

WORK IT RIGHT! - #9
Improving Relationships On and Off the Job

by Gini Graham Scott

WHEN YOU'RE NOT IN THE FAMILY

When you're not part of a family in a family-run business, that can make it more difficult for you -- especially in smaller companies with several family members. In bigger companies, the influence of family members will generally be much diluted by the larger workforce, management team, and responsibility to shareholders. But what should you do in a smaller company, apart from leaving to find another job? That's what Paul wanted to know, after working for about a year as a collection agent in a small collection agency, where his immediate supervisor, David, and the head of operations, John, were brothers, and their father owned the company.

David stepped into his job after graduating from college with an M.B.A. However, while Paul felt David did a good job and was well qualified, he felt John was not. Though John was supposed to handle the payroll and administrative procedures, screw-ups were frequent. But when they happened, David came to John's defense, after which John worked on fixing the problem.

Besides Paul, many other agents complained about John's work to each other, but feared telling David, because of his family ties. They feared David might even fire them or reduce their commission earnings by giving them harder leads for collection cases. Paul thought the system unfair and wondered what to do.

So what should he do? Unfortunately, the system may be unfair, if you work in a small private company. And you may not be able to do much to make the overall system more just, unless the unqualified family-member messes up so badly to become a clear liability to the company. Then, the family members are likely to move that person to a less vital position or even out of the company. But barring a clear disaster, the unqualified family member will often continue to bumble along, protected by other family members who cover up for him, help him do the job, and clean up occasional mistakes. So if you are not in the family, adjusting to such a situation may come with the job.

One approach that might help you feel better about the situation is to understand the reasons other family members are being protective and learn to better accept this.

Alternatively, if this unqualified person is seriously hampering operations, find a strategic way to press for change, such as by documenting the problem or finding a way to change operations to compensate for the person's poor performance.

For example, in Paul's case, he might make David more aware of the extent of the problem and the high level of dissatisfaction among other employees. Then, once David recognizes the seriousness of the problem, he might make effective changes. Thus, to promote awareness, Paul might keep a chronology of when John does something wrong resulting in inefficiencies or company losses. Also, since there is strength and safety in numbers, Paul might get others to keep track, too.

Then, with the problem documented, Paul can better to discuss the problem with David, and once David realizes the widespread feelings against John, his commitment to the company may well out-trump his commitment to protect Paul.

Still another possibility is to go as a group with documentation to the head of the company, if he might be more understanding, to show how John's actions have been undermining company's operations and employee morale.

Finally, another approach is to consider why John is acting incompetently and how you and others can improve his performance. For example, Paul might give John guidance on how to do a better job. In turn, providing this assistance might help ingratiate Paul not only with John but with others in the family, thereby improving his ability to move ahead, despite working in a family-run firm.

In short, if you are faced with an unqualified and protected family member in a family-run workplace and want to stay, think of ways to help and join them. This way, you may come to be like one of the family and get ahead, despite the bias towards hiring and promoting family members.

Today's Take-Aways:

- Even if life and work are unfair, think how to best play the hand you've got.
- Since there's strength in numbers, maybe you can solve the problem with a group.
- Helping a family member with problems may be the solution to your own.

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