

Hiring Non-Family Members: Keys to Success

By Davon Cook

Family business research and best practice emphasize the value of hiring the right person for the job—family or non-family. We have helped clients through the hiring and management of the first leaders that are not an owner or trusted family member--and it can be tricky. These individuals are catalysts for evolution of the business, but we see the struggle to integrate those new ideas and new energy. Consider these keys to success:

Make sure your culture supports it. When you decide to hire strategic employees that will have significant influence, it implies the organization has, or is transitioning to, a culture that includes more team decision-making, well-defined processes, proactive communication, and unbiased human resource management. Make sure everyone is on board with those implicit expectations. It will be disappointing to the new hire if that's not the case.

Respect the tightrope they walk. We often see non-family employees playing an internal facilitator role in family dynamics. Some are very good at it. If that's your situation, value that skill but respect its limits. Be sensitive to putting them in position of conflict of interest or in middle of family spats. Have a frank conversation about their comfort level with their informal position. Don't let that pressure become a roadblock.

Remember also that they may not speak the 'family language' comfortably. For example, some family coworkers are used to angry outbursts that quickly blow over. Realize your team members may not be comfortable with that norm or with your other forms of communication shorthand.

Value their investment in you. You don't have a monopoly on caring about the company and its people. These new leaders are often emotionally invested in both the business and your family. They appreciate it when you recognize that and value their ideas in that context. And some of them desire the financial aspect of ownership also. Be honest with yourself and them from the beginning whether that is a realistic possibility, so it doesn't cause hard feelings later.

These are a few of the dynamics to consider to successfully integrate non-family team members in management.