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Game-Changing CHOICES

harder, yet potentially more fulfilling, option. Lewis Smedes, a theologian who has written extensively on forgiveness, says that when you forgive someone, “you perform spiritual surgery inside your soul.” Forgiveness, he suggests, is as much about the person who was wronged, and the choice to forgive offers a new lens through which to view the relationship, which, in turn, allows for healing.

CHOOSING TO ACCEPT. Though I’m sure there are things you appreciate about those with whom you work, I’m just as certain there are aspects of your family coworkers you find irritating. Over long periods of time in the family business, it can feel like

Positive outcomes are possible through forgiveness, acceptance and admitting fault.

the frustrating tendencies of your business partner become more pronounced. To make matters worse, the only person who can change the irritating behavior is that person. You have no control.



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In almost every family business I know, there have been cycles of negativity, conflict or mistrust among family members. I have also been privileged to witness several instances in which this cycle of conflict or pain has been changed through specific, albeit difficult, choices by the family members.

Last month, I pointed out that John Steinbeck’s classic book “East of Eden”

also explores the dynamics of family conflict, change and individual choice. Using the Hebrew word *timshel* (thou mayest), derived from the Biblical story of Cain and Abel, along with two families’ experiences over generations, Steinbeck shows that the ability to change the dynamics and trajectory of the family is in our power—we “may” choose to do so.

Here are three choices to implement positive change in the family business.

CHOOSING TO FORGIVE. In a family, and especially in a family business, where relatives constantly interact with one another, someone will cause you pain. They may ignore you, question your integrity, disregard your judgment or undercut your authority. At some point, someone will do something to you that burns you up.

When that happens, you have several choices. You can seek revenge. You can quit. You can cut them off from your life. But, you can also choose to forgive, which seems like a

Your choice, beyond providing feedback so they are aware of their impact, is whether to accept them, warts and all. Smedes says, “we accept them because of what they are, or can be, to us—in spite of what we have to get through to find them.” The question, then, is whether you are willing to continue to accept some of the things you dislike in order to experience the many good qualities of your family members.

CHOOSING TO ADMIT FAULT. Just as your business partners will at times cause you painful moments, you also will create pain for someone else. Admitting you are wrong, that you hurt someone, is never easy. It is much easier to justify, excuse, blame or never acknowledge your contribution to a problem or misunderstanding. Most often, families sweep the issue under the rug, hoping time will resolve the conflict, only to find it blows up later.

Perhaps the most significant choice you can make in a family business relationship is to admit your own fault. It’s a powerful move because it demonstrates your vulnerability, and being vulnerable is a key step in building and rebuilding trust with another person. Owning your contribution to the problem sends a signal that you want to be part of a common solution.

Family businesses offer wonderful rewards, but to achieve the benefits, you have to navigate the pain that comes with family members as business partners. Your choices about how to deal with disappointment, frustration and anguish will directly contribute to your long-term sense of progress as a family and business. ●

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