



SURVIVING IN A **TOXIC FAMILY WORK ENVIRONMENT**

By DR. LARRY COLE

Let's begin by stating that the senior leaders of a dealership are responsible for creating a workplace culture that fosters high morale and productivity.

Having said that, there are both family and corporately owned enterprises that fail to live up to this responsibility. Toxicity in the dealership can come from many sources.

An excellent self-reflection exercise is to evaluate the poison you put into the dealership. Actually, every one of our personalities has the potential to contribute to the poison if we don't manage ourselves. But we're addressing family issues in this article.

I've had the opportunity to work in several family owned businesses and listed below are some of the dynamics that created toxicity for their businesses.

If you are a family owned business, you may want to check any of the following and compare them to the dynamics within your dealership.

- Parents (especially dads) struggle making business decisions that may interfere with family dynamics.
- Mom and dad have different agendas for the business.
- Parents and/or children talk about dysfunctional family relationships with other dealership employees.
- Family members have spread rumors about other relatives working in the store.
- Children are placed into leadership positions without being properly prepared.
- There is a lack of an exit strategy for the parents to turn the business over to the apparent heir or heirs.
- Siblings fight with each other and sometimes publicly.

- In-laws stick their noses into the business causing consternation.
- Mom generally wants everyone to just be happy and get along with each other.
- Personal lifestyles of children have an adverse effect on the business.

How many did you check? The focus of this article is to address a few strategies to more successfully manage your business and family.

FIRST, let's begin this strategy discussion by addressing the corporate environment.

The enterprise is a business

So, run it like one. Establish a governance process that includes regularly scheduled board meetings and make decisions that are driven by your vision for the company. Teach your children this is a business and not a playground.

I frequently hear children complain that "Dad never shuts down." The enjoyment of family events is sabotaged by talking business. Adhere to the rule that "family is first" at family functions.

Parents, manage your children

Help them resist the temptation to take advantage of the fact that their last name may be publicized throughout the enterprise. Teach them they are no better or worse than any other employee because of their last name. Children also need to be held accountable to adhere to the same rules that manage other employees.

Develop a succession plan

The succession plan is twofold. First, structure a plan for children to participate in a variety of roles throughout the enterprise to learn the business and establish how family members will ultimately fit into the line of authority as the parents exit the business. Children need to learn that every job is equally important to drive the success of the company; therefore, job assignments shouldn't matter or be judged as more or less important. If it does matter, perhaps that child is telling you they should not be in the business.

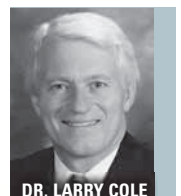
SECOND, speak to the children about their responsibilities.

Love your parents

Act like responsible adults. You have an opportunity most people don't have, so act like you appreciate it. In brief that means: 1) be eager to learn about every facet of the business, 2) express humility (*Google humility and narcissistic tests*), 3) focus on becoming the best version of yourself, and 4) remember that you are in a glass bowl with everyone scrutinizing every word and action that comes out of your body.

Keep your mouth shut

By the mere fact you are a child of the owner means that you should hold yourself to a higher standard. The fact is children will enjoy perks that other employees don't have. Keep those perks within the family unit.



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Market yourself

Your challenge is to show your parents that you are good enough to eventually run your part of the business. I'm telling you that requires hard work. I've counseled many children/employees and emphasized if they are not willing to pay the price to strive for excellence, then it may be best for them to go elsewhere – and you would be correct if you conclude that many people don't like to accept that reality.

THIRD, for the rest of us, sometimes the "family" remains blind to the pressures of working in a family-run business. What is even worse are those family members who act like they don't care.

Depersonalize

Accept the fact that the family dynamics are the family dynamics regardless of what they are. Accept the reality that you are not going to change them and refrain from talking to other employees about them because it only adds fuel to the fire. So politely remove yourself from such employee led discussions.

Be a sponge

Realize that your present employment is an excellent opportunity to work at being the best version of you, i.e., to maximize the resources residing in your body. Every experience is a teacher. You must be a willing student. I encourage you to identify your development goals to improve your performance. Instead of focusing on the negative characteristics of your employment as you drive to work, focus on how you are going to be better at the end of the day as the result of the employment experience. You want to use today to prepare yourself for the opportunities that can come tomorrow. As I've said many times over the years, today's struggles are the footsteps leading to tomorrow's successes.

Participate in fun outside of the dealership

Family and friends are excellent support systems along with participation in church and other community events. Focus on the enjoyment these bring to the table. Research is

showing that social support groups are important psychological medicine.

Leave

I've had numerous people ask when it is time to leave a place of employment. I'm offering you this formula to help you make that decision. On a scale from 1 to 10, rate the level of overall enjoyment you are receiving at the enterprise. Then rate the level of enjoyment you would expect to receive using this same scale. Then divide what you are receiving by what you expect. A recent example is the employee who rated present satisfaction a 3 and what he expected an 8. The quotient is .375. That tells you he is putting his body where his mind doesn't want to go. What is the ratio telling you?

In closing, the challenge to owners is to ensure the ratio for every one of their employees would be 1.0 or greater. **WED**

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