years.

2. Require all family business members to have experience outside the business.

The more credibility you have outside the business, the more trust and recognition you'll get inside the business. Rather than going straight from college to the family business, secure outside employment with an organization where you can build upon your school knowledge and gain vital business experience. When you do decide to join the family business, your family members and co-workers will then regard you as the sibling with four years of marketing experience or the cousin who once managed a department of 150 sales people. Your new business accomplishments will outshine your previous family role.

3. As junior family members show interest in the business, conduct a DiSC® or other similar assessment on them.

A DiSC assessment is a profile that focuses on behavior patterns. It can reveal a person's strengths and weaknesses so employers know which areas they should develop in each employee. For family business members, a DiSC assessment is vital, as it helps identify what each family member can bring to the business and it emphasizes the fact that there is more to the family member's personality than what he or she displayed during childhood. Over 40 million people have taken the DiSC assessment nationwide, and a comprehensive computerized assessment can be done for as little as \$100, making it cost-effective for even the smallest family business.

4. Conduct A 360 Degree® assessment on current family business members.

A 360 Degree assessment is an employee review that goes out to the person's supervisors, subordinates, co-workers, and customers - all those people 360 degrees around the individual. The goal is to determine the person's strengths and weaknesses in each role he or she has. An unbiased third party receives all the reviews and writes an assessment based on the results. In a family business situation, the results often show if problems exist between family members or how childhood perceptions may be surfacing or hindering performance. The family members can then use this information to correct any problems and create a more productive work environment.

5. Hire a family business coach.

Many times an outside party can see challenges in a new light and offer fresh

perspectives to solve a problem. That's why smart family businesses hire a coach who can act as a mentor and guide the family business through key stages of development. Because coaches are unbiased, they can assess each family member objectively and point out areas where childhood roles may indeed be surfacing or where family members aren't seeing a challenge clearly. When choosing a family business coach, it is extremely beneficial if the person has both family business and regular business experience. Someone knowledgeable in both these areas knows about the nuances that exist within a family business and can help the family members focus on the pertinent issues. Additionally, a coach with family business expertise is more sensitive to family business issues and may offer more appropriate advice.

Make the Transformation Today

Working with the people you grew up with can be an intimidating proposition for anyone. However, when you learn how to establish yourself with a professional identity and work on seeing others in this professional fashion, you greatly reduce the inherent issues of working in a family business. By taking the steps to make those childhood roles and perceptions a thing of the past, you and your family members can capitalize on all the rewards that come from what each individual has to offer. Your family business is then destined to flourish for generations to come.

About the Author

Laura Michaud, MBA, is a family business expert, author, and President of The Michaud Group. A former third-generation family member for Beltone Electronics, she has helped thousands of family members through various challenges specific to family firms. Her book, *From the Kitchen Table to the Conference Table: Family Business Communication*, shares tools and techniques that are guaranteed to improve your family business relationships. Contact The Michaud Group at 630-835-0333 or Laura@LauraMichaud.com.

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