Developing Thought: Concurrency
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-A fourth generation family business grappled with the definition of family ownership for many years. They struggled with the idea of limiting ownership to blood relatives only or what to do with married-ins after a divorce. Clearly defining the limits of what was "family" was challenging for them. They wanted to appropriately restrict ownership to protect their enterprise, yet also wanted to have a spirit of inclusivity.

Family-business systems work with situations like this frequently. The most successful families adopt a certain way of thinking about these situations that brings success over the long term. These enduring families have adopted thinking processes that develop their ability to manage and sustain concurrency of fundamentally opposed interests. Family-businesses constantly encounter numerous inherent dichotomies; developing the thought processes and capacity to accept these challenges as opportunities instead of problems to be solved is a vital skill for long-term success. In our experience, the families that move beyond "either/or" thinking into a "both/and" thought process are better able to successfully manage and navigate in an increasingly complex world.

-What did the family above do? To meet all competing needs, the family adopted an encompassing definition of family, crafted a buy-back and buy-in process for family and adopted a structured family internship and family employment policy. This both/and approach resulted in a sense of family inclusivity *and* created pathways for the family to relate in a professional, structured way that protected the business.

In our work as scholars, researchers, and family-business owners ourselves, we see a consistent theme among the longest-lasting, most successful family-business systems: they are able to develop the capacity to manage the concurrent demands placed on them by the unique situations they face. It may not be enough to wear the "business hat" sometimes, and then take it off to wear the "family hat". This approach is reflective of either/or thinking, and is unnecessarily limiting. We need to develop the ability to wear both hats at the same time, and to maximize the potential of each position in concurrency. Wearing both hats, and doing it well, is an example of both/and thinking. "I wear my business hat *and* a family hat at the same time." The seeming paradox of family-business can be a great advantage when we shift the way we think about our problems, and embrace the capacity for "both" (Schuman, Stutz, & Ward, 2010). The more that family-businesses develop their thought processes and ability to develop the concept of concurrency, the greater their ability to succeed in a range of situations.

-After a sobering appointment with his cardiologist, a father stayed awake many nights thinking about how to hand the business over to his son. As the head of operations the son was top-notch but had a brisk way of making decisions that was fundamentally different than his father's lengthy and slower approach. A common line from the father was "I love him, but he's not ready. He has no idea about how I make decisions". The father knew he wanted to exit the business, but was concerned about how a rapid transition of leadership to his son would affect the management team, and he wanted to change the way his son thought.

What do you do in this situation? Is this a problem to be solved, or a polarity to be managed? Problems are those things to which there is an end-point, with exclusive options. Problem solving is an essential technical skill that we use all the time. But problem solving has its limitations, especially when we apply this technical skill to situations that call for adaptive thought processes. Heifetz and Linsky (2002) distinguished between technical skills such as "fixing" and solving problems, from adaptive skills such as looking at underlying causes for the problems, and adopting innovative thought patterns. Our socio-cultural upbringing tends to develop and reward our problem-solving skills, so we have a tendency to over-emphasize this approach. Family-businesses unintentionally limit themselves when they use technical skills and either/or thinking to solve adaptive challenges.

-Over time the father saw that he couldn't "fix" his son and that his own style had flaws and inconsistencies. As a result, the father and the son discussed the strengths and weaknesses of their respective decision making skills among themselves and among their management team. Now, the risks and benefits of their respective decision making styles, along with their commitment to the family and to the firm were "known" to all. This discussion sparked a non-family manager to contribute more and to counter-balance the son's style and eventually the team adopted a co-COO style of management. This adaptive approach allowed the father to pull back more from daily operations and facilitate a creative way to capture the benefits of multiple approaches to decision making.

Family-businesses run into these issues all the time: How do I have unconditional love for my family members, *and* have a merit based system? How can I manage the short-term *and* the long-term needs of both my family and business? How can we integrate the need to make quick decisions with the discipline of making slow, reasoned choices? Certainly, we could approach each of these conundrums as a problem to be solved. But if we "solve" a problem that is be ongoing, we may limit ourselves to a narrow range of options. What if we approached these situations as opportunities to be managed in perpetual concurrency?

Managing concurrency is an adaptive skill and way of thinking that must be developed. Concurrency means the ability to engage challenges that are ongoing, are unsolvable, and that we must have a unique ability to manage. Polarities are those situations that present as interdependent value pairs. We cannot chose one or the other if we want to succeed to the fullest of our potential. Risk and stability; individual and team; harvest and invest; these are all examples of polarities for which we cannot pick just one aspect. We must have both, and we must develop each pole consistently over time to truly thrive. Models and tools such as the Polarity Map developed by Barry Johnson (1996) can be very helpful in developing the capacity to leverage polarities for our advantage. When we work to actively manage polarities, we can gain the upsides of each; we must intentionally develop the capacity to think in this way.

Our thought processes and perspectives create the way we view and work with challenges. Our mental models of how we approach situations is built through our language and thought patterns. "Am I focused on the success of the business, or the harmony of my family?" This question creates a false choice, and is unintentionally limiting. Developing the capacity to

manage polarities in concurrency requires us to ask, "How can I ensure I have business success *and* family harmony?" The most successful, happy families that we have encountered utilize the second way of thinking as a matter of course. These families have embraced the complexity of polarities by developing ways of thinking to ensure that all the critically important competing needs are met. The ability to hold the tension of concurrency over time is a skill that must be cultivated and valued.

"Do we rely on how we have always done things, or do we try something new?" This limiting question can also be stated: "How can we utilize our experience of what has worked in the past *and* incorporate some fresh new ideas?"

The payoff for family-businesses in developing their thought processes is that it allows them to rise to a higher level of success in an increasingly complex world. The challenges that our systems encounter face are not single events, but are ongoing, evolving and most often unsolvable. If we waste our valuable time and energy approaching these problems as things to solve, we deny our full capacity. The most successful family-businesses have developed the vital capacity to manage polarities in concurrency as an ongoing resource.
What about yours?

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