

Family Business Lessons From My Father: Reflections Upon His Passing

by Daryl Landau

In my middle age, what I feared most as a child has come to pass. My father passed away. In the strange world of family enterprises, this is often what constitutes a promotion. Now that the initial chaos of the transition and the main grieving period has passed, I have time to reflect on what I learned from Sy Landau, my dad.



My father was special, and a scholarship was named in his honour.¹ We were able to share this news with him in his last weeks, some good news to offset the realization that he would not make it back home before the cancer took him. It recognizes his contribution as a trainer of mediators, a designer of our training program, and for his general consulting skills and special qualities.

Our business is special, not because of its size and profits, but because of its function: conflict management and the training of mediators. My mother, Barbara Landau, is the matriarch of our family business, the founder and a pioneer in family mediation, with both a psychology Ph.D. and a Master's of Law. I could speak at length about the lessons I learned from her, but will keep to my stated focus, knowing that many of the lessons are the same. Moreover, he truly was the bedrock of our business owing to his skill with finances, computers, and creative design.

My mother conscripted me and my sister as adolescents to help with her training programs. Then she enticed my father into it when he left his VP of HR position. My sister did not fully enter the family business, a choice my parents accepted, whereas I made an about-face from a different career to join with them. We all became known as a conflict resolution family. Everyone wanted to know whether we ever fought – I'm not telling.

When I was young (being now firmly middle aged), I took some jobs at Manulife Financial where my father had spent most of his working life. Driving home together, he would tell stories of the characters at the top of this iconic company. The stories helped humanize (and 'humourize') that corporate world. They also showed how determined change agents could reshape company culture. Later those experiences gave weight to his teachings.

Our complex work arrangements (each of us had our own business yet we worked together too) could be simplified as two parts under the name Cooperative Solutions: foremost the

¹ The Landau Family Scholarship (my father's choice of name), created by the ADR Institute of Ontario, available through Conrad Grebel University College for their academic or certificate conflict resolution programs for someone who can make meaningful social change. Sy passed away from cancer in December 2012. Donations welcome (charitable), to Grebel, so it can become permanent.

training programs in negotiation, coaching and mediation, and the other the consulting and intervention part.

The training side is not a pure family business because it has non-family partners, as well as employees. It is here that my father's key lesson was to be fair to all, whether family or non-family members. It is important that non-family partners and employees feel respected and buy into the values and plans for the business. Will the idea of promotion of family clash with the idea of promotion through merit, or can both be achieved? Most of us can identify with the desire to have your children follow in your footsteps, and there is often a business benefit from the loyalty a family member gives to the business. My father wanted all of this. He was a stickler for high quality, and he was not one to sacrifice that just to see his child 'succeed'. There were times when he needed to talk to me about improving the quality of my work. We also had to negotiate my succession, something I took for granted. Certain partners assumed, understandably if not correctly, that my mother and I would vote as a bloc. Fortunately, Sy had cultivated relationships of trust and respect with everyone that made it possible to navigate tough issues as he grew less willing and able to work.

Family businesses notoriously do not plan and manage their successions well. Too often, the founder holds on until death or a crisis forces an ill-prepared successor to take over. My father, fortunately, did not have his self-esteem too invested in the business, nor was he too afraid to contemplate change. Experienced in strategic planning, he responded to requests for a plan of gradual succession. Change seems natural when it is gradual. It is also critical to communicate the desired plan with all stakeholders and ensure their buy-in.

Still, my father's early, prolonged and erratic decline taught me that crisis will always spur the important discussions, even as it also interferes with good planning. The timing is rarely in your control and transition is rarely predictable. When Sy realized his illness was starting to interfere with his ability to teach in our courses or to bid for new contracts, we took our five year plans and moved the clock forward. He explained his tasks to me. So though our bedrock was cracking, we were able to put supports in place.

As a speaker and consultant, my father had prized qualities that are hard to replicate. He translated the big theories into pictures, charts, and above all, stories. He created most of the materials we still use in our courses. These ideas, which he only discovered in his fifties, he presented with passion and conviction. The methodology of interest-based negotiation and mediation was logical to him, and he knew how to demonstrate that logic to others. These traits were a huge asset when we co-authored our book, *From Conflict to Creativity* (2001).

On the many occasions when I had a proposed improvement for our courses or other business, I found my father a good sounding board. If I could persuade him of the merit of the ideas, he was ready to help (I did not always realize the work it entailed) to put it into practice. Though I often discovered that the new ways were not always better than before, I appreciated the chance to put my own stamp on things.

The final lesson from my father that I will impart is a very important one: work isn't everything. Family businesses have a tough time with the boundary between family and business. Some of us struggled with that, but not Sy. He valued his free time too much. He also knew how to make family time fun.

This year may mark a turning point in many ways for me. It is a time to reflect on the past and chart a new future. Sometimes I feel an inner struggle between my increased role in the family business and my desire for independence and self-determination. My parents never tried to force a path on me. If I listen to my father's voice, I can hear it advising me to choose wisely and thoughtfully, with confidence and without regret. I like the sound of that voice.

Daryl Landau has had his own business, www.Common-Ground.ca, for about ten years, and is an Associate of his mother's company, Cooperative Solutions (for mediation courses, family mediation, etc.). He is assisting with Phil Kriszenfeld's Family Business Dynamics course at Conestoga College this Fall.