

Family Business

THE GUIDE FOR
FAMILY COMPANIES

www.familybusinessmagazine.com

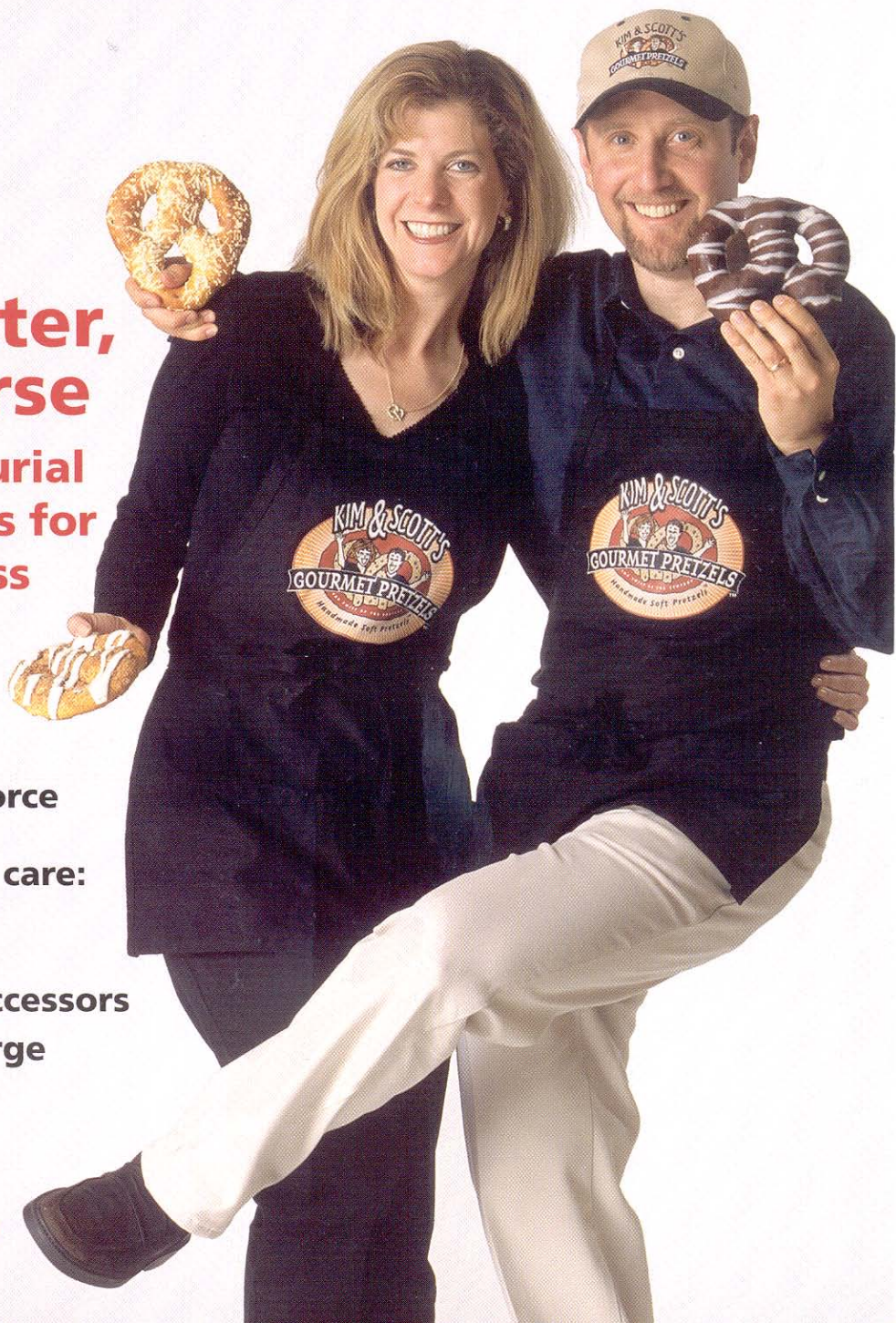
WINTER 2005

For better, for worse

Entrepreneurial
couples' tips for
togetherness
in business

- Avoiding a nightmare divorce
- Home health care: A family affair
- When the successors don't take charge

'Co-preneurs'
Kim and Scott Holstein



Four steps to conflict mastery in the family firm

The conqueror, the victim, the denier and the drama queen are repeating ineffective patterns they picked up as children. Mature adults must learn new ways of discussing their disagreements. The key is to be honest about your feelings.

BY SYLVIA LAFAIR

CONFLICT WILL NEVER go away; it's part of the natural ebb and flow of life. What *can* go away are our patterned responses to conflict that we learned while we still had our baby teeth. These early behaviors helped us cope when we felt small and unsure of how to react. They got us through difficult times when we were four or seven or 12, but they interfere with our ability to have honest, mature relationships now.

Many business families cope with conflict in unproductive ways. Do you recognize any of these people?

- *The appeaser*: Offers undeserved perks to avoid confronting a complainer—a hefty bonus, a larger office, a luxury car. This “Band-Aid” approach rarely solves the underlying problem.

- *The conqueror*: Humiliates an argument loser by gloating. No resolution occurs—the trouble just gets swept under the carpet.

- *The avoider*: Leaves the scene—either physically or emotionally—when the going gets tough, so the real concerns never are faced.

- *The denier*: Pretends everything is perfect out of a desire to keep everyone happy.

- *The victim*: Goes from person to person in the company, asking for advice on how to solve the problem—and then takes none of it.

- *The splitter*: Complains to others in a hushed whisper but, when asked directly what the problem is, replies, “Oh, nothing.”

- *The drama queen (or king)*: Chews the scenery and makes a lot of noise in a hand-wringing performance in which no real truths are told and no lasting solutions are found.

People who resort to these ways of reacting rarely make good leaders or good lovers. Here are four steps you can take to get beyond these old, outmoded attempts at conflict resolution and get to the heart of the issue.

Step 1: Learn the language of feelings.

When discussing a problem with your family or employees, be honest about how the situation makes you feel so the other person can fully understand your position. In order to do this properly, you must learn the language of feelings.

Too often, the words we use to describe our feelings are merely an intellectual bypass to play it safe. For example: “I feel that you acted inappropriately by hiring the new shipper without discussing it with me.” If you think



using the word “feel” makes the sentence more emotional, you’re wrong. All you are offering is information—and blame. Let’s revise this sentence to give it a real emotional twist rather than playing it safe: “I feel disrespected, and I want you to know how angry I am. I want to talk about why you hired the new shipper without discussing it with me.” By putting it this way, you’re creating dialogue.

Another example: “I feel that you are being extremely insensitive when you tell me it’s my fault the computer isn’t working properly.” Instead, try saying it this way: “I feel embarrassed when I tell you the computer isn’t working and you blame it on me without asking questions. I need your help, not your criticism.” Are you beginning to sense the difference?

Here’s one more example of intellectual bypass: “I feel that you care only about yourself when you call a staff meeting and don’t check to see if I’m available.” Here’s a revision that demonstrates conflict mastery: “I feel frustrated when plans are made for a staff meeting and I’m not included in the decision. I know I have good ideas, and I want to participate fully. I wonder what we can do so this will not continue to happen.”

The key to the language of feelings is to put your emotional response right after the word “feel.” You cannot feel “that.” A sentence that begins, “I feel that you ...” is an intellectual bypass of the real truth.

The other important lesson is to “take an *I* stand.” In using the language of feelings, my goal is to talk about how *I* feel and what *I* want to change—not to blame or shame someone else. Remember, the road to mastery takes practice.

Step 2: Trust the reactions in your body.

Intense, gut-wrenching emotions over a specific incident of conflict that last more than 15 minutes have less to do with the situation at hand than with an earlier unresolved hurt. Hidden sources of conflict can be found in emotional blocks frozen in our past. The depth of an emotional block can be determined by the amount of negative energy in the present situation.

Try this exercise to find the underlying cause of the upset. First find a quiet place where you won’t be disturbed. Then observe where in your body you feel discomfort—it could be a slight ache or a sense of nausea, dizziness or anything else that gets your attention. Most of

the time the sensation will occur in the chest or the stomach area. Occasionally it is felt as a headache or a backache. Close your eyes or stare at the ceiling or the floor. Put your hand on the area in which you feel even the slightest discomfort. What's the earliest time your body can remember experiencing a similar feeling? Usually in a minute or two a memory will occur. It's often unexpected, but it's always helpful. Notice all the feelings associated with that old memory and let your mind connect the feelings with the present situation.

Step 3: Write about the situation.

Studies have shown that writing emotional content actually improves the immune system. It also helps to clarify the situation at hand. When you encounter stressful conflict, write a brief synopsis of the whole story—the one that's lodged in your memory, i.e., the story your body's reactions are telling you.

Hidden sources of conflict can be found in emotional blocks frozen in our past.

Then write a shorter version describing why you are so upset at present. Compare the two stories, looking for the emotional ties that create a bridge from the past to the present.

An example may help. Michael, the younger of two brothers, was always deferring to his older sibling, George, although they were both in their 40s. This behavior was so deeply ingrained that it was considered the norm by everyone who knew them.

One day at a senior staff meeting, Michael expressed strong doubts about George's plan to buy another company. Michael and George began to raise their voices, much to the surprise of the rest of the management team. Michael was so angry he was shaking; he nearly lunged at his brother. He knew his behavior was irrational—way out of proportion to the situation being discussed.

He excused himself, went to his office and closed the door. After some deep breathing to calm down, he pressed his hand on his aching abdomen and waited. After almost five min-

utes he thought nothing would happen. But suddenly he remembered a fight with George over who would be the first to play a new game when he was nine years old. He couldn't believe the rush of emotion as he remembered the way George had wrestled him to the floor, twisting his arm till he thought it would break. He heard George's voice saying, "You'll never get your way, never, ever. I'll always be bigger and stronger, so just shut up and accept your dumb fate."

Michael began to write about the incident. As he wrote, he could feel the anger, shame and resentment of the nine-year-old he once was. He remembered how he gave up feeling he could ever be an equal with his brother. He sadly understood that a part of him had remained the little boy waiting to be tackled and pinned to the ground.

Later that day he met with George and shared what he had learned. Not surprisingly, George had no recollection of the incident. (An event that may represent a turning point to one person is often inconsequential to another.) They talked for a long time about childhood competition and how their father always seemed to protect Michael. For the first time, George admitted he'd resented the protection and longed to feel that their father would always be there for *him*, as well. To compensate, George had put on the veneer of independence and strength. The brothers were able to look at each other with new eyes that day. Finally, they could view each other as grown men who could find new ways to support each other.

Step 4: Try a new way of relating.

Sometimes we do best if we have a template to follow. Consider this sample conflict dialogue—four simple sentences that can help you stay focused on issues and allow old hurts and misunderstandings to heal:

1. "When you ..." [*This is not a blaming statement; it's descriptive, and it puts the situation in context.*]

2. "I feel ..." [*Remember: You must feel a feeling, you can't feel "that."*]

3. "And then I ..." [*Describes what happens when you are upset. This gives others some clues about why you often behave a certain way.*]

4. "What I am willing to do is ..." [*This is taking an "I" stand; it's a clear position statement to move things forward.*]

One brother and sister used this template to begin to experiment with new ways of talking with each other. The brother, Keith, is the CEO and president of a chain of boutique spa resorts. The sister, Julie, is senior vice president of creative projects, the very heart of the business. Their mother started the company many years ago as a bed and breakfast. Although the business was financially lucrative and had an excellent reputation in the industry, word had gotten back to the siblings that their in-fighting was creating a shadow over the reputation they had all worked so hard to build.

This feedback made them finally pay attention to the weak foundation they were standing on. They agreed to use the conflict dialogue model to air their dissatisfaction with each other. While each had undergone personal therapy, it did not seem to improve their relationship. They were not ready to attempt a meeting alone and agreed to have a facilitator.

After some pleasantries, Keith started. "When you promise to have the furniture for the new spa ordered and delivered on time," he said,

Conflict offers us an opportunity to examine our own values, beliefs and behavior patterns.

"and then when it doesn't happen and you make excuses, I feel angry and mistrustful, and then I want to keep you out of any important decisions. What I'm willing to do is create time lines we both can agree on and institute weekly meetings so I can learn how things are going and see if there is any way I can help. And now I would like to hear from you."

Julie first acknowledged her appreciation that they were finally talking directly to each other. Then, using the dialogue model, she responded, "When you give two or three conflicting messages and change your ideas on what to order, I feel confused and frustrated. And then I shut down and play it safe, waiting for you to make a final decision, and I do very

little. What I am willing to do is create the time line with you, not just agree with what you decide. I am also willing to come directly to you when I get upset rather than talk to Mother. And now I'd appreciate hearing from you again."

The tension began to lift as Keith and Julie each became accountable for their part in the chronic conflict. More rounds of dialogue continued as they sorted out one issue at a time, speaking the language of feelings and practicing making accountability statements in front of each other. While initially this type of dialogue felt artificial, it became easier and more comfortable as time went on. Within a few sessions they were able to meet without a facilitator and eventually instituted this model into all areas of the company.

The bottom line

We are evolving from a culture in which conquest has been the norm. When one party must submit to another, passive hostility results, and relationships become irrevocably damaged or dissolved. Many family businesses have closed their doors because the dissonance of conquest ultimately has made everyone a loser. Mediation and negotiation go beyond conquest as a means of finding agreeable solutions, yet these are usually short-term and do not address underlying issues.

Conflict mastery is hard work and takes practice. But it can improve the bottom line, both relationally and fiscally. Conflict offers us an opportunity to examine our own values, beliefs and behavior patterns. As we become more aware of our behavior, we can grow beyond the need to deny or avoid conflict or to please the other person. We no longer need to win at all costs, see ourselves as the victim or become overtly dramatic. The destructive tendency to drive a wedge among our family members or colleagues will dissolve, as will our need to have other people be message-bearers for the truths we are afraid to speak ourselves. Instead of these worn-out, repetitive patterns, there will be room for creative, collaborative connections. FB

Sylvia Lafair, Ph.D., is co-owner and president of Creative Energy Options Inc., a global coaching, consulting and leadership development company in White Haven, Pa. (info@ceo-inc.net).