



## \* Team players or terrorists? The influence of in-laws

*When your child marries, you must deal with a powerful new player who can have a significant impact on your business.*

**M**ANY TIMES over my succession-planning career, parents have said to me, "Our family is so close. We could not ask for better circumstances." In many cases, their bragging is premature. Most senior-generation members who claim to have the ideal family business environment have not yet experienced the real excitement of succession: Their children are still unmarried, so they haven't entered what could be called the "in-law lottery."

When your son or daughter marries, you will quickly be forced to deal with a new power player in your family who can have a significant impact upon your business. Your child's spouse will influence his or her perspectives, priorities, attitudes and expectations.

If the luck of the draw brings you one or more team players, praise God for your good fortune. But if

to your child's development as a citizen and business successor. No doubt a responsible son-in-law can be supportive to a daughter needing reassurance that she can make it in a "man's world." And a secure daughter-in-law can communicate to Junior that he is capable of earning his place in the family business.

However, there is at least a 50:50 chance that you are going to be dealing with an in-law terrorist. I base this forecast upon firsthand experience working with insecure, hypersensitive, entitlement-minded and, in some cases, downright psychotic in-law liabilities who:

- Created stress-generating issues between their spouse and the spouse's parents because the in-law resented their close parent/child relationship.
- Created relationship problems with their spouse and his or her parents and sibling(s) owing to jealousy

The above examples only scratch the surface of pathetic in-law situations.

### Keeping terrorists at bay

Before we discuss how to prevent in-laws from turning into terrorists, let's look at the psychological characteristics of these two archetypes. Team players feel welcomed, respected, appreciated and involved. They choose to participate because they believe—or are made to believe—that they are valued and bring value.

Terrorists, on the other hand, feel rejected, disrespected, unappreciated and uninvolved. They choose to make their point, get their pound of flesh and gain a perverted form of respect by overtly or covertly exerting whatever leverage or power has been placed at their disposal by achievements, "developments or circumstances. Being married to a prince or princess and having dominion over children (the senior generation's grandchildren) is indeed leverage and, in some instances, power.

Here is a list of actions that can work to turn in-laws into team players and, where appropriate, can help you deal with in-law terrorists.

1. Initiate a family business council to facilitate family communication on general business matters. This is most effective if you initiate it before your children become engaged or get married. Within the family business council:

- a. Establish "operating covenants." Record your core values and policies, including an agreement as to how

### **Insist that the family communicate directly, and don't tolerate anyone dropping emotional hand grenades.**

the "wheel of matrimony" brings you a terrorist, pray for wisdom and patience. And if you end up with two or more terrorists, pray for strength and resilience, because you and your family are in for a challenging ride.

In-laws who are team players can be a genuine asset. They can help your child achieve maturity, conviction and drive. In-laws can provide the miraculous missing link

over the "unequal" privileges or gifts provided to the sibling(s).

- Created wedges between siblings because of a perception that the spouse's sibling was unproductive but was enjoying an equal share of the business income.

- Restricted grandparents' (business owners') access to their grandchildren because the grandparents were considered too controlling.

in-laws will be welcomed, respected, appreciated and involved.

b. Discuss and adopt a family member employment policy and family employee performance expectations. These family resolutions will preclude most of the unreasonable expectations, especially pertaining to entitlement attitudes of employed children and in-laws.

2. Princes and princesses should tell their betrothed about the family business council and let them know that they will be included after the wedding. To be sure this happens, parents should do the same. This information will mean more coming from the prospective mother- and father-in-law because it expresses welcome, inclusion and respect.

3. Within the family business council, parents should forthrightly but respectfully address any perceived meddling or rumors by starting with, "We heard you had a question." Let it be known immediately that all issues will be discussed and there will be resolution in an open forum.

Insist that the family communicate directly, and don't tolerate any emotional hand grenades. Make sure the instigator participates in dealing with the collateral damage. In-laws hate embarrassing confrontation, so this behavior will stop as soon as accountability becomes predictable.

ber employment policy that family members will be compensated according to the responsibility of the position and the productivity of the person, which may not amount to equal compensation.

7. Blame the necessity of a prenuptial agreement on the attorney or

**Terrorists choose to make their point by overtly or covertly exerting whatever leverage or power has been placed at their disposal.**

4. Parents should make the family business council meetings enjoyable and productive so that the in-laws want to come.

5. Parents should clearly express that the only family member right is an *opportunity* for a career in the business and an equitable portion of the family estate—but not necessarily an equal portion of the business.

6. Express within the family mem-

ber succession planner. Do not attribute it to parents, as this can handicap in-law relationships from the get-go.

8. Initiate a board of directors. Directors would generally not include in-laws unless the in-law was duly appointed and serving in an official capacity. Spread responsibility for corporate governance, promotions, etc. among the directors rather than concentrating total responsibility

Anúncio

## SUCCESSION

with the business owner.

9. Parents must recognize the autonomy and independence of their children's new family. Give advice only when solicited. In discussions with in-laws, show utmost respect of their space and values. Try not to use judgment words such as *why*, *when*, *should* and *never*.

10. Irrespective of personal feelings to the contrary, which could be based upon fact or premonition, welcome in-laws into your family and treat them as dukes and duchesses.

11. If you find yourself dealing with an in-law terrorist, do everything possible to remedy his or her feelings of rejection and disrespect. Discard your pride, offer multiple apologies and genuinely endeavor to change behavior that is perceived as disrespectful without overtly patronizing your in-law.

12. If overt patronization and enablement are the unchangeable expectation, apologize for your fail-

ure to fulfill the in-law's (unreasonable) expectation and resign yourself to the fact that this ship was sunk before you ever got aboard.

13. Princes and princesses should hold both their parents and their spouse accountable for respect and giving one another the benefit of the doubt.

14. Parents should not blame all bad vibes on the in-law. Your child had a choice, and he or she is genuinely partly—and, in some instances, totally—to blame for what happens.

15. Parents should accept that operating a family business has its downside and in some cases its price. One of those prices is the requirement that you consider behavior modification to accommodate your in-laws. Another price is that you confront rather than tolerate emotional hand grenades. If this perceived price is too high, sell the business and protect the family. Otherwise, fulfill your leadership

responsibility and do not allow an in-law to manipulate you with aberrant behavior such as restricting access to your child or grandchildren. If you ever give them reason to think this stupid behavior is fulfilling their goals, you will surely see more of it.

### The key: Respect

My guess is that some of what is listed above you find reasonable and some you don't. I assure you these suggestions have worked, but that does not mean there is a "silver bullet" for your unique circumstances. Respect is the in-law imperative. You want it and they want it. Just remember the old *adage*, "To get respect you must give respect."

*Lloyd H. Rawls is the president/CEO of The Rawls Group, headquartered in Orlando, Fla. (www.rawlsgroup.com), and has specialized in succession planning for closely held, family-owned businesses since 1973.*

A utilização deste artigo é exclusiva do autor.

# Anúncio