

Leaving The Family Business: How To Know When It's Time To Go



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Careers



Is it possible to keep smiling like this when you're working with family? GETTY

Disagreeing with your boss can be difficult. When you share a last name with your co-workers, it's even more complicated. In any business, disagreements are bound to arise - but family relationships can make matters much more intense. If you can't work through your differences, does that make you a bad employee? Or just a lousy son, daughter or spouse? Maybe none of the above. Maybe leaving the family business isn't a question of how "good" you are at your job, or how dedicated you are to your family. It's not about you being

just a sister, daughter or father. Maybe there's something deeper at stake.

The *Harvard Business Review* suggests that clarity is the key to knowing if you're in the right spot, even when you're working with brothers, fathers, mothers and sisters. Wouldn't it be great if it were just that simple? Think about it: if you could write down your career goals, and identify where they differ from your parents', would you know how to move forward? Not in a family-owned business. Here's why: because your father (or mother) is never going to let go of the reins no matter what you put on your magic list. His or her history of success is the last word **in every argument**. When the people who brought you up want to take you down, it's not a fun ride. Have you been there?

Meanwhile, writing down your career goals isn't necessarily a bad idea. Just understand that making a list isn't the same as doing **what your career deserves**. Can you make the kind of impact you want, at your family business, or is it time to leave the nest? Consider these four steps, in evaluating a "should I stay or should I go" decision:

1. **Don't Question Your Identity:** there's something we all know, even when we don't want to admit it, and that's who we are. You know your vision for yourself and your career. If not, maybe check with an executive coach or other trusted advisor to separate your true abilities from unearned confidence. Because understanding yourself is the first step in any difficult decision. Let me give you a far-fetched example, in order to make my point: let's say that I identify as a rodeo clown. Don't judge me. It is who I am, deep down, underneath the makeup and the big shoes and the curly red wig. (Do you

have a bias against rodeo clowns? You might want to look at that). But here's the thing: I can't be who I am, as a professional, unless I'm at the rodeo. It's easy to see that I need to be in a place where my skills make sense. But there's no place for a rodeo clown inside a manufacturing company. Get this: your identity needs and deserves a place where your decisions are supported, your identity is rewarded and your skillset is not contorted. Whether you are a rodeo clown or an accountant, I offer no judgement - only guidance: Instead of questioning who you are, take a look at where you are. Before you send in the clowns, are you really in a place that will allow you to realize the possibilities for your career? Are you pursuing your professional identity? Or choosing a personal one that was handed to you at birth? Again, no judgment, but are you living your best life - or bending it to fit someone else's needs and goals? When family values are business values, it's easy to take what's been given. Maybe even enjoy a nice living as a result of your compromise. But what if there's something more in store for you? Wouldn't your family want you to become who you are meant to be - even if it means working somewhere else?

2. **Change Your Relationship:** the tricky thing about a family-owned business is that the work relationships are established over a lifetime. Partnerships are *over-determined* (what psychologists describe as influenced from many different sources). Working with relatives is always more complicated than [working with relative strangers](#). I mean, I never spent birthdays and holidays with Melanie in accounting, and that kind of social distance is why we get along so well. My brother, on the other hand, knows all my

faults, weaknesses and bed-wetting stories. PS: I don't want them shared on our next Zoom call. The key to redefining family and work relationships is a simple one, and it's vital to your success: there has to be a mutual agreement around what is and isn't suitable for work. Boundaries are mission critical. Setting up merit-based evaluations, and objective criteria for promotion, can be a huge help. When business is an extension of family, remember the old adage: good fences make good neighbors. What boundaries need to change, inside your family business? Or do you need to open the gate, walk past those boundaries, and head for greener pastures?

- 3. What's Good About This?** This four-word question can help to identify the upside of a tough situation. With my coaching clients, we look in the direction of *what's good about this* - not so we can cling to some shred of positivity in the middle of a disaster, but so that we see new perspectives. If there's a fresh viewpoint you need in your life, and you can't see what's good about where you are now, maybe it's time to make a change. Or to hire a coach. But how can you move forward, without turning your back on your family? Maybe what's good about this is coming to understand that your family members don't want to hold you back. Do they? Maybe what's good about this is seeing that you don't have to have everything figured out in order to move towards who you need to be. Do you? Look, you don't have to have a rock-solid game plan for the next five years in order to step towards some goodness. Even if family members don't understand your desire to leave, can they find a way to support your decision? Can they support your identity, and come to their own realization around what's good about this?

4. **Don't Write Out Your Goals:** write out your values instead. When you bring a future goal into the present moment, how is that goal expressed? Your true goals show up as your values. Instead of writing down your goals, write down how you see your values expressed, every day. How are you living what you value - and are you able to capture your career values, one day at a time, in your family business? Lofty goals - like becoming CEO, running the company one day, or taking over your brother's side of the business - are interesting. But looking into your values is the key to finding your independence, either within the company or without. By writing out your values, you just might discover your worth. And then, you can see how you value your career in its current context. Wouldn't that be a worthwhile goal?

It's easy to believe that leaving the family business is a rejection of your family values. But it's not. Becoming who you are meant to be isn't desertion, it's reinvention. Independence is a part of growing up - and just plain growing. Your career choices are simply a matter of embracing your own values, and doing so with dignity and respect. A respect that you give to yourself, as well as to all your family members, regardless of where you work. Because, when you really look at your values, you might see that you are right where you belong.

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Perhaps there's a way to change your relationship with your duties, obligations and responsibilities, so that you can find a new way of tackling the same old problems. When new agreements are reached, old relationships can change. Whether you leave the family business or stay isn't the point, really. The ultimate question isn't about working with your family; it's about what works best for you. There's no need to apologize for what you value, and there's no shame in pursuing what you want. And you know what they call the people who care most about your personal happiness and professional success?

Family, my friend. Family.

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