

PSYCHOANALYTIC INSTITUTE

 JUNE 1997

Perspectives

INTERGENERATIONAL CONFLICT IN FAMILY BUSINESS

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Intergenerational conflict is a heavy sounding concept. History is replete with examples from Abraham and Isaac, Esau and Jacob, Cain and Abel, Hamlet, etc. One of the more compelling stories from a psychoanalytic perspective is that of Oedipus Rex, a tale by Sophocles believed to have some basis in fact.

Many of you know the story of how King Laius, the king of Thebes (spelled with a B by the way), went to visit a "family kingdom consultant" otherwise known as a soothsayer or oracle who advised him that his infant son would kill him and marry his wife. King Laius took his infant son to a mountain, tied his feet and staked him to the earth. A shepherd found the infant with swollen feet and named him Oedipus, two Greek words meaning swollen feet. The boy was raised by the King of Corinth and years later he repeated his father, King Laius' error, by also consulting an oracle consultant who informed him that he would marry his mother and kill his father. Oedipus,

being a decent chap, avoided returning to visit the King of Corinth whom he assumed was his father and moved, instead, toward the land of Thebes where he met King Laius and killed him and subsequently unknowingly married his mother with further dire consequences.

Family business is often like a kingdom where there are rights of succession, betrayal, even seduction, etc. Is this, however, a healthy resolution and transition of power and/or leadership? There are many forces at work in every human family and probably the greatest of these is the desire to grow up, to fully become a person in one's own right.

Many forces are at work to preserve the status quo and avoid change. One of these is a fear not that our children will now grow up, but that they grow up to be different from us. This process of growing up involves many developmental steps. I will not focus on all of them, but will choose three

that I think can and do play a major role in intergenerational relationships in any family.

The first chance to grow lies in the need to be seen clearly as who you are. For instance, there is the acknowledgment of the "the gleam in mother's eye or father's eye" in recognizing and fostering your talents and skills, seeing you as a "chip off the old block." Through years of support and weathering the trials, successes and failures, this gleam is taken inside and we take it for granted. It is vital component of ourselves that we refer to as self-esteem and the capacity for self-esteem regulation.

Persons with good enough self-esteem can accept and even offer challenges and confrontations, and they are able to modify their closely held opinions and objectively view the facts. This applies to both ends of a generation. A parent who has not achieved good enough self-esteem and the capacity to regulate it may be unable to accept the healthy challenges of the young, as for instance, our friend King Laius with his son Oedipus. Clearly such a process is rarely perfect in any human being. The gleam in mother's or father's eye and the view of the child as a chip off the old block can, in fact, be distorted. I would venture to suggest that a parent may unwittingly choose to see only specific talents and skills as they relate to the family business and ignore others which may have a totally different design and outcome, such as artistic, educational or professional interests.

Mothers and fathers may also not agree and subtly or overtly exert influence, either toward or away from the family business. Parents and children locked into behavior patterns they do not recognize can prevent progress, growth and development. Until these problems are recognized they seem to be self-perpetuating.

Many other conflicts may arise from this process. The young adult who suffers from low self-esteem may engage in perennially seeking parental approval with grandiose schemes or in defiant opposition to the parent. This search for

approval can be marked by profound, often hidden, mortification over even minor mistakes, errors or confrontations. Another attempted resolution may be an apparent compliant submission to the parents' wish for a clone-like individual. From the parents' perspective, all of these may reflect evidence that this particular young adult does not have the qualities or the abilities to lead, thus creating further problems in succession. Consider the situation of a young or not so young person who is doomed to work with the very people who could not help him or her establish a reliable self-esteem regulation. Would such an individual be better off not in the family business which seems to repeat the failures of childhood? Parents often classify, categorize or type their children, and it is very difficult for a child to break out of this type casting. These patterns may not show up or may be more easily recognized or at least not be reinforced with outside employment.

There is a second, and equally important opportunity to grow up. This is the development of a working core of ideals. All of us are familiar with how idealization begins when we view our parents as the wisest and strongest people on earth. Later we view teachers, mentors, coaches, leaders as people to look up to, rely on, use their strength to explore, learn, and through optimal gratifications and disappointments take in a working core of ideals that are experienced as part of the self. Idealization is like the initial phases of being in love. If the relationship is to survive it does so because of optimal disappointment that more clearly reveals the other and allow for the emergence of a different clearer love and appreciation of each other, together with strengths and weaknesses.

Mark Twain, after the usual childhood admiration for his father, at the age of eighteen said that he was astonished at what a square his father was and how little he knew and that at twenty-four he was equally astonished to realize that in six short years his father had learned so much. Clearly some idealization remained, but Mark Twain felt he had a more objective vision of

his own parent. This process of idealization and optimal disappointment is vital to family members achieving a clearer more objective picture of each other. Failures in this arena occur and lead the individual into a continuing search for an idealized other, such as the consultant oracle that poor old King Laius, and even his son Oedipus listened to, instead of being able to listen to and trust their own emotional gut reactions and intellectual assessments. Over-valuing or over-idealization and failure to accurately see a child for who they are may contribute to placing a son or daughter in a position of power they are unsuited for and cannot handle, such as the Wang Computer Dynasty, a major family empire founded on Wang's belief that his son should take over because "he is my son and, therefore, he can do it." As an esteemed colleague observed, it was precisely that because he was Wang's son he could not do it.

Over-idealization may persist through several generations preventing innovation and paralyzing descendants of the great founding father whose words assume biblical proportions. There are more subtle failures where fights over money may disguise a parent's need for healthy admiration, or in turn, prevent a parent from seeing a son or daughter's genuine loyalty or respect, a potential King Laius never allowed. This may happen because a parent cannot tolerate being admired or idealized. I think having ideals often appears to take on a quasi-religious flavor. Ideals are not all good. They can indeed be destructive. In fact it is not cool to be idealistic in this day and age and many young people feel better if they speak of ambition or greed and may hide, even from themselves, motivations that are based on ideals. We are driven by ambition and drawn by ideals and one is not better than the other. They are simply different motivations in our struggle to grow up.

The third possibility for growing up is the need for like minded souls -- alter egos, buddies, sidekicks, colleagues who share your ambitions and/or your ideals. Many individuals who fail to succeed in successful self-esteem regulation or in

establishing a working core of ideals often get by with some "help from their friends." I would suggest that working in a family business can, and often does, interfere with this need for true peers. The son or daughter of the boss is always seen as a part of a family structure to which outsiders cannot belong. The child or young adult is less likely to know if the position or perks he or she holds is based on merit or family connections, and outsiders within the business cannot fail to see the boss's child as favored. What a blow to one's self-esteem which is often tied to real performance and real recognition. I think this accounts for the wisdom of family members working outside the business, not only to gain experience, but also to grow emotionally. It is a fortunate individual who is successful in all three potential areas of growth: 1) self-esteem regulation 2) the establishment of ideals and 3) cooperation with peers.

These ideas cannot begin to cover the many aspects of a family business. These are a few psychoanalytic lenses that provide a view finder, looking at the role of self-esteem regulations, ideals and peer support which may help you see and even value, not only your own motivations but those of the child, parent or even founding fathers.

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