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GETTING AHEAD

All Up In The Family Business: How to Work With Parents and Not Lose Your Mind

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Nicole Gorman had no intention of joining her folks' jewelry business. She spent eight years working as a teacher, but during one summer break, she found that maybe bling was in her blood after all.

"I worked at another jewelry store, and there was an instant click," recalls Gorman, 37, who can now be found behind the counter at downtown D.C.'s I. Gorman Jewelers (202-775-8544, Igorman.com) with her parents and brother.

For Gorman, joining the her clan's company proved an easy transition. But even when that's the case, it doesn't mean that it's all smooth sailing ahead. Family businesses can prove tricky, with just as many opportunities for conflict as for cheerful meetings in the back office. Taking steps to address potential problems, both before and after the next generation comes on board, helps make working together the fulfilling endeavor it should be.

Gorman's experience was perhaps a best-case scenario. That she came to the decision on her own, without any pressure from relatives, was a plus — as was the time she spent following her own career path.

"Some family businesses have a policy that kids coming into the business have to work outside of it for five years," says David Gage, co-founder of Arlington-based BMC Associates (703-465-1262, Bmcassociates.com), a business mediation and conflict resolution firm that helps solve intra-family corporate disputes. "That makes a lot of sense. Sometimes the kids may need to spend time doing other things, finding out who they are and working for other people."

"I encourage people to create their family constitution or family code of conduct," says Margaret Wilson, founder and principal of Tandem Partners (410-241-2369, Tandem-partners.com), an organizational consulting firm based in Baltimore County. "Talk about things like what it means to be someone working in our family business and your philosophy on compensation. Dealing with those things before people are actually ready to make a career decision can be helpful; it's much more difficult to have those kinds of conversations in a heated moment."

When disagreements do arise, don't bring your generational baggage into them or resort to acting like your 13-year-old self. "We always have respect for each

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other," Gorman says. "We know each other and know what buttons not to push. So, we just talk things through and respect what we each have to say."

Separating your business life from your personal life, as much as you can when you clock in alongside Mom or Dad, also helps. "My mom and sisters sometimes make a rule at the dinner table and say, 'No business talk,'" advises Jon Mervis, who works at Mervis Diamond Importers (800-437-5683, Mervisdiamond.com) with his father, uncle and cousin.

"It's about managing the boundaries and being clear what hat you're wearing at any given time," Wilson says. "I encourage parents and children in a family business to call each other by their first names at work and for people to drive to the office in separate vehicles. That way, you have some buffer space when you leave the office and can be with your own thoughts."

Of course, mixing business with bloodlines doesn't lead only to conflict and strife. There are plenty of positives about sharing an office with people who already have a pretty good idea of your abilities.

"You can do more in a family business because there is such a level of trust," says Mervis, 27. "If I have an idea and I take it to my father, he usually says, 'Yes, do it.' He knows that I have the company's interests in mind and trusts that I'm intelligent and competent enough to execute the plan."

"Kids in a family business can go up the ladder sometimes quite a bit faster than if they worked in another corporation," Gage says. "There is an advantage to really knowing one another and having intimate knowledge of the other people in control of the business."

The younger generation often finds itself bringing its predecessors up to speed on Facebook, Twitter and other 21st-century tech tools. In turn, the parents and grandparents offer hard-won wisdom.

"I learned more about life in general from watching my mother-in-law operate a business than almost any other experience," says Ben Ryder Howe, 39, who chronicles the two years he spent working with his wife and her relatives in the upcoming book *"My Korean Deli: Risking It All for a Convenience Store"* (\$24, Henry Holt and Company, on sale March 1). "How to treat people, how to handle pressure and conflict, what it means to follow a routine and be consistent."

What the business' youngest members learn can help them deal with the pressure of eventually taking the reins of the operation. "I wouldn't want to take the business over and have something happen to it," says 28-year-old Ryan Ridgely Grant, who works at Rockville-based Charles R. Grant Insurance Agency (301-279-7100, Grantinsuranceagency.com) with his parents, uncle and older sister, Ashley N. Grant. "But I think that makes me want to do everything in my power to make it the best it can be. I do feel pressure, but it's also exciting."

That sense of opportunity is why so many people opt to join the family company. "You have to go into it with an open mind," says Ashley N. Grant, 32. "But from my experience, the positives greatly outweigh the negatives. My recommendation would be to just go for it and see what happens."

*Written by Express contributor Beth Luberecki
Photo by Kevin Dietsch*

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