

TRANSFORMING FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

HOW TO BURY THE WEAPONS AND SHOW APPRECIATION



Maintaining good relationships between family members is no easy task and yet it is one of the most important ingredients to the success of a family firm. Family members who are in business together have to assume multiple roles (family, ownership, and management), and therefore must pay close attention to the quality of their relationships. People usually take family loyalty for granted, but sharing the same name does not guarantee a natural bond that will withstand conflict. Chérine Debbas Moukaddem, Board member of a 100-year-old family business and Leadership coach explains three simple tools to improve family relationships.

Building family relationships might require **a lot of discipline** but it is definitely **worth the effort** in order to strengthen the family business **chances** of survival in the face of **adverse circumstances**.



Family loyalty and support are usually put to the test when the stakes are high or when things start to go wrong. Typical triggers are financial problems (e.g. the business did not perform as well as expected, so the family needs to make tough decisions) or when the family name is in jeopardy (e.g. the business has to be restructured and people must be let go; how will this affect the family's reputation and image?). At other times, conflicts can be driven by the individual's motives, such as the position of a family member (e.g. the first-born son feels it is his birth right to be at the head of the business). Spending time and energy on building family relationships might require a lot of discipline but it is definitely worth the effort in order to strengthen the family businesses chances of survival in the face of adverse circumstances.

Let's approach family relationships rationally and look at them as if they were a project to manage where success is measured by the strength and quality of the relationships. What would you do differently in your family? Shifting the focus to investing in family relationships is the first important step in the long and complex journey to building strong family bonds. The following three simple tools can be a beginning:

1. Bury your weapons

I once read a passage by William Ury (author of "Getting to Yes") who lived with a tribe in Africa known for the poisonous arrows they use when hunting. According to Ury, when tribe members would feel tension rising between them and internal conflict was about to break out, they would go and bury their deadly weapons in the forest, then get together to talk until they would find a solution and resolve their differences.

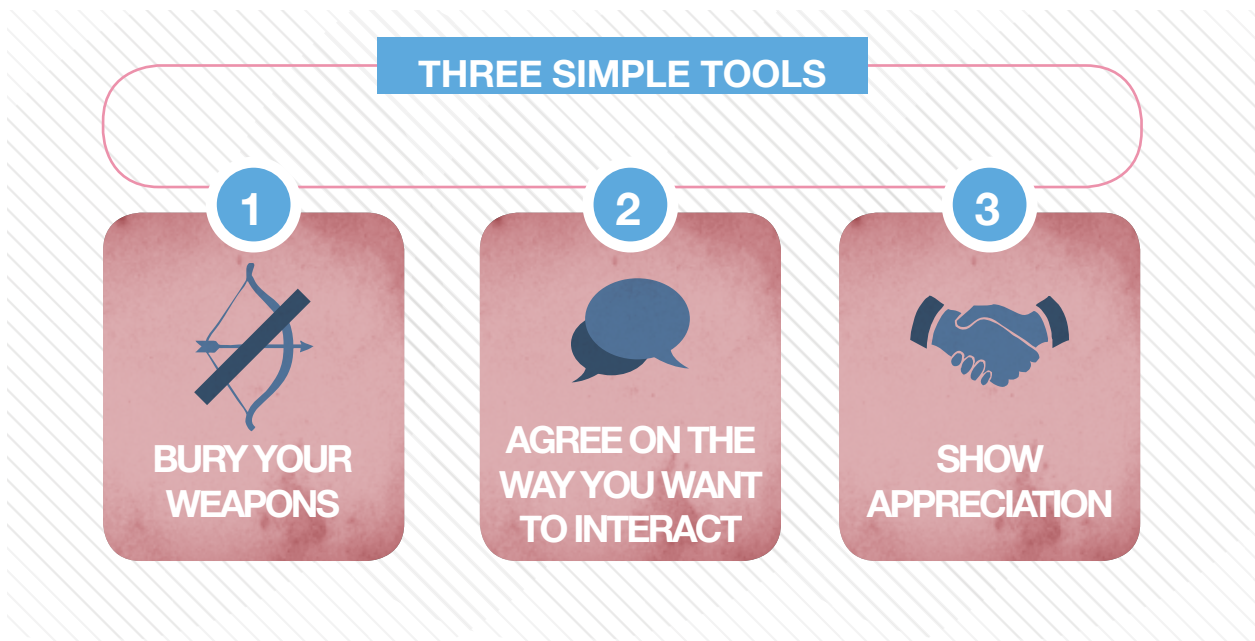
Family businesses might not own poisonous arrows, but they can "bury the weapons" by being aware of the impact of their words and behaviours on other family members. This means making a conscious choice to keep anything that could be detrimental to the relationship, such as anger, resentment, and jealousy, away from family interactions. It does not mean that fundamental issues should be ignored; on the contrary, the aim is to address concerns without harming anyone while protecting and valuing the family bonds.

For families that want to begin by defining what is detrimental to their relationships, a good guide can be found in Dr. John Gottman's four toxic behaviours:

- **Blame or criticism**, which consists of attacking your partner by sending negative words targeting someone else's character.
- **Defensiveness** that usually escalates the conflict (the defensive person will use phrases such as "It's not me, it's you").
- **Contempt** that includes sarcasm, belittling, cynicism, hostile-humour, and so forth.
- **Stonewalling**, where a person cuts off communication and refuses to engage, leading to more contempt from the other party.



FIG 1: Three simple tools to transform family relationships



Dr. Gottam states that every person concerned in a relationship is responsible for avoiding toxic behaviour in conflicts as they feed of one another. One should be aware of their presence and look for the underlying causes that triggered them.

Whether times are stressful or not, burying the weapons symbolises leaving anything that would distract you from the topic at hand, such as personal or unrelated concerns and worries, outside the family meeting room. This will allow family members to be fully engaged with each other, and to show respect to the relationships at hand.

2. Agree on the way you want to interact with each other

As a family it is important to define the type of “feel” you want your interactions to have. Imagine two different cars, an old Volkswagen Beetle from the 60’s and a brand new red Ferrari: The “feel” of driving each of these cars is extremely different! It is the same for families; they each have their very own and unique “feel”. Some families are well known for their hospitality and generosity, others for their cut-throat competitiveness, and again others for their attachment to history and roots.

The focus should therefore be on a conscious group exercise that creates the kind of environment that will build trust among family members. Some concrete examples are the permission to say whatever is in the back of each person's mind, or the power to say "No" when needed and the safety of not being judged for one's opinions. As an outcome, the interactions and relationships become filled with trust and safety, allowing each person to be engaged and to speak up.

3. Show appreciation

Whenever it feels right and genuine, showing appreciation is one of the most powerful ways of strengthening relationships. We have a tendency to see what is wrong and what needs to be changed, and we often forget to build on what is positive. Showing appreciation empowers people and creates a positive and engaging environment. Acknowledging people's work and achievements can be very simple and done on a daily basis. It shows the other person what we value in them. We can start by simply saying, "You are..." and add one word; for example "You are courageous!" I remember a woman, the CEO of a company, who heard her brother, the Chairman, acknowledging that thanks to her stubbornness and hard work, they had all learned to work together and to be stronger as a team. She had tears in her eyes as she was used to being criticised all the time and never being taken seriously by him. Telling other family members what you value in them provides positive energy and fuels the family engine!

Using these simple tools to create a trustworthy and safe environment for relationships to flourish has many benefits. The most obvious one is the strengthening of family bonds and

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family values. It also engages and empowers every family member to fulfill his or her role in the business. It allows for issues and concerns to be addressed in a more efficient way. Furthermore, a family that consistently works on its internal relationships will be stronger in times of challenges and will be prepared to face tough decisions.

My father once said to me: "In life, one builds." Anyone in the family can start the process of strengthening family relationships by being aware of the impact of simple, often subtle interactions among family members. Anyone that is motivated to work on these interactions, for the greater good of the family and of the business can become a "builder" of family relationships. ◆

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