Teaching Your Son to Mind Your Business

Grooming Junior to Take Over Your Job is No Easy Task

By Dr. Leon A. Danco

Unsuccessful men, incompetent men, and nonconfident men don’t run privately held businesses. They are outwardly successful, and people are grateful for the favors they supply, or so they appear to be, and it’s easy to be an all-purpose answer man.

In general, however, contractors are not very sensitive when it comes to understanding that the others who inhabit their world have feelings, needs and frustrations, too. These people constitute both our personal and business families.

In my consulting practice, I run across this fact all too often. I’m asked to counsel sons whose fathers have taught them nothing of their businesses. Sons can’t command the respect and commitment of their own peers, and the fathers want to know why.

I’ve had many conversations with sons of all ages, at all levels of experience and interest, at all levels of education and ambition; and, with increasing frequency today, I’m consulted by young women deeply interested in their family’s businesses—somebody once called me the Margaret Mead of the wealthy Aborigines. Our youth seem to fall into specific categories with specific needs at each stage, just like their fathers.

When they are young they need to see enthusiasm in those whose careers they consider valuable. Some sons and daughters genuinely don’t have any interest or aptitude in business, and I urge you, let them go follow their own pursuits. Don’t let your business become a holding pattern for uncertainty or a prison to be escaped from after your departure. That ruins the whole joy of participation and accomplishment on the parts of those who really do enjoy their work.

Playing with The Family Business . . .

When our offspring are young we are so busy climbing the ladder of success that we hardly have time to see the poor kids. So Saturdays we take them to the office to keep us company and impress them with how hard we work. They sort through the scrap barrel, rearrange the labels in the shipping room, push the buttons on everything they can find in the office, and irritate the hell out of the people who have to straighten up afterward.

In this way we begin the process of making our kids feel that company employees are their personal domestics, and that the plant and the office are their inherited sandboxes. No wonder owners and managers later often resent their heirs.

As they grow older, children hear dad come home from the office blasting the no-good unions, damning the government, saying his competitors are cut-throats and his help is stealing him blind. Then he turns to his son and he says, “Some day, my boy, all this is going to be yours.” (In some cases he may say it to his daughter, but I find that instance still relatively rare.)

The son isn’t stupid. Is it any wonder that he wants nothing to do with the business and goes into the Peace Corps?

Then, in junior high or high school the owner manager adds to his son’s
misconceptions through meaningless summer employment on an adult wage scale he doesn’t understand. The son is secure in knowing that he will not be reproached and is invincible against being fired; and then we top it off with a guaranteed job when he gets out of college. Dad now finds he can get even with the IRS by having his son’s allowance subsidized by the government by calling it salary—the job is unimportant.

No wonder children think business is a combination of executive sandbox and a license to cheat the government. All they see are the obstacles and pitfalls and material rewards involved. They must be made to understand that business can be a positive social force and that it is a rewarding experience.

Rewards and Contributions . . .

Business interest is usually aroused in boys by their dads at an early age, and through associates of the father whom the boy meets; through dad’s enthusiasm for his work and the happiness that it provides not only him but his family.

Advice in this area is a little out of my line, but I can surely say that indifferent attitudes usually stem from the fact that too many fathers are not as enthusiastic about what they do as are the local swim coach, pilot, science teacher, or photographer. These men exude a feeling of joy and social contribution.

Imagine how many youngsters would be interested in flying, for instance, as a career, if all they heard about it were engine failures, thunderstorms, near misses and instrument malfunctions. And that’s mostly what they hear about business at home . . . the tremendous adversities that the old man has had to face. Wasn’t he brave? No wonder he drinks.

Kids are idealists. It is the adult who has taught them to be cynics, critics and to confuse cleverness with competence. When your son finally joins your business, does he really know anything about it? With his qualifications, whatever they are, would you have hired him for his job on the basis of skill alone? Is there a real job for him to fill, with clear cut responsibilities and a definable success?

Athletics teaches a young man that the pros are organized, that they know what they are doing. The players have specific assignments; the plays are worked out in advance; there is cooperation among all the members of the team; they accept the coach as understanding, qualified, and impartial . . . And then the son goes into his dad’s business, only to be disappointed because he can’t see the organization, understand the plays, evaluate the players or watch the replay. He doesn’t even know the rules, or who makes them or changes them.

Eating and Sleeping His Work . . .

If the young man is single, lives at home, and works for dad, he really has problems. There is no distinction between the home he grew up in and the business in which he works. Father in the dining room is father at the office.

Mother is not only cook for the household but possible accountant and treasurer, bookkeeper and teller of the secrets of the corporate boudoir. Business gossip is a subject for after hours.

The son at this stage yearns for personal freedom from special treatment and overt signs of familiarity. He wants to be a good employee. He knows he is not a manager of anything, even though for pseudo-legal purposes dad has made him vice-president and secretary.

Your son wants to be an equal with his peers and contemporaries. Pay him what you would pay anyone else to do the same job; not less to make him tough, and not more because his salary is pretax.

No cute nicknames, no calling him “son” and letting him call you “dad” or letting him call mother “mother.” It only serves to emphasize his uniqueness, and he doesn’t want it at that stage. No lunches at the club with dad, no special favors you don’t do for anyone else doing his job. The poor guy wants to cut it on his own, and dad won’t let him.

This is one of the reasons why sons-in-law are often better equipped managers than sons are. The son-in-law grew up and didn’t know he was going to take over the old man’s business.

He just happened to marry a wonderful girl, and he probably had a decent job and learned something before he was dragged into the family business.

Better yet, let your son learn about business elsewhere—where he can make mistakes and not embarrass his
father, and where his early uncertainties and ignorance won’t cast doubt on his ability as a manager in the years to come.

When and how do the heirs start to learn how to run the business? The first thing they must understand is that the business is not a right; it is a responsibility. The earlier they realize this, the happier everyone will be. And the heir should begin to accumulate his own experience bank—not just in business but in living itself. This is where an education can help.

At the undergraduate level, I would much prefer to see your heir take a course in zoology, sociology, anthropology — you name it — rather than business administration. Because those teachers love their subjects and the man who teaches business at the undergraduate level for the most part dislikes business because he has never been accepted there.

This is a generalization, but I am not happy with a degree in business administration at the undergraduate level. Too often it isn’t worth a damn. And after graduation, delay his entrance into your business. Let him find a job on his own merit. Let him learn that business is interesting, exciting, frustrating, difficult, rewarding, satisfying — with the best company he can find.

I suggest a public company. If any of your suppliers will take him in a management training program, you should be overjoyed.

Suppliers encourage this because if they do a good job with your son, he is going to be loyal to them as his teacher.

Now, suppose that somehow your son has become a qualified manager, never mind where he learned it . . . with you, or on somebody else’s payroll. Let him manage his plans and put them into effect; let him see the results of his errors and yours; and allow him the responsibility of choosing his contemporaries to help him manage.

Make it clear he is your successor, and clean out your own dead wood—you put it there. Don’t resist the changes in method, processes and attitude he brings to his job.

Finally, don’t keep him down just so you can stay on top and have him await his liberation from your tyranny through death. A son is a father’s greatest student. Let him have a graduation day he can really spring from. And give thanks to God for the privilege of installing him as your successor in your own lifetime.

As one son put it to me recently, “If dad would take mom and relax, and just give me moral support, he’s worth $100,000 a year to the company. But if he insists on coming to the office to check on what I’m doing, he’s only worth about $8,500.”

What’s it worth—all the guts, sweat and toil, the assets, the prospects of your business? And to whom? Who has an interest in your wall & ceiling company? How do you value it? Explore the many answers with Dr. Danco in his article, “Stock and The Spreading Family Tree” next month, in Construction Dimensions.

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