

# Ties that Bind

## The Powers That Be

Understanding the give and take of sovereignty in family business **BY Tom Hubler**

**P**arenting never ends—at least the urges don't—whether your child is 2 or 42 years old. Parents may continue to intervene to prevent problems, assuming it's in the interest of their children or grandchildren, without considering their children's opinions. This can cross boundaries, create sovereignty issues and hurt feelings. Yes, "sovereignty," a word normally associated with geographic boundaries, such as a sovereign nation. Sovereignty is part of the language of family business situations. Myla and Jon Kabat-Zinn include it when they discuss parental intentions in their book, *Everyday Blessings: The Inner Work of Mindful Parenting* (Hyperion, May 1998).

In their seventh of Seven Intentions (p. 382) they mention "honor[ing] my children's sovereignty, and my own." Until I read this, I had not considered sovereignty in relation to my own children, let alone in family-owned businesses. The light bulb went on.

I recalled an occasion in my practice when the son-in-law in a family-owned company complained that his in-laws were usurping his own parental authority. Without his consent they were providing organized activities as family trips or excursions—activities that he felt were only in the domain for he and his wife to provide. He was also concerned that spending every Sunday with his in-laws was eroding his family.

The situation of another client was similar. A son in a family-owned business complained that his par-



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ents, however well-intentioned, were usurping his parental authority. They organized family meetings and discussed topics at those meetings that he felt only he and his wife should share with their children.

I recalled the complaint of another son, active in his family's business, that his mother's holiday gift giving pre-empted him and his wife as parents. His mother bought tickets to holiday shows without checking first with them.

Then I remembered a grandmother privately sharing with me her goal to create a happy family experience for her grandchildren. She was defining her job description of a good grandmother without consulting her son and daughter-in-law about what "good grandmothering" might be.

In each of these cases, adult children were expressing the need for sovereignty. What is most unfortunate in these instances



### THE CONTRIBUTOR

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is that potentially everyone's feelings could be hurt. This issue is complex.

The adult children's financial or business reporting relationship to the parents complicated their ability to set boundaries and express expectations. Understandably, the adult children were reluctant to "rock the boat," reluctant to say something to their parents that might further complicate the problem. The adult child thinks, "If I, as a family member, say something, it will upset the parents, so I'm better off keeping quiet."

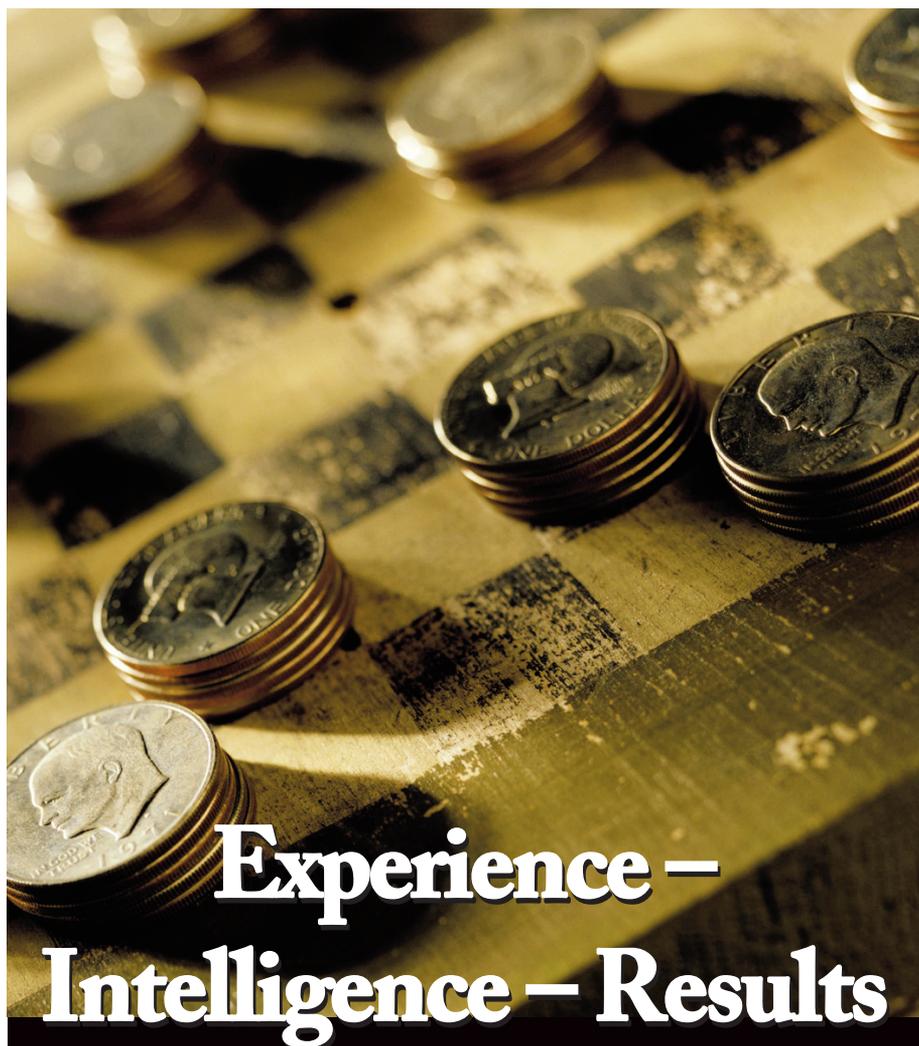
Do you know when issues of sovereignty come up in your family business? Do you have in mind some ways to handle them?

In my opinion, the best approach is to set aside some quiet time to clear the air so that everyone can share their expectations of each other as a member of the family and the family business. I suggest you create win-win situations that honor the integrity and sovereignty of both the senior and younger generations, and share your perspective. Also, let other members of the family know your boundaries and share your expectations without judgment, criticism or blame.

How did the son-in-law and daughter create a win-win situation where every Sunday was a "command performance" at her parents' home? They established a "his and hers Sunday." On her Sunday, they visited her parents. On his, he had the option to do something with just his wife and their children. They respectfully communicated this plan to her parents. The senior generation was pleased to oblige. They understood the need for their adult children to have balance within their family.

Flexibility and a willingness to accommodate each other are critical to most solutions. All family members need to generously contribute to the common good.

When sovereignty issues arise in your family business or within the family, don't wait for them to escalate into a problem or misunderstanding. Reach out. Gather the family or those involved to discuss the matter. Start out by seeking to understand what others think and feel. Listen before you share your own expectations. Holding respectful, open family meetings like this can do much to reduce stress and encourage strong family bonds that recognize sovereignty. **MB**



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