



LOVE, MONEY, POWER AND SIBLING RIVALRY

Interview with Dean R Fowler *Management Consultant, PhD, and Clinical* *Marriage and Family Therapist, USA*

A leading expert in the field of family business dynamics, Clinical Therapist, Advisor and the Author of two books, *Love, Power and Money: Family Business Between Generations* and *Family Business Matters*, Dean R Fowler has helped hundreds of family firms transcend the emotional barriers that threaten their organisations' sustainability.

Fowler often mediates sibling conflict in the family business context. Mostly, the disputes he sees involve brothers and sisters contesting the estate plans of recently deceased parents. The cause of this severe dysfunctionality is almost

always emotional. Common tropes include jealousy, inequality and long-held, deep-rooted resentment. Despite the success rate of Fowler's mediation, some still move to litigation.

Working with these relationships gives Fowler a unique perspective on fraternity, and his experiences have uncovered a better way for families to approach succession. Labyrinthine estate plans, dense with Shyamalanesque surprises, bring out the worst. Transparent communication brings out the best. Recently, Tharawat Magazine sat down with Dean Fowler to discuss sibling rivalry.

IN A FAMILY BUSINESS, WHERE MONEY, POWER AND LEADERSHIP ARE CORE ISSUES, SIBLINGS OFTEN KEEP THEIR RIVALRY HIDDEN FROM THE PARENTS OUT OF FEAR OF LOSING THEIR STATUS. **THE DEATH OF PARENTS DISSOLVES THIS FEAR OF RETRIBUTION;** THERE IS NO LONGER ANY INCENTIVE TO CONCEAL THEIR RIVALRY. **IN THE WORST CASES,** SIBLING RIVALRY PLAYS OUT IN HIGH CONFLICT OVER FAMILIAL MONEY, **POWER AND CONTROL OF THE BUSINESS.**

For rival siblings, what changes when parents pass away?

In my view, sibling rivalry is caused by the siblings' relationship with their parents and not with each other. Siblings want the attention, blessing and love of their parents. Rivalry exists if one sibling feels that the other receives more attention, love and care than they do.

In a family business, where money, power and leadership are core issues, siblings often keep their rivalry hidden from the parents out of fear of losing their status. The death of parents dissolves this fear of retribution; there is no longer any incentive to conceal their rivalry. In the worst cases, sibling rivalry plays out in high conflict over familial money, power and control of the business.

How does sibling rivalry start?

The core issue at the heart of sibling rivalry is individual self-esteem. Siblings who have developed a strong sense of self-esteem respect each other and aren't perpetually hungry for attention from their parents because they're comfortable with themselves. Lack of self-esteem is rooted in the actions of the parents, and entrepreneurial parents, in particular, can exacerbate the situation.

Entrepreneurial parents are busy. Often, they're not around to praise their children. They're not there applauding at their soccer game or taking an interest in their hobbies. Entrepreneurs, in the most extreme cases, have narcissistic personality disorder, which can sometimes contribute to their success. However, it also means that, as parents, they wish to be imitated and agreed with categorically. This further undermines self-esteem in a child because if the child wishes to

express themselves, they'll be rejected until they conform to who their parent expects them to be.

How does emotional rivalry differ from strategic rivalry?

Strategic rivalry occurs in families where familial relationships are healthy – family members with high self-esteem know who they are. Over the last 25 years, I've decided to work with these kinds of families: families committed to developing and supporting their children while working together towards a successful business transition. Often, these are third-, fourth- and fifth-generation family businesses because history has taught them the value of healthy relationships. Even in families that have their emotions under control, conflicts that revolve around practical business issues can still arise. When this conflict exists between siblings, it is strategic sibling rivalry.

Siblings can have very different ideas about risk, for example. Take a family with two very capable siblings; one is a high risk-taker, and one isn't. One might naturally gravitate towards accounting, while the other is drawn to product development. These differences aren't necessarily prohibitive, but if the siblings enjoy equality as decision-makers, they must be able to agree as well. Will their business expand globally? Do they want to introduce new products? How much should they keep as capital reserve and how much should they pay out in dividends or compensation? If they can't answer these questions together, then the family business is dysfunctional.

The strategic actions that involve growth and risk for a business define the strategic rivalries between siblings. They are the critical moments that non-siblings

also have debates over. Sometimes, strategic differences between siblings are misinterpreted as an emotional rivalry. Frequently, strategic and emotional rivalry are intertwined.

How can families mitigate sibling conflict?

It's essential that family members, siblings or otherwise, work on their communication skills. When family members don't fully articulate their issues or concerns, they are misunderstood. They might come across like they want more money, but what they really want is recognition – to be heard and respected.


Sometimes, these issues have festered since childhood, and dealing with them requires family members to reach a new level of effective communication. A dedicated platform must exist for this dialogue, and formal family council meetings are an ideal starting point. Having accountants or lawyers preside over these meetings is a poor idea. They often lose objectivity and become part of the problem. Families should find trained professionals familiar with both the business and psychology aspects to help them get a healthy conversation started. Only when clear communication is established can people solve the problems they're facing.

What does progress in the field of management consultancy to resolve sibling rivalry look like?

I would like to see an increased emphasis on interdisciplinary fluency. Family business consultants don't need to be certified lawyers and accountants with PhDs in psychology to serve the field. However, consultants with these respective backgrounds need to be

knowledgeable and fluent in the issues that face the other disciplines. Early on in my career, I found an effective way to encourage this fluency in myself by creating a study group of advisers who met every month for ten years. The aim wasn't networking or marketing; honing our skills with actual case studies provided the impetus to meet.

Gaining respect for others in different fields means cultivating a practical knowledge of those fields. Right now, too many people are good in their own discipline but lack collaborative potential when clubbed together with professionals of a different ilk. Better interdisciplinary fluency will lead to greater results for family businesses. We all need to work together, and the respect required to do so is only possible through education and hard work.



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