

# McLean, Koehler, Sparks & Hammond

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## Burned Out in the Family Business

Is your career satisfaction burning bright or burning out? If you're feeling burned out in the family business, you're not alone. Even the most successful leaders experience stress and fatigue from time to time. It can happen when you're feeling overwhelmed and unable to meet constant business demands, or it can be the result of prolonged strain in a relationship. Whatever the cause, burnout doesn't happen overnight, and it's difficult to combat when you're right in the middle of it. So it's important to recognize the sources of stress and frustration that can lead to burnout, before they threaten your health, your work, your relationships, and your family business.

More and more businesspeople feel as if they're on a treadmill running to keep pace. Ten years ago, 10-hour workdays were already commonplace. Today, an increasing number of people work 12 to 14 hour days, sometimes six days a week. Add to this the time we now spend in commuting. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, nearly 10 million people drive more than an hour to work, up 50 percent from 1990. And then there's technology stress. Technology allows us to accomplish much more in a workday, but it also can cause us to take on more than we should. PDA beeps and cell phone rings (our own and others) keep us in a state of high alert. Our personal and work boundaries are more blurred than ever and true "down time" has become rare.

It's obvious that we're all dealing with a fair amount of stress these days. Now add the additional challenge of managing business and family and it's easy to see why people working in a family business are especially susceptible to burnout. What aspects of your family business regularly cause you anxiety and stress? Here are three common causes and strategies for heading them off at the pass.

### Boundaries

When you work in a non-family business, your coworkers probably don't know you as well as your family members do. When the workday is done, you go home to your family and focus on that part of your life and on other hobbies and interests. For members working in a family business, however, it's not so easy to maintain the boundary between work time and personal time. It takes agreement and commitment to keep them separate and distinct, but it can greatly reduce your stress. Here are some guidelines for managing the boundaries between family and business:

- Acknowledge which "hat" you're wearing (family or business) when you're communicating and making decisions together.
- Don't discuss personal or confidential information about family members with other people at work.
- Keep company funds and personal funds separate.
- Treat family members with the same courtesy as you would your best customer.
- Give family members the same privileges, opportunities, constructive criticism and accountability as anyone else working in the company.
- Don't use business successes or failings as a barometer of family acceptance.

### Balance

A classic path to burnout is having unrealistically high expectations in the relentless pursuit of goals. This characteristic is both a blessing and a curse for family business founders, many of whom called up superhuman powers (and put in superhuman hours) to start and grow their businesses. It's a blessing that you love your business so much that you're willing to work long hours over an extended period of time. It's a curse when you don't realize that you've moved past the healthy balance point. To prevent total burnout, consider these strategies:

- Take a break. Sometimes what you need more than anything is a vacation. However, if you wait until you have two weeks with nothing on the calendar, it's unlikely to happen. Start small, with a long weekend away. Or simply take a walk outside at lunch, or listen to music during your commute.
- Recognize the difference between energy and adrenaline. When you're feeling driven by work, it's easy to put off physical needs so that you can "get this one thing done." Unfortunately, that "one thing" often turns

- into the "next thing" and the next and the next. So as simple as it sounds, when you're tired, rest. When you're hungry, eat. It's a simple way to break a cycle that can lead to burnout.
- Develop "detached concern." You can be closely involved with people and in projects, while still balancing how much you expect from yourself and others.
- Delegate. One remedy for an overburdened schedule is simply to shed some of your responsibilities. Do other members of your family or workforce have specific talents or leadership potential you should be using? They may be good candidates to take on some of the responsibility you currently hold.

### **Boredom**

Sometimes, the cause of burnout isn't having too many challenges, it's not feeling challenged at all. We all get bored with our work at one time or another and it can happen to even the brightest, most ambitious people. While we can usually continue to function when we're bored or no longer enjoying what we're doing, it certainly won't be at top speed. And left unattended, boredom can lead to burnout. While there's no instant cure, any action is better than sitting around bored or in bad humor. Here are some positive steps you can take:

- Keep your business life interesting. Attend a conference or trade show to keep up with your industry or profession.
- Widen your circle of contacts. Join a peer group. Learn how other leaders manage their businesses and creatively tackle problems.
- Get out and about. See what's going on out in the field or down on the shop floor. Visit with a customer or one of your employees. It will help you take a new look at your "old" business.
- Shake up your routine. Take a different route to work. Instead of e-mailing a supplier, pick up the phone and call. If you always have breakfast on Friday with your plant manager, make it lunch on Tuesday this week. (While you're there, order something different off the menu.)
- Consider offering a new service or product or promoting an old service or product in a new way. Just make sure you have the people and resources in place to carry out your new idea.

Is it really better to "burn out than rust out"? We don't think so. If you have a desire to perpetuate the family business for future generations, you need to play a long game. Try some of the above recommendations to avoid burnout rather than managing it after it has already occurred. You and your family business will be healthier for it.

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McLean, Koehler, Sparks & Hammond helps owners and business leaders become more successful by providing innovative financial, technology and management solutions for every stage of their organizations' life cycle. MKS&H's organizational consulting division, Tandem Partners, specializes in people strategies that drive business results. For more information on this article or MKS&H, please contact Margaret Wilson at 410-296-6200 or via email: [margaret@mksh.com](mailto:margaret@mksh.com).

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