

One for All and All for One

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BY IVAN LANSBERG

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I was recently working with four siblings—three brothers and a sister—who were to soon take full charge of their father's third-generation company. As so often occurs, rivalries among them had flared up as the time for succession drew near. At one point in our meeting, I asked them what they would need to change to become a more effective team. Their answers were very telling.

The oldest brother said that from then on he would make an effort to visit each of his siblings on his or her birthday—something their deceased mother had always done. The second brother vowed to invite the others to go fishing more frequently. The sister, in turn, wished to organize more dinner parties, so that the siblings and their spouses could see each other more frequently. Finally, the younger brother promised to make time to visit the others at home as often as he could.

Since my original question was about how they were managing their work relationships, I was puzzled by their responses, which were all about their relationships outside of work. Improving the quality of social relationships outside the office does help to strengthen the bonds between siblings, but surely that alone is not sufficient to change what happens at work. When I inquired further, it became evident that none of the four had a clear vision of what it takes to create an effective sibling team or even how to recognize one when they see it.

The problem is quite common among sibling groups. So little has been written about what a productive sibling team looks and feels like

that siblings seeking constructive answers cannot get much help from the management literature.

What, then, are the qualities of an effective sibling team? To begin with, the partners share a commitment to what I call a Shared Dream. The Shared Dream is a vision of the future that generates excitement and vitality in their working relationship. It may be only loosely connected with specific performance goals or targets in the business, and it may never even be articulated by any member of the group. Nonetheless, it remains implicit.

The dream is shrouded in the rich imagery of the family's culture, values, identity, and tradition. It offers the possibility of both collaboration among the siblings and their fulfillment as individuals. By embracing the dream, members of the group feel that their involvement with the others will stretch them and enhance their growth.

In effective sibling partnerships, moreover, the members are well aware of how their individual talents and skills can be put to work to achieve the dream. This implies, of course, that they are sufficiently differentiated—that is, secure in their separate identities—to appreciate the ways in which they are distinct.

As with other types of teams, the sibling partnerships that work best are those that are able to harness the diversity of skills and perspectives each partner brings to the enterprise. Tasks are allocated among the group in ways that capitalize on each partner's unique abilities and strengths. And yet the partners do not

lose sight of how their individual efforts are interwoven with the collective aspirations of the fraternal team as a whole.

Sibling teams capitalize on one of their unique advantages over other types of work groups: the depth of understanding of one another's ways and the common knowledge that frequently grows out of years of shared experience. One interesting example is the Sherman brothers, creators of some of the best-loved songs in Disney movies (including *Mary Poppins*). Not long ago in a radio interview, one brother described how a lifetime of mutual experiences had supplied them with an abundance of material to draw upon for their songs. The trips to the park with their father as children, their adolescent struggles, their careers as adults in the music industry were all grist for the Sherman brothers' remarkably successful collaboration.

Siblings who work well together take pride in one another's achievements, as well as in the achievements of one another's children. The individual members are quick to give credit for their accomplishments to the team as a whole. This is especially true of partnerships in which one sibling is the leader. As one lead sibling in a company that I studied told me: "My definition of leadership is to take the blame when things go badly, and to share the glory with my siblings when things go well."

"Sharing the glory" requires a generosity of spirit that is essential for keeping the team together. On a recent visit to a client family, I sensed trouble even before I left my hotel room. I had read an interview with the lead sibling in the company, on the front page of a major newspaper, in which he constantly used the pronoun "I" and credited himself with much of the company's success. When this man's younger brother picked me up at my hotel, he could not stop talking about how upset he—and the rest of the family—had been over the lead brother's arrogance.

Contrary to the common perception, sibling rivalries do not disappear when we grow up. The inability to manage these rivalries can cloud business judgment and get in the way of effective collaboration.

Sibling teams that stay together don't sweep their natural rivalries under the rug. Instead, they find ways of putting them in perspective—often through humor. The humor is expressed in comments like: "There he goes again. He has to have a bigger house and a faster car than everyone else." Sibling rivalry, I have learned, becomes most destructive when it goes unacknowledged, when the competitiveness and envy that still stirs in the group remains underground. A light comment at the right moment can get a laugh that does much to defuse the tension.

I am often amazed at the diversity of arrangements for managing conflict that I see in sibling companies. For example, two German brothers who inherited a family business from their father had been ordered by him before his death to follow a simple procedure if they could not reach agreement on an issue. The father had a trusted business associate living in Zermatt, Switzerland, a man of great experience and business acumen. The brothers got along very well, but on those rare occasions when they could not agree, they called their father's friend in Zermatt to act as a mediator.

Each brother would get on the phone and explain his point of view. The trusted advisor (who was referred to as "the old man on the mountain") would listen attentively and then say, "Frederick is right," or "George is right." The brothers would immediately hang up and abide by his ruling. In the past 35 years, they have called on the father's associate only three times. Luckily, the old man has survived long enough to see the siblings through a succession to the next generation.

Another sibling team developed an even less orthodox conflict-management ritual. Long ago, they adopted a procedure whereby a string tie would be passed from one to the other to be worn in meetings. The person wearing the tie would have "the right of last word" in the event of a deadlock on any issue. After exercising his right, however, he would have to give the amulet to one of his siblings, who, in turn, would also have one chance to have the last word. One reason that the ritual seems to work well is that it tends to encourage consensus on difficult issues. Whoever wears the tie tries

very hard not to lose the power and privilege it confers, and thus works hard to foster compromise among the others.

Still other sibling partnerships try to manage conflict by enlisting very senior non-family managers to act as mediators. In Europe, for example, it is common for each sibling to select a non-family consigliere who is given considerable authority to help manage rivalries and disagreements among the partners. These individuals are carefully selected and groomed; they are often half a generation older than the siblings and are given an important role as impartial mentors of the group.

What seems to matter more than the substance of these conflict-management techniques used by sibling groups is that some sort of functional process is put in place on which they all agree. Sibling partnerships seem to enjoy considerable latitude to organize themselves creatively. In fact, many of the practices used by effective sibling teams seem to violate every established rule of sound administration. When I point out such anomalous practices to sibling teams, they invariably tell me, "Hey, who cares? We're making money and having fun. We must be doing something right." ■

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Source: Family Business Magazine, Autumn 1995

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