SOLVE DAD’S PROBLEMS FIRST

By Dr. Leon Danco

This will be a lecture to readers who are potential heirs. Since it’s about Dads and their problems—nothing new to them, of course—all fathers are free to leave the room.

First, we have to assume that, as a potential successor to a family business, you have lots of drive. You crave responsibility and chance to put all of your bright new ideas into action. You represent youth at its best; wanting to do things, different things, and pushing to get them done yesterday. But there’s a good chance you also represent youth at its worst: insensitive, reckless and over-confident.

I’ve met too many heirs who were ready to wrestle their Dads for control. Be forewarned, if you’re itching to fight for control rather than earn it, you will lose. You don’t understand your Dad’s world. You lack experience and you don’t have any chips. In the 20 years I’ve been working with family businesses, I think I’ve seen every form these confrontations can take, and, believe me, there’s no greater fury anywhere than that of a father who’s wrath has been aroused by an ungrateful son or daughter.

I know your fathers. I know them well. They have discussed problems and concerns with me that they’ve never told their priests or their rabbis or even your mothers. They certainly haven’t told you. Yet many of you think you know everything worth knowing about your fathers.

Well, you are in for a surprise. Your father’s problems are caused in large...
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part by his love for you, because usually there’s a conflict between that love and his valid concern for his own future.

You see, some of you are basically greedy kids. That’s a statistical fact, as sure as the fact that some of you are hard working heirs who deserve the legacy your Dad’s work has built. The problem is your Dad often can’t tell which of you is which.

He wants to be fair to everyone—to you, to your brothers and to your sisters. But he’s very worried about how you will react to each other and he’s concerned about what you will do to the business he has built. He’s painfully aware that your actions will profoundly affect the business, his retirement and his security. He has my sympathy.

I’m not ignoring your troubles. I’m simply saying there’s another side. Your Dad is very lonely, very scared, and very tired; he’s running out of time and he just doesn’t know where to go for help. And too often, all you do is complicate the problem and make it worse, because you don’t take the time to understand his problems.

Just try and sit on your brilliant expansion plans for a minute and take a hard look at your Dad’s problems. Maybe he has to run like hell every quarter just to keep a positive cash flow. Maybe there are political intrigues in the office he’s so much a part of that they’re driving him crazy.

Maybe his big accounts, the ones he has serviced exclusively for 20 years, bring in 80 percent of the business and he’s getting too tired to cover them all. Maybe you and your brothers and sisters and their wives and husbands are always fighting. Maybe he’s afraid you can’t handle the business.

This is only an offhand sample. Look around you. Try to see and understand the troubles that are killing your father. He can always solve them himself, you know, by simply folding up and selling out, or by just running it into the ground. Then you could start out the way he did, flat broke and unemployed. It happens every day. If you get greedy, it could happen to you.
The alternative is for you to solve your father’s problems. Not all of them. Solve just one. If you can do that, I’ll wager a bottle of my own father’s 20-year-old Scotch that he’ll give you more of them to work on. The more you solve, the more you’ll get until some day your father will know he can leave the entire problem safely in your hands.

Channel your drive and enthusiasm into areas of the business that obviously need attention now. Do everything you can now to ease the burdens your father has accumulated over the years, because it’s the only sure way to get his confidence and his respect for the plans you have for tomorrow.

Confucius was once approached by a young officer during a fierce battle. He and the other junior commanders did not like the way the general was conducting the defense of the city and wanted Confucius’ advice on how to remove him.

The sage’s advice was immediate and simple:
First to repel enemy.
Then, maybe, to reorganize army.

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