



# Enterprising Rural Families™

This newsletter is an instrument of the *Enterprising Rural Families: Making It Work* program of the University of Wyoming Cooperative Extension Service. For further information concerning the Enterprising Rural Families program or on-line course contact [information@eRuralFamilies.org](mailto:information@eRuralFamilies.org) or go to <http://eRuralFamilies.org/>.

## TIPS OF THE MONTH:

- The three basic measurements options for performance appraisal...
  1. **Traits:** Friendliness, strength and skill, etc.
  2. **Results:** New contracts, growth, financial gain, etc.
  3. **Observable Behaviors:** Operates machinery, greets customers, learns content of job and related jobs, etc.
- Communities work best when all the sectors are engaged:
  1. Built capital
  2. Financial capital
  3. Political capital
  4. Social capital
  5. Human capital
  6. Cultural capital
  7. Natural capital
- Solving business disagreements:
  - ⇒ Resolve disagreements promptly.
  - ⇒ Don't put your energies into arguing your position.
  - ⇒ Be willing to negotiate.
  - ⇒ Talk, brainstorm together, be objective, reach a decision.

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## Family Business Ghosts

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When rural families find themselves going around and around in circles, unable to solve problems and get on with life, it is often because they are haunted by ghosts from the past. They are entrenched in behavior patterns that have been passed down to them from previous generations. Whether or not they realize it, they handle problems and decisions like their predecessors.

Consider a typical rural family: The family patriarch, Frank, is a rugged, trail blazer-type individualist, who runs the business the way he wants. Like his father, Frank does not talk much about his plans, never mind people's feelings. His wife, Mary, alternates between being a martyr and a mediator. Like her mother and mother-in-law, she worries and frets about how they are going to keep the business going. She also acts as both sounding board and go-between for her husband and their son, David, who is also working in the family business.



David is frustrated. He wants to fortify and diversify the business and prove himself. Sometimes, he simply goes ahead and does what he thinks should be done, regardless of what his folks say (like his father did when he was younger). David's wife, Ellen, alternates between insisting that things have to change and accepting they never will (like Mary in years past).

History repeats itself, especially within families. People are products of their upbringing. If parents are honest, hard-working, and kind-hearted chances are their children will be too. If parents are workaholics, given to angry outbursts, sly in their business dealings, or inclined to drink to forget about their troubles, chances are their children follow suit.



Strange though it sounds, "Don't talk" and "Don't feel" are two of the most common and destructive family business rules. In some "no-talk" families, problems are either ignored, in hopes they will go away, or denied. In other hold-your-cards-close-to-the-chest families, problems may be put up on the table so they can be discussed, but discussion is restricted to family members. Seeking consolation or advice from outsiders is taboo.



A classic example is the family with an alcoholic in their midst. Everyone pretends everything is perfectly normal. If evidence of the disease (problems at work, job loss, or an accident) becomes undeniable, family members make excuses to explain the problem away and protect the loved one. Seeking professional help is not an option because that would amount to airing the family's dirty laundry in public.

In "don't feel" families feelings never gets factored into discussions about the management and future of the business. If Mom is hurt by Dad's sharp words or afraid expansion will bankrupt the business, which is her problem. If Son #1 feels he is obligated to take over the business when he would really rather pursue a career in music and Son #2 feels he is better suited to running the business, neither will likely ever get a chance to discuss their feelings, much less realize their dreams.

Other common family rules include: keep the peace (at any cost), respect and obey your parents (unquestioningly and unfailingly), do not rock the boat or challenge the status quo, be strong (never be afraid or unsure), be perfect, and be successful (materially and financially).

Families can find themselves locked-in to all kinds of roles and recurring battles. Inherited behavior patterns can dictate anything from who does what job to how decisions are made, how money is handled, what family members talk about and how they talk to each other, right down to how people think, feel, and spend their free time. Rifts between branches of the family or older and younger generations can recur generation after generation.

The problem with old family rules and behavior patterns is that while they may have worked well for previous generations, they are no longer useful, appropriate or beneficial. Dad is not always right. Being hard-headed and hard-nosed may be advantageous when starting out in business, but when passing the business to the next generation, a softer, more consultative approach touch is needed. Parents need to be challenged if they are being unfair or making imprudent business decisions.



Protecting the peace and the status quo do not make sense if people are miserably unhappy. Failure to resolve the underlying problems will ultimately cost the family the business, if not the relationships with family members as well. People's attitudes and behaviors should change as situations change. Behaviors should be appropriate and helpful.

So, how do you exorcise family business ghosts? The first step is to become aware that you are involved in playing out a drama that has plagued your family for generations. The second step is to try doing something different. To paraphrase Albert Einstein, you cannot keep doing the same thing and expect to get different results.

If one member of a family refuses to play along with the ancestral script, other members may decide to change as well. But remember, you cannot force other people to change. You can only change yourself.



Do not rebel for the sake of rebelling. If you do the opposite of what you are expected to do, you are still being controlled by your family pattern. Instead, do and say what you truly want to do. Be 100 percent honest. Follow your heart. Look after yourself and your needs. Let the chips fall where they may. Regardless of the outcome, you will have broken free of the chains that constrained you. You will be rid of your old family business ghosts and feel a whole lot better about who you are.

(Communication techniques and problem solving in family businesses are covered in greater detail in the **Enterprising Rural Families: Making It Work™** on-line course.)

\* Originally authored by Lorne Owen P.Ag., Ph.D., Judy Carter M. A.

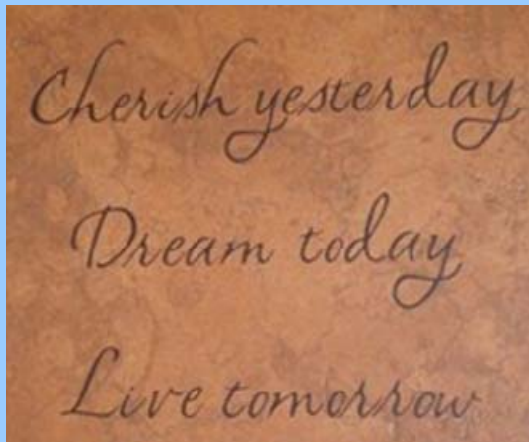
#### Suggestions for Further Reading:

Astrachan, J.H. and K.S. McMillian. (2003). *Conflict and Communication in the Family Business*. Family Business Leadership Series, No. 16. Family Enterprise Publishers. Marietta, Georgia.

Hoover, E.A. & C.L. Hoover. (1999). *Getting Along in the Family Business: The Relationship Intelligence Handbook*. Routledge. New York, NY.

McClendon, R. and L.B. Kadis. (2004). *Reconciling Relationships and Preserving the Family Business: Tools for Success*. The Haworth Press, Inc. Binghamton, New York.

Whiteside, M.F., C.E. Aronoff, and J.L. Ward. (1993). *How Families Work Together*. Business Owner Resources. Marietta, Georgia.



Don't let ghosts from the past slow down the progress of today!  
Break free of the chains, follow your heart, look after yourself.



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