

Good Boundaries Make Good Business Families

Robert Frost's poem, *Mending Wall*, posits, "Good fences make good neighbors." In his poem, Frost, intentionally uses the mending of a tangible wall as a representation of the barriers that separate the neighbors in their friendship. Good neighbors respect one another's boundaries.

In a business family, boundaries, though often mental structures or commitments, are as real as tangible fences. Boundaries establish one thing in relationship to another. They are a line between where one ends and the other begins. Boundaries draw lines regarding what is acceptable and what is unacceptable within the family and the enterprise. Boundaries help family members balance personal and professional obligations; maintain family bonds; and develop emotionally and psychologically throughout their lives.

To improve boundaries in your business family, it is important to keep in mind awareness, intention, action, and resolution. We all have the ability to learn and grow in defining and being responsible for our boundaries. In a business family, it is as important to have a Boundary Policy as it is a Mission Statement. A Boundary Policy should include:

- The balance between individual needs and business needs
- Maintaining personal and interpersonal privacy
- The elimination of burdensome family baggage
- Avoiding domain 'spillover' – family, business, ownership, management
- Resolving conflicts in the appropriate domain (the family or the business)
- Promoting growth, stability, and success of family business

There are several key items families need to recognize and can start working on immediately:

1. Recognize the need for clear boundaries. These boundaries exist in the family, in the business, and personally with individuals playing several roles depending on the context.
2. Talk about boundary issues. Communicate the concerns of each individual, and walk toward the conflict. Avoidance is not a healthy option.
3. Develop a written Boundary Statement for your family and business.

When you boil it all down, where do family business conflicts really start? Too often, it is with boundary issues.

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