

# Meetings are Therapeutic in Family Business Consultation

By Patricia M. Cole, PhD

As family therapists become more involved in family business consultation, they need additional therapeutic tools for working with business families. One of the most effective ways of addressing family business problems is to transform the therapy sessions into business meetings. In this setting, the therapist shifts from "counselor" to "facilitator" to assist clients in addressing family issues as well as business issues.

## Reasons for the Meetings

The reasons for holding family meetings fall into three main categories. First, many family business members are resistant to the idea of therapy. They may question the skills of a therapist who, in their minds, cannot possibly understand the business complexity of their family relationship. Also, the head of the family enterprise is usually an entrepreneur who believes that an "examined life is not worth living." He or she is used to controlling both the business and the family and, therefore, resists any outside help. A family therapist can easily disarm this therapy phobia by suggesting that the family organize into a business meeting with the therapist acting as a facilitator. This context provides a more acceptable environment for the family who views the time as business meetings with a facilitator rather than therapy sessions with a therapist.

Second, meetings act as a boundary between the family and other employees in the company. Without this boundary, the family system can disappear in the day-to-day work operations of the business. Meeting the demands of the company may inhibit the family's ability to communicate with one another as they pursue their separate work schedules and responsibilities. Solving this problem is similar to the meetings or councils that many families hold around the kitchen table: Who will take out the garbage? How will the family spend their summer vacation? Do the curfew rules need revisiting? The purpose of these meetings is to provide some structured way of keeping in touch for the continuation of a smoothly running household. Likewise, a similar meeting format is needed for the continuation of an effectively run company.

The last reason for holding family business meetings concerns case management issues. Family sessions become easier to run in a structured

environment. It is not unusual to have eight or more family members attending therapy sessions with eight or more crisis issues. For example, at one recent consultation, a family brought up the following problems in the first session: divorce, domestic violence, a serious illness, financial problems, management issues, and succession planning. With multiple concerns competing for attention, therapists can become easily overwhelmed. Turning the therapy sessions into meetings with an agenda to follow can alleviate some of the natural chaos that may otherwise develop.

## Structure of the Meetings

In structuring these meetings, the therapist can travel to the place of business and hold the sessions there, or the family can travel to the therapist's office. Either way, it is advisable to place the family around a table with the CEO at one end and the therapist at the other. This is an important strategy. The head of the company can easily sabotage the meetings if he or she feels displaced as head of the company and believes that the meetings will transform the business into a democracy. The therapist is there to help facilitate discussion, not to incite a mutiny against the present leader. Nevertheless, the therapist can help set some ground rules by discussing these issues with the family:

Who should attend?  
Where should we meet?  
How often should we meet?  
How is the agenda decided?  
Who should run the meetings?  
Who organizes the meetings? (distributes agenda, reminds participants of the date, etc).

If the family cannot agree upon an initial agenda, the therapist may provide one. A worksheet can be given to the family in preparation for the first meeting. To help strengthen familial relationships, questions should be included that attend to individual, family, and business concerns. Aronoff and Ward (1992) suggest some of the questions listed below:

What do I want right now from my life, work, career?  
What do I want in the future in those three areas?  
How do I see my life, work, and career goals fitting into the business?

What kind of environment do I want to work in?  
What do I value?  
What does my family value?  
What does the business mean to the family and to me?  
What do I need to talk about with other family members?  
What are the strengths and resources of our family?  
How can we put those strengths and resources to work?

Strengthening family relationships can also be achieved by including agenda items for family celebrations as well as business issues. Planning a family reunion or birthday becomes as important as planning the expansion of the business. Agenda items that emphasize family concerns and celebrations should be encouraged at all times. This serves as a constant reminder that the business is not more important than the family, and that, in fact, the company's success depends on healthy family relationships.

The use of family business meetings can ease the discomfort for business families who feel threatened in a traditional therapy setting. Meetings can also provide boundaries that therapists may need to manage the therapy sessions, and families may need to remind themselves that they are more than just a business. The most impor-

tant advantage of family business meetings is providing a context in which the families can function on their own after the facilitating therapist is no longer needed. Helping families come together for organized communication becomes habit forming. As the therapist works himself or herself out of a job, the family can continue these meetings as a way of keeping in touch on a regular basis and, thereby, ensuring the health of both the business and the family.

*Patricia M. Cole, PhD, is the founding director of the institute for Family Business at Nova Southeastern University. She is currently assistant professor and director of the Family Business Project at the School of Social and Systemic Studies, Nova Southeastern University, Ft. Lauderdale, FL. She is a Clinical Member and Approved Supervisor of AAMFT. She presented at the AAMFT Annual Conference in Atlanta on "Loving and Loathing: Family Relationships in Family Business."*

## References

Aronoff, C. E., and Ward, J.L. *Family meetings: How to build a stronger family and a stronger business.* (Family Business Resource Leadership Series, No. 2). Business Owner Resources, P.O. Box 4356, Marietta, GA 30061.

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