



Media Release

Frustration the main course for many family SMEs at Christmas lunch

Wednesday December 17, 2014. Deeply held frustrations and powerful emotions may be the main course served up at the dinner table for many family business people when they gather for Christmas later this month, said Family Business Consultants Network (FBCN) Chair Jon Kenfield. It's quite common for upcoming generations to resent the unwelcome '*demon child*' who's at table with them – being the business that's taken up so much of one or both parents' time, energy and affection – often to the perceived detriment of their natural children.

In many cases, when FBCN members are called in to help family owned SMEs in crisis, they find a depth of personal and family dysfunction that reaches back for decades. The causes are diverse, including: sibling rivalries, parents breaking retirement promises, in-laws treated as outlaws, domineering (bullying?) parents, chequebook control, inheritance threats, lack of confidence in children's business competencies; and the list goes on.

Inevitably some or all family members are well aware of the problem, but digging themselves out of their hole isn't so easy:

- Parents may be in denial and would rather avoid the problem than name it, confront it, and lead the family out the other side.
- Family tensions may have become so intense and entrenched that individual members have given up trying to find solutions, deciding it's easier to write some or all of the family off as "lost causes".
- Families start disintegrating as a coherent group to reform as smaller, nuclear bodies. They only gather for major events, and communications stay at a harmlessly superficial level.

Kenfield notes that for many families the impending Christmas meal can become the catalyst for change. Every year he sees Matriarchs and family champions (often the youngest sibling) rise to the occasion – demanding that the family "cleans up its act" to save the family unit from perdition - correctly identifying the fact that the business is actually destroying the family.

Kenfield points out that this is a major difference between corporate and family owned businesses – relationships are outcomes of emotion, and emotions make people act. In family business settings, major issues may have nothing to do with commercial activities, and yet unless they're identified and addressed successfully, both the family and the business may be doomed.

FBCN's process starts with fact finding, so we understand what we're dealing with before we try to change anything. We also get the stories behind the facts – from everyone's perspective. This gives everyone a chance to vent and offload, and provides profound insights into the cast of characters.

Another scenario can arise, without apparent warning, when underlying issues are left to fester: if a business leader retires suddenly, dies unexpectedly, or suffers an illness that requires them to relinquish control their sudden absence creates an immediate power vacuum that either leaves the business (and the family) floundering in confusion, or creates an unsightly struggle between siblings, at a time of maximum vulnerability.

Kenfield explains that FBCN was established specifically to help family owned businesses better address succession and continuity related issues, and underlying tensions that impact on household harmony, through its collaborative, non-combative approach.

“We guide family businesses through generational transition using collaborative processes that are invariably more holistic and comprehensive than anything they can easily obtain from a conventional provider. We work hard to balance each family's human and legal / commercial needs to produce “a happier family and a stronger business”.

“Within our network we can offer: mediation, facilitation and conflict management; accounts and cash flow analysis; strategic and business plan development; management & leadership training; ownership and succession planning; coaching, counselling and mentoring; therapy; legal and practical business structures; tax and estate planning; financial planning; family and business risk assessment; HR consultancy services; etc.”

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