

ADHD Hidden Treasures in the Family Business

By Louise Levin

Family businesses account for 85% of businesses owned and operated within the United States. Though no study has been conducted to determine the percentage of individuals within family businesses diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), one can infer from general population statistics and the hereditary nature of the disorder, that the family business structure is significantly affected. ADHD is a neurobiological disorder that compromises attention, impulse and executive function. It is estimated that over 18 million adults and children in the United States are diagnosed with ADHD. Because it is primarily passed from parent to offspring, its prevalence within the family business is perhaps more visible than in more diverse corporations as the management structure will, more often than not, include more than one affected individual.

On a very basic level a family can be defined as a system comprised of distinct individuals. Distinctions, or roles within the family system, are established as members begin to assert their individuality in response to one another. On a professional level, the ADHD family member can most commonly be defined as “the visionary;” he or she is the one able to both see and think “outside of the box.” ADHD individuals are often endowed with exceptional intellect, are able to visualize the “big picture,” and have an invaluable capacity to hyper-focus, especially in moments of creative stimulation. These positive attributes stem from efficient management of the challenges associated ADHD. In order for the family business members to effectively utilize the invaluable talents inherent to their ADHD member/s, each must first acknowledge the challenges associated with the disorder, and their potential to contribute to or detract from the optimal functioning of the business of the family and the family business. The following behaviors are most likely to be compromised by ADHD:

- Though ADHD individuals are able to envision all aspects of the “big picture,” and to motivate others to their cause, they often abandon a project after its initial stages due to diminished interest and/or stimulation over the long-term
- Impulse control: an individual may blurt out inappropriate comments or divulge sensitive information/secrets. Lack of impulse control can also lead to other inappropriate behaviors, including inter-office relationships, untoward remarks and, potentially, substance abuse issues
- Compromised Executive Function: ADHD individuals find it difficult to effectively prioritize and execute basic tasks, often leaving the “to do list” unfinished
- Generalization: the ability to translate the cause and effect relationship from one situation to another, similar situation. Chastising an ADHD colleague for unprofessional behavior does not necessarily lead to immediate change. Unless trained to manage and mitigate this unique challenge, the ADHD individual will continue to be the “repeat offender;” chronically late to meetings, disorganized, rude and/or unreliable

- Time Management: an ADHD individual may consistently arrive to meetings late, or not at all, potentially damaging the reputation of the business and belief in its professional integrity
- Inconsistent performance/attention may compromise an ADHD individual's work output and not necessarily reflect their actual potential

Each family member responds in his or her own particular way to the ADHD individual; each has become comfortable in an uncomfortable role. One of the most important factors inherent to ADHD management is the need for each family member to shift, or to completely change, his or her role in relation to the affected member and, consequently, to the others. They will be asked to take part in a radical alteration of the family business dynamic. Instead of expending energies to organize around the negative aspects of ADHD, it is much more efficient for both the family and the ADHD individual to focus on cultivating the positive aspects of the disorder. Below is a case study highlighting the consequences of a family's failure to effectively accommodate an ADHD member in the family system.

CASE STUDY: A series of sessions with a US-based family business in early 2000.

High end apparel company; management structure comprised of four principle individuals: the father and mother, in their mid 70's and two sons, both in their 50's. I later diagnosed the eldest with ADHD, after a series of intensive therapeutic sessions.

Corporate dynamic: The father and the younger son were the two principle decision makers within the business, establishing a firm personal and professional relationship that often isolated the eldest son from productive involvement. The mother had no official title, though she had strong influence in business concerns. The company had not made any significant changes to corporate structure since its founding; rapid growth of emerging markets placed increased pressure on the corporation to update current strategies and directives. The eldest son had always been considered a "visionary," a brilliant mind that could effect this necessary change. Though the family recognized their need for the eldest son's involvement, his aberrant behaviors and habits had to first be addressed.

Negative manifestations of ADHD in the eldest son: Heavy cocaine usage, inter-office affairs. Rehabilitation to address drug use one year prior to my involvement with the family proved successful.

Corporate Dynamic post-rehabilitation: The eldest son was given the role of global strategist, in the hopes that his ideas could be implemented to save the foundering family business. Though he was provided with a title, he lacked necessary support from the family to effect real change. He was not provided with a secretary, executive assistant or professional team; instead, he was expected to "prove" himself before tangible support systems would be provided. Though the son was asked to radically change the business, both the father and younger son proved incorrigibly resistant. They were unwilling to

listen to the eldest son's recommendations, often turning professional disagreements into personal attacks on past behaviors and indiscretions. This reluctance to change, to move forward was manifested in the family's abusive relationship with the ADHD member. My professional help was sought only after tensions in the office reached a critical level, and the business began to fail.

After I diagnosed the eldest son with ADHD, I worked with the family, individually as well as collectively, to understand and to accept ADHD as a real disorder. The eldest son began to take ownership of his ADHD, and he was very open to changing his behavioral patterns by practicing recommended techniques and tools. The family, however, remained obstinate, refusing to work with their son to radically alter the negative family dynamic that had become the "status quo." After a year of working with me, the eldest son was able to realize his unique talents. He left the family business, which had become a hopeless situation, to pursue his talents as a partner at an international consulting firm within his industry. He remains a successful, driven and highly productive member as a corporate executive.

The value of an ADHD individual to the family business structure exceeds any minor concessions necessary to facilitate their productivity. From employee to CEO, these individuals have the tools to become effective team leaders. Conception of innovative business practices and anticipation of emerging markets and trends are two major benefits to the ADHD thought processes. An ADHD individual can easily grasp "what needs to be done," and their high levels of energy are often effective in motivating others to work towards, and to believe in, the final objective, or end result. A family business in which one or more members are diagnosed with ADHD can excel, as long as the appropriate actions are taken to ensure cohesion of the family business unit.

Due to attention deficiencies, many ADHD employees may require highly trained, executive-level secretaries to assist in the scheduling of appointments, and in ensuring that he or she is continually kept "on task." Fixed-term assignments, consisting of flexible hours, are ideal for the ADHD employee. Levels of productivity are relatively unorthodox and will not necessarily synergize with the standard "nine to five" method. The family business is better equipped than most to acquiesce to these demands, as the family generally comprises the overall management structure. This does not, however, mean that an ADHD employee should be permitted to work lesser hours than their colleagues; instead, they should be responsible for understanding their own daily biorhythms and request permission to work within their greatest hours of productivity.

In any successful business, non-negotiable rules and regulations regarding compensation, promotion, demotion and termination must be in place to ensure uniform levels of commitment and culpability among company executives. The failure to establish criterion for determining roles of immediate family members and non-family executives within the business may lead to a lack of appropriate understanding of roles within the corporate structure. Taken on a case-by-case basis, different standards, agreed upon by executive consensus, may be employed to "deal" with the ADHD member, in contrast to those unaffected.

Currently, the designated courses of treatment may include a combination of talk therapy with a licensed family therapist, allopathic or alternative medications and/or an ADHD coach. All are affected by ADHD, and a systemically trained life coach is integral to achieving a family's collective understanding, and forgiveness, of the disorder. As efforts to mitigate and manage the disorder continue ADHD family members, with the support of the family system, will increase professional efficiency within the family business. They will also be able to optimize their positive roles in both the business of the family and the family business. Our future leaders will undoubtedly be sourced from all walks of life, constitution and temperament; there is no doubt that, among these exceptional individuals, a large contingent of ADHD professionals will establish themselves, and their families, among the great business leaders of the 21st century.