Family Business Consultants as Leaders

Working with family businesses as a consultant is one of the most awesome responsibilities I can imagine. It incorporates managing family issues and concerns as well as business issues and concerns and the interrelationship between the two. The impact of choices made by the consultant can have far-reaching effects for both family and business that can impact generations of family members.

As the field of family business consulting evolves, and there are more and more practitioners and other professionals such as lawyers, accountants and insurance people working with family businesses, there will also concurrently be more discussions about "client failures." From the consultant's perspective, these are situations where, in retrospect, the choices made in regard to assisting the client did not achieve the desired result—in terms of either the family or the business issues.

Though success or failure may be easy to recognize in retrospect, they are elusive and difficult to define conceptually. In a chapter entitled "Failure: Our Bold Companion," David Keith and Carl Whitaker quote Rudyard Kipling's famous line: "If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster and treat those two imposters just the same…" (Kipling, 1940).

In my own practice of family business consulting, there are times that I look back upon and realize that an intervention or a suggestion to a client was inappropriate. What has enabled me to evolve and, I hope, be more effective is the opportunity to meet with my study group to analyze and understand what went wrong and what I could do differently.

Fritz Perls was often quoted as saying we only learn from our mistakes. Len Hirsch, one of my mentors, often said that clients never make mistakes; it's always the responsibility of the consultant. For me, being willing to talk about these mistakes or failures more publicly or present a program on the topic of client failures would take even greater courage, in addition to candor and humility. To do so, a presenter would need to expose her or his professional work, consulting mistakes, and something about herself or himself in analyzing a case failure publicly.

I have a tremendous amount of admiration for some presenters who were willing to do just that at a recent Family Firm Institute conference. Their courage and willingness to take on this daunting task and expose themselves, their philosophies and choices to all who attended demonstrated the kind of leadership I think is important for the continued evolution of the field of family business consulting. It will take leadership on the part of all practitioners who are willing to publicly examine their work and take on the leadership responsibilities that are part of working with families and business.

In his chapter "Leading from Within: Out of the Shadow, into the Light," Parker Palmer (Conger & Associates, 1994) quotes Vaclav Havel on the notion of leadership as it applies across the board beyond politicians and heads of nation states to classroom teachers and so on. His point is that anyone in a position of power over other people is a leader in the broad sense of the word and, therefore, has a duty to take on the responsibilities that go with that type of leadership. I believe that this is clearly the case in the context of family-owned businesses. As long as we continue to work with family businesses, each of us has a special responsibility to explore what is going on inside our own conscience. Otherwise we have the potential to do more harm than good.

David Whyte (1996) discusses this same issue in a little different perspective in his second chapter entitled, "Beowulf." Beowulf is a masculine story about the descent into the waters of the unconscious. All of us stand at the edge of our own inner pool of darkness and its monsters which, out of fear, we have a tendency to want to avoid.

Whyte addresses the modern corporation and the equivalent of those repressed monsters from Beowulf that lie just below the surface of our professional lives. He lists a few of the many. The most important include:

> "Unresolved parent-child relationships that play out into rigid company hierarchies, paternal management systems and dependent employees; unresolved emotional demands individuals may have of fellow workers, but many never admit to themselves; the refusal to come to terms with an abused childhood, the subsequent longing for self-protection and the wielding of organizational power and control at any cost to gain that protection. Perhaps the parent of all of these vulnerabilities is

> Beowulf's mother herself, the deep physical shame that we are not enough, will never be enough, and can never measure up." (p. 53)

While Whyte talks about these in the context of the corporate world, they are certainly present for all consultants. If we think about Vaclav Havel's admonition to take responsibility for our own consciousness lest our involvement create more harm than good, we are then compelled to confront the depths of our souls and move to a deeper understanding of our inner experiences. Each of us has a family of origin that constantly influences our perspective, our intervention, and our advice to clients. The more we understand these influences, the more effective we can be in not projecting our own experiences onto our clients. Palmer (1994) comments:

> Great leadership comes from people who have made the downward journey through violence and terror, who have touched the deep place where we are in community with each other, and who can help take the rest of us to that place. *That* is what great leadership is all about. (p. 28)

All family business consultants and other professionals who work with family businesses, have a responsibility to go inside themselves and develop a more effective understanding of their own inner experiences. We must begin to ponder, in a deeper and more systematic way, our personal and professional experiences, and primarily from our families of origin, that could negatively affect the work we do with our family business clients.

In order to create light out of shadow, Palmer (1994) calls us to address five areas of shadow that could affect and could be projected onto our work with family business clients. Since most of our world as consultants is extroverted, it is often difficult to recognize our projections as well as take a more introspective approach to our work and to the bias we bring to our work. Hence the call to go inside and ponder these questions as they might affect our work with family-owned businesses.

I will first cite Palmer’s five areas of shadow and then go back and discuss how they might apply to our work with family-owned businesses. The first is “a deep insecurity about our own identity and self-worth.” The second shadow has to do with the perception that “the universe is essentially hostile to human interests and that life is fundamentally a battleground.” The third shadow in leaders and consultants is what he calls “’functional atheism’ – the belief that the ultimate responsibility for everything rests with me.” The fourth shadow is fear around the natural chaos of life. The final shadow is the denial of death. Each of these shadows has a potential negative impact on our consulting of family-owned businesses and warrants further examination.

First, because consultants are in an externally focused profession, it is very difficult to recognize the fact that, underneath all of their self-assuredness, they have issues and concerns like everyone else about their own sense of identity and self-worth. It is sometimes manifested in their work with clients and, if the consultant-leader is unaware of it, he or she can project their fears and insecurity onto their clients and end up creating systems and solutions that deprive others of dealing with these issues and their own identity.

In his work in building learning organizations, Peter Senge (1990) often talks about people becoming their roles. This happens to consultants who are unavailable to deal with their own inner fears about their identity. In addition, they are often afraid to challenge their clients in unexplored areas of their own identity. Instead, the consultant takes on the role of expert and often robs the client of opportunities for growth and development of his or her own potential.

The gift according to Palmer (1994) is that, if I am able to ponder this question, I will know that who I am does not depend on what I do. Knowing this about ourselves frees us as consultants to be flexible and create options that will benefit our clients.

The second shadow has to do with seeing the world as hostile to human interest and life as a battleground. I have often heard lawyers talk about "it is necessary to eat what you kill." The battleground analogy often becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Essentially, this mentality is born out of a sense of scarcity rather than abundance. As a result, professionals don't refer when they should, and they take on the philosophy of Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery in Lake Woebegon, Minnesota. Ralph's philosophy is: "If we don't have it here, you don't need it." As a result, consultants fail to collaborate with each other, and they begin to operate under what I describe as "delusions of adequacy." They don't learn from each other or benefit from the synergy of their different perspectives on how to assist the client. The gift for those consultant leaders who are willing to take the challenge is the knowledge that the universe is working together for good and a tremendous sense of abundance. Collaborating with other professionals will not diminish my practice, and I will not lose my influence with my client.

The third shadow is "functional atheism." Consultants who operate with the belief that ultimate responsibility for everything rests with them and that they make it happen, basically disempower their clients. Their assumption is: "Just let me do it." They are often plagued with workaholism and burnout. The gift, again if they are willing to ponder this shadow, is the realization that they are not the only act in town. They are co-creators with their clients and other professionals. Again, it is the synergy of the work with the consulting team that creates the best solutions. Ultimately, the challenge is to trust others—not only other professionals, but also the clients themselves. It is generally their insights and their ideas that create the best solutions.

The fourth shadow is fear around the natural chaos of life. Fear is something that affects consultants as they work with the daunting challenges of being involved in a family-owned business. As a result of forgetting that creativity comes out of chaos, some consultants are prone to create structures, solutions and a sense of rigidity that sometimes is not in the best service of their clients. It represents to some extent a failure to integrate the J and the P on the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. The judging and perceptive function is the fourth of the four polarities discussed in the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. The judging function is organized and structured, while the perceptive function is more spontaneous and goes with the flow. Structure and premature closure often are not in the best interest of the client. Essentially, the consultants are avoiding the issues of change they were brought in to deal with and avoiding doing it differently. Often, as a result, they create outmoded technologies and simple solutions that are inappropriate. H. L. Mencken once commented on this issue when he said, “For every complex problem there are a multitude of simple solutions—all of which are wrong.”

The gift of encountering this shadow and going inward, is the realization that creation comes out of chaos. However, it requires the discipline of learning to stay in the moment and live in the moment—something that is difficult not only for our clients, but also for ourselves. We come to realize that change can only occur in the moment, and it is essential that we learn the discipline of that challenge. It also requires us to accept the notion that people and organizations, despite our intuition to the contrary, thrive on chaos. If they can stay with it long enough and be disciplined not to create premature solutions, they will have positive results they could never have imagined.

The final shadow is the shadow of death. All the work that consultants of family-owned businesses do in regard to the ownership-succession process, as well as leadership succession, implicitly has to do with the issue of loss and death. Unless the consultant has come to terms with that issue in his or her own life, it is going to be problematic for the clients.

As a result of not integrating and coming to terms with that issue, consultants will artificially maintain the status quo and avoid helping the client deal with the letting-go and change issues in the family business succession transition. Often, a consultant is concerned about a negative evaluation, a public failure or getting a “pink slip,” so, she or he avoids dealing with the critical transition issues in a succession planning process. Or, he or she may continue to try to work with and/or change a client beyond that which is reasonable.

The ability to ponder these mysteries and the shadow of death allows us to realize that death is natural. This is the gift. When we can allow things to die, new systems and new life will emerge. Ultimately, we come to the realization that death is an old friend. Denise Levertov’s poem, “Talking to Grief,” captures the essence, for me, of the integration of this issue. It has to do with recognizing that winter is coming and that I need to let that dog live under my porch so I can come to terms with the issues of change and loss in my own life. In doing so I can avoid projecting those issues onto my clients.

In my own practice, I encounter these shadows regularly. In some instances I am pleased with the results. In other instances I am disappointed with my response.

A recent client situation illustrates the first of two shadows that often challenge me as a consultant. “Functional atheism” is a frequent shadow of mine and manifests itself in my doing too much and not trusting the client. It combines with the first shadow—

insecurity—to create a situation in which I, as a consultant, begin to operate with "delusions of adequacy" and think I know what is best for the client.

In this specific situation, a second-generation owner-entrepreneur in his early 70s and his spouse were at a Family Business Planning Meeting with their three adult children and their spouses. The purpose was to initiate succession planning discussions. I was anticipating that some stressful family revelations would come out during the meeting, so, prior to the meeting I had asked the owner-entrepreneur to be prepared and available, in an emotional sense, to his oldest son who was active in the business along with his sister and her husband. Quite to my surprise, the father came to the meeting with a letter he wanted to distribute at the outset.

I made it quite clear to the entrepreneur that I had a very specific process planned for the meeting. I told him it would be inappropriate to distribute copies of the letter to the family at this point in time because it would upset my sequence and schedule of events.

After his second and third request to share the letter, it finally dawned on me how inappropriate I was in not letting him do so. This was my delusion of adequacy and thinking that I know better than the client. As I finally realized this, I then suggested to the client that he read the letter to his family and distribute copies later.

This turned out to be one of the most profound meetings I have ever participated in. Rather haltingly and with tears, the client began to read his letter and share a metaphor about his life. He talked about his blessings and how he and his wife had been on a journey up the mountain for the past 50 years. "The summit," he said, "was foremost a truly great family relationship supported by a thriving business free and clear of debt. Obviously we have fallen short of our summit."

He went on to say that the time had come for him and his wife to descend the mountain and allow their children to take responsibility for their own journey. By this time, there was not a dry eye in the room. The father's story pierced the cold, emotional facade. It not only changed the course of the meeting, but it also made it possible for the family to reconnect emotionally and spend the first Easter in 10 years together as a family.

I am humbled to think how close I came to overlooking this significant opportunity for the family. I learned a lesson I will never forget.

The second shadow I meet regularly relates to loss and death. This shadow is the most profound, in that it requires that I, as a result of client situations, regularly confront the loss issues in my own life. In a recent unpublished paper entitled "Coming to Life Through the Blessings of Loss" (Hubler, 1998), I explore paradoxically the blessings available to me through integrating the loss issues in my life.

I mentioned earlier how hard it is to explore issues with clients if those areas are unexplored in the consultant's own life. This is particularly true in the shadow area of loss and death. A friend once told me that I am the most optimistic person he knows.

He said that I am the only one he knows who would try to get a 33-inch refrigerator through a 31-inch door. I am sure that a major part of that optimism in client situations is driven by my avoidance of loss issues, related to the loss of two sons at birth and the fear of losing my third, adult son who is depressed and mentally ill. I realize that, in this area, I am clearly vulnerable to creating unrealistic expectations, and sometimes a false sense of optimism, for clients. On the other hand, I realize the benefit of having explored the blessings of loss in that it enables me to help clients explore an area of family business loss that might otherwise go unaddressed and adversely effect the succession planning process.

A recent client situation illustrates this concept well. The Jones Company had worked with three previous consultants, including one family business consultant, over the past 10 years. Although some very good work occurred, it never lasted, and the problems persisted. At the point I became involved, the 67-year-old father and his 43-year-old eldest son, had not spoken to each other for the last four years. This was despite the fact that they worked side-by-side daily in a relatively small company.

When I asked at the Family Business Planning Meeting what the two of them (father and son) had in common, the family was perplexed. I shared my perception that both of them had lost their father at an early age. It was as if a light bulb went on; both of them began to soften as they explored what I meant. The dad had lost his father at age ten, and, to this day, he continues to use an endearing yet demeaning nickname given to him by his father before his death. The son in this situation had lost his father--

figuratively—as the business eroded their relationship over the past 28 years. Paradoxically, as they have explored and begun to understand the loss issue present for both, they have been able to rekindle the love in their relationship. I like to think of this process metaphorically as "sailing into the wind." As I work with clients around succession issues, I often find it necessary to tack, just as I would if I were sailing into the wind. Talking about loss has enabled these two men to heal their relationship. It has created an opening to initiate a formal ownership succession process that has eluded them for the past 10 years.

The closing line in Mary Oliver's 1992 poem, "When Death Comes," is an inspiration to me as I encounter these loss issues. She writes:

> *When it's over I want to say: all my life*
> *I was a bride married to amazement.*
> *I was a bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.*
>
> *When it's over, I don't want to wonder*
> *if I have made of my life something particular, and real.*
> *I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened, or*
> *full of argument.*
>
> *I don't want to end up simply having visited the world.*

When it comes to consulting with family businesses, I clearly do not want to have only visited this world. I want to make something of my life experiences and my shadows that also allows me to bring light to my clients.

As the field of family business continues to evolve, it will be important to continue to encourage workshops and study groups that support the idea of learning from our mistakes. At the same time, it is equally important and equally courageous to continue to support the idea and value of our inner work of dealing with our shadows. We need to acknowledge and admit our mistakes, and use them as opportunities to bring us to higher levels of sophistication with our family business clients. The interdisciplinary study group process that I participate in which includes case presentations has been an excellent resource for me to understand my biases and how I can be more effective and bring light to my family business clients. Each of us has the responsibility to accept the leadership challenge of Vaclav Havel and continue to the best of our ability to bring light rather than darkness to the clients we encounter.

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