

Here's to Family Spirit

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I recently spoke at an event to honor exceptional family companies. It was a celebration hosted by the fifth generation family owners of the Scottish distiller William Grant & Sons, maker of Glenfiddich and other famous whiskeys. The Grant/Gordon family, led by Chairman Peter Gordon, invited 11 other families that control and lead excellent private family companies to pledge their intention to remain private and family owned for 50 more years—two *more* generations.

Many people at the gathering won't even be alive at the 2065 reunion, but that doesn't seem to matter. They know their families well enough (including future family members they haven't even met yet) to make this pledge.

You can meet these families and their companies—carefully selected by my research team at the Cambridge Institute for Family Enterprise—in an inspiring book titled *Family Spirit*, published by Chronicle Books. Each company has won prestigious awards for excellence, and the products of two of them, Riedel and Arabesque, are on permanent display at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and MOMA. (Riedel glass, by the way, is in its 11th generation of family leadership.)

To stay robust for that long, these family companies have remained innovative and have overcome their share of adversity, including family disagreements. Their corporate cultures are first rate. Each succeeding generation of family employees has been impressively innovative, adding new approaches, products, or services to the ones that established their company's success. They don't just venerate a pioneering founder. They continue to be pioneers. Each family's story in *Family Spirit* emphasizes a part of the formula that has made their companies great and kept them that way.

They all strive for excellence and are committed to high ethical standards and, of course, family control. They are principled. But which principles do they follow? The Underwoods of Los Angeles, running a large beverage distributor, remind themselves, "change is something

you do every day." The Wirtzes of Chicago have a sports entertainment company and say, "put the company first." The Mouawads of Beirut own and run a leading jewelry company. They believe "you've got to put relationships first." The customer always comes first for the retailer Mitchell

That's possible because each family has an exciting mission that allows family members to put family, company, employees, customers, someone else first. The world is hungry for responsible businesses and business leaders like these that are dedicated to more than making money and

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family from Connecticut, but "hugging" their associates (employees) comes a close second. It's governance first for the Lavazzas of Turin, with their leading coffee company. The Lundbergs put first sustaining the land they farm in central California. New York hoteliers the Denihans and the hot sauce producers, the McIlhennys of Amelia Island, Louisiana put their employees first. It's quality first for the Grant/Gordon and Johnston/Harrison families of Scotland. Different principles that express each family's values and focus their attention. But notice that no one ever says, "it's me first."

self-enrichment. It's exciting to see these 12 exceptional family companies surviving and succeeding in a world that seems to be tilted in favor of passionless corporations.

Let these 12—and your company—be a beacon for other companies and other families who are passionate about what they do.



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For over thirty years, John A. Davis has served as an academic, advisor, writer and speaker in the family enterprise field. He is a leading authority globally on family business, family wealth, leadership and succession. To learn about his professional activities, visit johndavis.com and follow him on twitter @ProfJohnDavis.

About Cambridge Institute for Family Enterprise

The Cambridge Institute for Family Enterprise is a global research and education institute dedicated to the real issues facing family enterprises. It is a place where progressive members of family enterprises come to learn, exchange ideas, develop themselves and position their enterprises to be not only successful, but sustainable over generations. Learn about our conferences, education programs, writing and research at cambridge-institute.org and on twitter @CambridgeFE.