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Trapped? Really?

by Dr. Michael Klein

For some individuals, working in a family business can be an incredible gift. For others, the family business is a prison, without any chance of parole. For those who are feeling trapped in the family business, ownership of the business is more burden than pleasure. The freedom that their family business allows is overshadowed by a lack of business process and clear structure. Having their name on the door is not worth being "on call" 24/7, or never being able to really take a vacation.

Sometimes it is easy to know that we are trapped…we feel it. However, other times, it might not be clear. Perhaps there is a vague sense of something that's just not quite right. So, we hunt for clues. Answering the following questions can help shine a light on some of these clues:

- If I wanted, could I leave the business without destroying family relationships?
- Have I developed skills in the family business that are translatable?
- Do I know what I have to offer to a career outside of the business?
- Would the family business go on without me?
- Do my parents (or other relatives) have financial means beyond family business income?
- Do I have clear professional goals or ambitions?
- Have I ever worked outside of the family business as an adult?
- Have I outgrown any need to prove myself to a parent(s) through my work in the family business?

The more the answer is "no" to these questions, the more likely a trapped scenario has happened. Individuals who are trapped are in need of help and support, but most importantly, *the ability to separate themselves and their individual goals and development from the family business.*

By taking a step back, and looking at the following questions, individuals are better equipped to consider their unique predicament and make short-term (and long-term term) decisions:

1. History: How exactly did I get here? What was my path?
2. Legacy: What does it mean to me to own or work in a family business?
3. Relationships: Who truly matters to me? Which relationships are important to maintain?
4. Career: What do I want to do with my professional life? What do I enjoy, and what is my potential?

Of course, arriving at the answers will take much more time than it takes to ask the questions. It will likely take some deep thinking, soul searching, and perhaps even hiring an objective, neutral consultant or coach. But the time and effort (and even cost) involved is minimal compared to the potential for damage that can result from abrupt and impulsive actions or denial.

Regardless of what the genetic lottery hands us at birth, our personal and our professional experiences should result in new insights into who we are and what we are capable of. As our careers progress, we should be able to develop new skills and abilities, as well as discover interests and passions we didn't know we possessed. Ultimately, our jobs and other professional experiences should guide us towards finding out where are true strengths and talents lie.

For some, the family business can absolutely provide an unmatched arena for this type of professional development. Unfortunately, for far too many, the family business stands directly in the way of this – and, as a result, it stands in the way of healthy adult development.

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