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Connecting and Separating Family and Business: A Relational Approach to Consultation

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A number of theoretical orientations to family business consultation have been proposed and developed. This article acknowledges these contributions but sets out to take a fresh look at the process, using the interconnected notions of relationship and context to organize the discussion. Case examples are provided as illustration.

When members of a family business experience difficulties, they may hire a consultant to make recommendations for change. The consultant's suggestions will, of course, reflect the assumptions he or she makes about the sorts of unique challenges and conundrums faced by the clients and the way in which such difficulties can be most effectively addressed. A variety of theoretical overlays have been proposed for making sense of the rich complexities faced by members in family businesses and for how to solve the problems that can arise.¹ Each orientation focuses the consultant's attention in a particular direction, drawing distinctions that bring into existence particular abstractions—such as *role sets* or *triangulation*—and render invisible (out of mind) that for which there is no name. What can be seen in and understood about a situation determines the scope and the nature of the consultant's suggestions.

This article proposes some conceptual tools for helping consultants orient to family business situations and the process of consultation. The tools will be developed from an exploration of the interconnected ideas of *relationship* and *context*. This is not to say that extant models do not address similar issues; however, it may be useful to draw some different distinctions and see if new possibilities for consultation can be generated as a result. The discussion will begin with an examination of the nature of relationship and

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then proceed to unpack the concept of context; the developed notions will be applied at each step to the world of family business.

Relationship

A family business can be viewed as a kind of contextual hybrid, a unique combination of two sets of rules and expectations. A theorist could highlight the *duality* of the combination, focusing on the inherent differences between family and business relationships; however, it is also possible to underscore the *unity* of the combination, to view a family business as a complete entity with an integrated structure and organization (Kanter, 1989; Kepner, 1983; Hollander and Elman, 1988; Whiteside and Brown, 1991). The choice between viewing a family business dualistically (that is, as a “discrete-family-system-interfacing-with-a-discrete-business-system”) and holistically (that is, as a “familybusiness”) depends on the way the relationship between family and business is understood. This may be more clearly seen if we represent the relationship in terms of the distinction “family/business.” It is then possible to recognize that the choice of orientation turns on the way the boundary (that is, the slash of the distinction) between family and business is handled. To better grasp this point, it may be helpful for us to move, for a moment, to a more general discussion about what relationships such as distinctions do. Once this is done, we can return to the issue of how theorist and consultant alike can play with the “family-and-business” and “familybusiness” relationships of family businesses.

A conceptual boundary—such as the slash between family and business in the distinction family/business—creates a relationship that simultaneously accomplishes two complementary functions. It distinguishes between “this” and “that” (for example, “family” and “business”) and in so doing separates one “something” from another “something.” For instance, “foreground/background” isolates foreground from background, “good/bad” severs good and bad, and “complex/simple” differentiates complex and simple. But in the marking of the boundary, each of the terms is defined in relation to the other: they are not isolated entities; the boundary defines them as *relata*. That is, the boundary serves not only as a *separation* between two “somethings,” it also, through the juxtaposition of the two sides, establishes a *connection* between them (Flemons, 1991). The slash in the distinction family/business is a conceptual boundary that establishes the distinctiveness of family and business and links them irrevocably.

This dual aspect of boundaries is not abstract philosophy—it is an essential part of our everyday lives. Distinctions constitute the relational “stuff” of thought; they form the basis of our conceptual ability to experience the world (Bateson, 1972; Flemons, 1991; Zerubavel, 1991). For example, people simultaneously define their uniqueness (separation) in relation (connection) to others and their bond (connection) in terms of their

differences (separation). The distinction self/other is experienced in relational terms such as the following: “I am more outgoing than he”; “I am a better manager than she”; “I organize more effectively than he”; “I understand less than she”; and so on. People *are* relationships.

Such an understanding can help us appreciate, for instance, how impossible it is for people in significant relationships to ever fully separate from each other, particularly through such practices as divorce. The very attempts to make an important relationship not matter will often have the effect of highlighting it, of making it matter more. It is paradoxically the case that the effort to separate from someone serves to forge a connection (Flemons, 1991): the more a son, for instance, strives to escape from his upbringing, not to repeat his father’s mistakes, the more his actions are defined in relation to what his father did or did not do and the more he fails to escape.

The implication of such an understanding for both theorist and consultant bears most directly on the adoption of an orientation to family businesses: should one assume a dualistic or holistic perspective? The idea of relationship developed above suggests that neither orientation is more or less correct, more or less ontologically true. There is no objective border dividing family and business in two, no real outline encircling them as one. Each orientation will be limited to the extent that it forgets to acknowledge that it is highlighting only one of the functions of the distinction family/business. The boundary is conceptual; it creates a distinction that simultaneously separates and connects the *relata* on each side of the slash. Thus, instead of inquiring as to which perspective is correct, theorists and consultants can ask the following sorts of questions: “If I conceive of the family and business as two distinct contexts, what will this allow me to see and understand about the relationship between them that otherwise would not be possible?” And likewise, “If I take the two to be one, to be an organized whole, what will this allow me to create and invent?” And finally, “What can I discover if I look at family businesses stereoscopically—that is, if I bring together both the ‘family and business’ and the ‘familybusiness’ templates?” Thus, the emphasis is placed entirely on what a particular handling of the family/business (or any other) distinction affords in possibilities.

Consider the case of a brother and sister who grew up in a family where there was an expectation that siblings help each other if and when they can. When the brother turned sixteen and asked his older sister for a loan to buy a motorbike, he could be relatively certain that he would procure the necessary funds; and later, when the sister was going through a painful divorce, she could count on her brother to help her move and to lend her the money for the security deposit on her new apartment.

However, if these siblings were then to start a business together, and if there was a business rule that partners do not financially oblige each other, then there would be much potential difficulty if the brother needed help on the down payment for a house. The rules of the family and their history of

helping each other would almost demand that his sister give him a loan; however, the rules of the business would preclude it.

The simultaneous overlay of two such divergent contexts would make either course of action wrong. The sister/partner must both help and not help, and can neither help nor not help. In such a situation, both family and work relationships could well suffer. Trust, which is really just a name for the certainty of one's expectations in important relationships, can easily be violated amidst such contextual complexity.

A standard response of a consultant in such a situation would be to encourage the brother and sister to keep family and business clear and distinct. However, as explained above, it is impossible to draw boundaries that only differentiate; attempts to separate the two contexts can have the effect of connecting them ever more intimately. Sister and brother, diligently trying to keep family and work from seeping into each other, might well be frustrated and disappointed when their conversations on the weekend become stilted and halting (as they strive not to mention business issues), and their conferences at work become either so sterile that their synergy is lost, or even more familiarly tinged than before (with each ultra-aware of the presence of a "too big-sisterly" tone of voice or a "too little-brotherly" entreaty), despite—in fact, because of—their best efforts.

It would thus become important for a consultant to utilize the inherent connectedness of separated relationships in creative ways. Several ideas emerge. The siblings/partners could agree to money lending as siblings and lending refusal as partners, or they could negotiate new rules of money lending as a brother and sister who work together. Sister/partner could, for instance, loan money from the business to brother/partner but charge interest, something never practiced in their family relationship. Whatever rules evolve, these siblings can find ways of recombining elements in either or both of their family and business contexts to evolve new sets of rules and expectations.

With these ideas in place, we can now proceed to examine the notion of context from a relational perspective.

Context

Context has most commonly been conceived of as a kind of container—or as Bateson (1972) and Goffman (1974) would say, a *frame*—that in some sense determines the meaning of communicated messages within it. The frame itself can be communicated paralinguistically and/or nonverbally (for example, through tone of voice, facial expression, body posture, and so on) as a *metamessage*, a message that classifies messages. For example, the statement "You're fired" takes on a very different significance for an employee depending on whether his boss utters it after having been insulted in front of important clients or after having been beaten in a friendly game of

squash. The phrase ("You're fired") simply does not make sense outside of the frame within which it is uttered. It will either be classified by a metamessage that says, in effect, "Take the seriousness of this message about the difference in our hierarchical positions seriously" (that is, you really are fired for having humiliated me), or (in the case of the friendly competition of the squash game) "Take the seriousness of this message about the difference in our hierarchical positions jokingly." Without context there is no meaning (Bateson, 1979).

Even with the semantic fluidity engendered by the contextual determination of meaning, communication would be a decidedly simple affair if the relationship between message and context were as simple as that between a picture and its frame. If a particular message could always be "correctly" framed within its "proper" context, its meaning could always be appropriately specified and understood. This, of course, is not possible—for a number of reasons. First, different participants in an exchange may contextualize a message differently. The boss who teases her employee when he beats her at squash may in fact scare him into believing that he actually has been fired; a message is only teasing when it is framed as such by the recipient.

Second, contexts are often impossible to clearly define; indeed, teasing is itself such an instance. Much of the double-edged delight in teasing resides in contextual ambiguity: the recipient is often left in limbo as to whether the other person's deadpan is to be interpreted as a serious or humorous offering.

Such ambiguity can arise as a function of the fact that contexts themselves are embedded within contexts. Another way of stating this third point about the complexity of the relationship between message and context would be to note that just as messages are classified by metamessages, so too metamessages can be classified by meta-metamessages, and so on. Ambiguity, confusion, and paradox can arise any time a message at one level (that is, a message, metamessage, meta-metamessage, and so forth) is contradicted or undermined by a context that embeds it. Thus, the boss's metamessage that her employee should take seriously her seriousness about firing him may be thrown into question (for the employee) if the exchange happens on April Fools' Day and if the boss had previously arranged with him to make a scene so she could play a practical joke on their clients.

The fourth, and most important, reason that the specification of context is not a simple affair has to do with the reflexive relationship between context and messages. Unfortunately, Bateson's frame metaphor obscures the fact that context is not transcendentally separate from that which it contextualizes. A context of "insult" or of "teasing" or of anything else does not exist independently of the messages to which it is "meta"; it does not float above them; rather, it resides in the relation between the exchange of messages, it is *immanent*. Contexts, like melodies, are woven of the parts they compose. The "meaning" of each individual note in a melody is a function of how it fits within the shape of the whole. The melody (context) gives it meaning.

However, the melody is nothing but the combination of such notes; thus, each note partly shapes the melody that in turn shapes it. The same is true of each exchange in an unfolding conversation: every statement in a dialogue contributes to the forming of a context that reflexively determines how the statement itself is to be understood. More generally, a relationship between two or more people can be viewed as an ongoing, interactive process of constructing, deconstructing, and reconstructing contexts and contexts of contexts. Each act of the participants (including attempts at nonparticipation) becomes woven into the multilayered interplay of communicated meaning that continually defines, questions, and redefines the limits of what is possible or acceptable between them.

Connecting and Separating Contexts

Such contextual notions can provide a port of entry into the unique complexities of family businesses. It should be clear at this juncture that there are no simple, objective containers (contexts) called *family* and *business* within which people behave and make meaning. To reiterate the points made above, contexts (1) are critical in the creation and determination of meaning; (2) are constructed relationally and interpreted individually; (3) often cannot be “pinned down” unambiguously; (4) are themselves contextualized (thus making paradox possible); and (5) are consistencies or stabilities in a world of flux, a kind of relational “constant” woven of ephemeral strands (and thus are themselves subject to alteration when the changing of one or more of the strands changes).

With such ideas in hand, consultation can be approached as a process of playing with the relationships within and between family and business, of separating and connecting, of creating and altering contexts.

Separating Family and Business. In a sense, the members of a family business have the same issues with which to contend as consultants—that is, what to make of the boundary demarcating and joining the different domains of their family and business. Many, if not most, of the challenges faced by people working and “familying” in these enterprises may be experienced in terms of difficulties in the ways the business and family are or are not divided in two or joined as one.

If the dividing properties of the boundary are obscured, family expectations, obligations, habits, and so on may contextualize business interactions or vice versa. A father and son who are partners in a business venture may find it problematic when discussions at work are organized familiarly (with the son, perhaps, deferring to his father when he could or should be challenging him), or when activities of the family take on the feel of management meetings (with filial respect, say during Sunday dinner, giving way to partnerlike challenges). In such instances, it may be helpful for the family business members to find more effective ways of demarcating one context from the other.

It is important to remember that contexts are socially, not physically, constructed—they are created and maintained in relationship. Neither dining room nor boardroom is thus itself a context; however, each could become what Bateson (1972) would term a *context marker*, a signifier about a context, a part of an interactively composed meaning system that classifies those very interactions, that indicates what sorts of messages can and should be exchanged and how they are to be interpreted. In the example offered above, the physical locations of the father and son’s conversations were seemingly not serving as context markers for either family or business, since relationship patterns appropriate to one context were appearing in the other.

Context markers are types of metamessages—they are necessary signs or signals that contribute to the categorizing of contexts, that help differentiate this context from that:

In human life . . . there occur signals whose major function is to *classify* contexts. . . . And note immediately that . . . there are also “markers of contexts of contexts.” For example: an audience is watching *Hamlet* on the stage, and hears the hero discuss suicide in the context of his relationship with his dead father, Ophelia, and the rest. The audience members do not immediately telephone for the police because they have received information about the context of Hamlet’s context. They know that it is a “play” and have received this information from many “markers of context of context”—the playbills, the seating arrangements, the curtain, etc., etc. [Bateson, 1972, pp. 289–290].

Context markers work in a synecdochal way: a part of a context—such as, in the case of a play, the greeting by the usher, the spatial relationship between stage and audience, the changes in lighting, the hush that pervades as the curtain rises, and so on—metacommunicatively invokes the whole of it. Although such messages are often communicated without conscious intent in the course of our daily interactions, they can also be used purposefully. A hypnotherapist may, for instance, signal the beginning of “trance” by modifying the tonality and tempo of his or her voice or by asking the client to sit in a different chair; the paralinguistic alterations and the change in seating serve as markers for the context of trance and can thus be helpful for generating hypnotic experiences.

Similarly, family business consultants can help clients find significant markers for differentiating family and business contexts.² One of the most common examples is the use of first names at work. As one father/boss put it: “While we are at the office or calling our customers, [my daughter] always addresses me as Roger; it is businesslike and provides her with equality. When we leave the business, I am once again ‘Daddy,’ and that appellation tends to submerge any tensions we may have experienced. It worked for me and my father, and it works for me and Jessica” (“My Daughter, the Successor,” 1990, p. 191).

The choosing of an appropriate marker is, of course, best left to the clients themselves. A man in his late forties complained of family tension in the real estate business he shared with his wife, also in her late forties, and their twenty-three-year-old daughter. The business was prospering, but the man was concerned about a lack of family harmony that had previously existed. Everyone got along well at work, but they had difficulty relaxing with each other once they got home.

When the question of separation between home and family was introduced, the husband replied that no such boundary existed. When asked, "What have you been thinking of to mark the difference, but have not yet tried?" the businessman brightened and spun out a simple, poignant idea. He would prefer coming home to a kitchen table uncluttered by company papers, because these reminders of unfinished work spoiled their evenings as a family. A clean kitchen table became a significant metaphor for separating day from evening, work from home, business from family.

Another couple agreed that their hour-long car rides to and from their jointly run office would be treated as a special transition time, where concerns and ideas about either or both business and family could be brought up and explored. With their car serving as a place where the mingling of family and business issues was actively encouraged, the patterns of relationship woven at home and workplace could be more distinct from one another. Once the connection between family and business is acknowledged and supported as legitimate and necessary (and time is set aside for its purposeful realization), the comfortable separation between them can more easily follow.

Connecting Family and Business. In family businesses where contextual separation is an important issue, family and business will always only be distinct in relation to each other. This means that a marker that invokes one of the contexts may, when missing, invoke the other by virtue of its absence. It also means that unrelenting efforts to separate the two contexts can have an effect opposite to that intended.

Consider a demonstrably confident and assertive woman executive struggling to have her father/boss treat her with the same respect she demands, and receives, from almost everyone else in the family's company. The father values her opinions and trusts her decisions, but every once in a while he "slips" and speaks to her in a way that leaves her feeling like an admonished daughter rather than a vice-president. Having tried various ingenious, but unsuccessful, ways to encourage her father to take her seriously—including having long talks with him, purchasing more conservative ("executive-type") clothing, and taking a course in assertiveness training—the daughter is seriously considering leaving the firm. If anything, the father has increased his paternal communications in response to her redoubled efforts to establish herself as "not-just-a-daughter." She feels frustrated and helpless.

Self-confidence is, in part, communicated by the ability to laugh at

oneself. Thus, perhaps the best way for the woman to change her interactions with her father would be to stop trying seriously to erase her "daughterhood," and instead highlight it in some playful way. What might happen if she took to showing up at meetings with her father with a teddy bear in hand, one that he had given her as a young child? By intentionally invoking the family bond between her and her father, the daughter could stop waiting anxiously for the next time he would embarrass her. The more proactive she becomes in marking their familial connection, the less opportunity or necessity he will find to do so. The successful separation of family and business happens within the context of their comfortable connection.

One of the benefits of thinking about a family business as a connection between two different contexts is that successes in one set of relationships can provide clues and ideas for how to address difficulties in the other. What works in family predicaments can be used as a resource for solving problems in the business, and vice versa.³ For example, a couple in their early forties who together ran a successful tree business were nevertheless fighting and struggling desperately at home over the ways they handled the wife's two boys from a previous marriage. Both of the children, in their early twenties, were heavily involved with drugs; one was on his way to prison and the other lived mostly on the streets. The husband advocated "tough love" and was critical and angry with his wife's inability to "turn off the faucet," to keep the boys from exploiting them. They had seen therapists for years but were always disappointed with the results.

The consultant explored how the couple dealt with their nine employees; although their management styles were drastically different (she was nurturing, he, distant), they had found that each way of relating complemented the other most effectively. Their ability to make their differences work in their business was pointed out, and it was suggested that they could find ways of applying this same expertise in their home situation. Subsequently, the couple were, for the first time, able to take a joint stand in relation to the sons, and they reported progress at home that they never thought possible.

Sometimes problems are not unique to either the family or the business but occur in both. The consultant can then look for commonalities in the contexts and help clients to, as it were, photograph two birds with one camera. The best scenario is to orient clients to a difficulty in a way that allows them to find their own solutions.

A husband and wife who ran a restaurant-supply business out of their home requested help with what had become an impossible situation. The man said that he was losing his temper many times a day—at his wife, at his suppliers, at his customers, at his son—and these "fits" (as he called them) were undermining both family and business relationships. He felt ashamed of his behavior and was chagrined by his helplessness to do anything about it. Again and again, he had resolved not to blow up, but he always failed. The

wife was seriously contemplating "going on strike," their fifteen-year-old son had recently left the home because he "couldn't take the fighting any more," and customers, tired of being verbally abused, were canceling orders.

The man was asked to attend carefully to the contextual circumstances of his temper outbursts. Did he "lose it" more with his wife around work issues or family issues? Was it easier or more difficult to begin yelling at a customer than at his son? Was he more likely to unleash his anger with a long-term customer, or with one that he did not know well? The issue of temper was thus used to organize questions around the connection and separation of family and business.

When the couple returned the following week, the husband was perplexed. He had not lost his temper once. He could not remember the last time he had gone a single day without a blowup, never mind an entire week. The consultant replied that he could not be helpful with the man losing his temper if he did not lose it, so he suggested that the husband purposefully have temper fits in both family and business contexts and come back and report on what events helped serve as triggers. The wife was asked to participate as well. Could she observe him with customers and with her, and notice differences in the timing and circumstances of the outbursts? And if she found him not losing his temper, could she help him in some way so that we could gather the necessary data?

During the following weeks, the man and his wife disagreed about many things and he continued to encounter significant frustrations with his business, but his temper outbursts ceased completely. He laughingly accused the consultant of using "reverse psychology" and said he did not trust that the change would last. But over the next months it did endure, and the couple were able to enjoy significant alterations in both their personal and professional relationships. His success with his customers gradually gave him confidence that he could be different with his family, and his success with his family allowed him to trust that he could more effectively deal with his customers and suppliers. The consultant encouraged the husband not to completely lose his ability to lose his temper, since there might be times in the future when it would come in handy.

The consultant's requests of the man and his wife served to connect both of them to his temper in a new way; rather than being ashamed of it, they were asked to be curious about it, to find out more about it. When the couple allowed the husband the possibility of blowing up (to find out more about it), he found he did not have to.

Although the differences between family and business situations were initially posed by the consultant as a way of organizing the inquiry into the contextual circumstances of the temper fits, they ended up not being pertinent to the change in the situation. A more satisfying boundary between family and business *did* occur as the couple was able to connect to the husband's temper and to each other, but the separation between contexts was not directly suggested by the consultant. However, the same logic of consultation that has been discussed throughout the article—playing with

the connection and separation between family and business—was applied to the relationship between the couple and the husband's anger.

Conclusion

The case examples presented throughout the article illustrate some of the ways consultants can use relational and contextual notions to shape their understanding of family businesses in general, and to organize a way of responding to a varied assortment of particular client concerns.

Such ideas can also be applied to the process of consultation itself; that is, they can allow consultants to reflect on (and perhaps alter) how they position themselves in relation to their clients, how they connect to and separate from the family businesses requesting their help. Consultants need not (and cannot) objectively assess a family business situation and give "good advice" from a removed (separate) posture. And neither can they join the family and encourage them from the inside, for then their perspective will not be different enough to be meaningful. The best suggestions offered will be those woven from strands provided by the clients; however, the choice of which particular strands to find and use and what to weave with them will reflect the consultants' imagination and approach. The specifics will necessarily be unique to each situation, but the ideas presented here may help orient consultants to the sorts of strands and the types of weavings that they and their clients can together discover and create.

Notes

1. Models for understanding family-owned businesses have been derived from mediation, sociology, organizational psychology, systems theory, and family therapy, incorporating and combining ideas and constructs such as roles (Gillis-Donovan and Moynihan-Bradt, 1990; Hollander and Bukowitz, 1990; Rosenblatt, de Mik, Anderson, and Johnson, 1985; Salganicoff, 1990), systems or institutional overlap (Lansberg, 1983; Rosenblatt, de Mik, Anderson, and Johnson, 1985), rules (Davis, 1983; Jaffee, 1990; Rosenblatt, de Mik, Anderson, and Johnson, 1985), subsystems (Beckhard and Dyer, 1983; Kepner, 1983), goals (Lansberg, 1983; Ward, 1987), gender (Dumas, 1989, 1990; Gillis-Donovan and Moynihan-Bradt, 1990; Hollander and Bukowitz, 1990; Salganicoff, 1990), generational issues (Bork, 1986; Friedman, 1991; Swogger, 1991), developmental stages (Gersick, Lansberg, and Davis, 1990; Kadis and McClendon, 1991; Ward, 1987), organizational dynamics (Lane, 1989), conflict resolution (Kaye, 1991; Prince, 1990), and so on.
2. O'Hanlon and Wilk (1987) conceive of psychotherapy as a process of "shifting contexts" and provide some excellent ideas for how context markers can be used to facilitate such shifts.
3. The "solution-focused" work of de Shazer (1985, 1988) and O'Hanlon and Weiner-Davis (1989) may prove interesting for readers who wish to further explore the idea of applying clients' solutions from other times and other contexts to areas that they are experiencing as troublesome.

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