

Obligation or Opportunity
Dr. Steven K. Moyer

“Someday, son, this could be yours!”

That was a statement made to my two brothers and me as we were growing up. My father was very intentional in choosing a vocation. As a devoted father and family man, he deliberately chose to have a family business that would teach us a positive work ethic and provide opportunity for multiple generations of our family to work together. The business also provided our family wonderful perks that we enjoyed, like a mountain house, family vacations, and a comfortable life style.

We were located about one hour north of Philadelphia in, at the time, a largely agricultural community. Our business was a butcher shop in our hometown with a retail store in the city. This provided work for my brothers and me through our high school years (generally required by Dad to be in the shop at 5:00 AM for a few hours before school). It also provided an opportunity for us to work during our college years to minimize the college debt load.

My brothers and I always knew that Dad would be delighted if one or more of us would take over the business, and there were opportunities to profitably grow the business. At the same time, Dad repeatedly told us: “Go to college so you don’t *have* to do this, but this is a good business.”

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Somehow in that all, Dad made us feel that the business was truly an opportunity for each of us, if we so chose. Dad never implied – overtly or covertly – that he and our mother expected us to take over. There was never an implied obligation, and there was never an implication that his legacy was his business. His legacy was, would be, and is his faith and his family.

How did my parents do that? As I reflect on these interactions, I am continually reminded of concern for family being self-actualized. As a family we were nurtured to have a realistic perception of ourselves, of others and of the world around us. By teaching us this way, our parents developed in us a continued sense of appreciation, wonder, awe and a transforming faith in God. Ultimately, my brothers and I all pursued careers outside the family business – and that was ok.

Today, working with many Business Families, I see the spectrum of expectations coming from parents to the Nxt Generation, from “Thou will take this business as thine own” to “You will never get this business.” The Business Families that are able to openly dialogue and discuss the involvement of the Nxt Generation with genuine concern for the Nxt Generation have a greater chance of beating the odds of becoming another statistic of businesses that fail when being passed to future generations. A choice not to be in the business is not a failure.

So, how does your family see the business: an obligation or opportunity?

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