

# THE ORIGIN OF PERSISTENT FAMILY CONFLICT

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*The simple fact is that if you trace most serious family conflicts back to their origins, the tensions are rooted in a single triggering source.*

Family conflict that is persistent—lasting years or even generations—is very difficult to deescalate, let alone unwind. It can be nearly impossible to return these relationships to peaceful, constructive beginnings (if these ever existed).

The tensions that arise between family members in severe persistent conflict often ripple through the family and family enterprise. Minor disagreements on issues can turn into insulting exchanges, creating deeper mistrust. Proposals about what’s best for the family enterprise can be interpreted as affronts to a person’s character. Personal grudges can choke opportunities for useful debate and “creative abrasion,” in the words of innovation expert Linda Hill. Individuals can become highly self-protective, looking out only for their own interests; worse, they can become vindictive. As conflict escalates, family members typically assemble allies and force relatives and others to choose a side. Divisions between sides can grow as the conflict becomes pervasive throughout the family and organization. Once mere conflict becomes trench warfare, family unity rarely recovers.

An enterprising family's best strategy to address severe, persistent conflict is to never let conflict escalate to this point. It is useful, therefore, to understand the origins of persistent conflict in families.

### **SERIOUS, PERSISTENT FAMILY CONFLICTS ARE TYPICALLY TRACED TO ONE SOURCE**

Family conflicts are triggered for a variety of reasons and can be continued and escalated by a number of factors. Common provocations include economic or financial issues, critical behavior by one or more parties, perceptions of unfairness, values differences, or third-party manipulation. Any one of these and other factors can create or deepen fissures between family members and rupture family unity.

A family's *response* to conflicts also varies: some conflicts are tolerated, some are resolved in various ways, and some fester and persist. When you trace any serious, persistent conflict in families back to its roots—or at least to the crossroads when the conflict really became ingrained, hot and intractable—in most cases you see that the conflict takes off when one or both parties *feel very disrespected* by the other. The simple fact is that most serious family tensions are rooted in feelings of disrespect. As John Davis teaches his family business students and clients, “Disrespect is the enemy.” From such tainted soil nothing healthy can grow.

### **WHEN DISRESPECT PERVADES A FAMILY**

Enterprising families have many family, business and ownership connection points where they interact and make decisions. There are a lot of opportunities for individuals or groups within the family to disappoint, upset or hurt the feelings of relatives. It therefore helps to recognize typical situations where feelings of disrespect can be triggered in the family.

Family members often feel disrespected when:

- Their ideas, opinions, advice, or contributions are not acknowledged.
- They are not recognized (seen, heard, celebrated, included, valued) by high status family members.
- They feel unsupported or uncared for during difficult moments, or they feel callousness or lack of sympathy by relatives for their situation.
- Their contributions are not reciprocated.
- They are criticized unfairly or humiliated in public.

- They are surprised, particularly by bad news or in public.
- Secrets were kept from them, indicating that they weren't trusted or cared about.
- They are compared unfavorably to another family member and are seen as deficient.
- They feel they have a very different status in the family that they perceive as unfair or unearned.

Families that are aware of these (and other) potential triggers, and who discuss them as threats to family unity and family success, are more likely to avoid them.

The impact of feelings of disrespect can go unnoticed by others for some time. Even when disrespectful behavior is spotted, family members often don't confront it, especially when it involves challenging powerful family members. An individual that has been disrespected by a relative is more likely to suppress their hurt feelings, perhaps discussing it with others, rather than address it directly with the perpetrator. These are among the reasons why, in families, feelings of disrespect can lead to resentment covertly festering and opportunities to build allies for a counterattack.

We all know we can be disrespectful towards others at times. The faster we acknowledge this after a triggering incident, the better the chances of resolving the issue before it worsens. The greater the culture of trust and respect in the family, the better the chances of a genuine effort to reconcile. Families should not encourage or ignore a family culture that tolerates widespread disrespectful behavior.

### **BUILD A FAMILY CULTURE OF RESPECT**

Acknowledging and discussing disrespectful behavior is healthy, but is rarely sufficient to ward it off. In addition to meaningful dialogue, families would be wise to implement these practical actions.

*Cultivate a Respectful Family Culture.* The cultivation and maintenance of a respectful family culture is an ongoing process. This should be all members' priority but is the official work of family leaders and, when one exists, the family council. It is done through deliberate discussions, behaviors, rewards, and intercessions. For example, within the family, discuss the value of respect and its significance for family unity and multigenerational success. Recognize and prize respectful behavior by family members. Make respectful family members role models for others to emulate. Make showing respect, especially when having disagreements, part of the family's code of conduct.

Before you end family gatherings, pause to express appreciation for one another. Small expressions of appreciation can go a long way to solidifying feelings of respect and caring.

*Empower Family Leadership.* Family leadership should watch carefully the contours of public conversations, communications, and interactions in the family to recognize how respectful they are, and to understand how much individuals or branches feel respected. Because a family's unity is at stake when relatives have persistent conflict, family leadership must carefully monitor family communications and intervene when necessary to try to deescalate situations that could spiral down.

*Create Family Policies* (codes of conduct) that articulate the family's desired behavior and treatment of one another. Check to see if your existing policies, themselves, are respectful of the different groups within your family.

*Assess the Family on the Issue of Felt Respect.* Evaluate the family's strengths and vulnerabilities on the issue of felt respect. Survey members of the family about to what extent they feel cared about, recognized, and respected by others in the family, and if there is enough trust within the family to have disagreements on sensitive topics, talk through them, and resolve them. If people feel respected, keep doing what you're doing and stay alert for disrespect by individuals and groups and in your policies. If people don't feel respected, find out why, and find a remedy—quickly.

## IN CLOSING

When group members feel well-regarded, respected, and cared about by others in the group, and when they believe that everybody in the group is treated fairly, they are more likely to be loyal to and trusting of the enterprise. A good litmus test of felt respect within a group is when there are disagreements on specific tactical or strategic choices and members still demonstrate appreciation for those who disagreed with them. This standard of respect is an important goal for an enterprising family so family conflicts do not slow or halt important momentum and value-building.

No matter how good a family's business strategy, no matter how effective its leaders or profitable its activities, a family's success will not last without family unity, and unity fundamentally depends on the genuine and ongoing presence of respect in the family.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Courtney Collette is Chief Operating Officer of the Cambridge Institute for Family Enterprise, a research and education institute devoted to multigenerational family enterprises. Since 2011, she has led its education programming, conferences, research studies, and publications. As head of education programming, Ms. Collette designs curricula for seminars, workshops, and online courses for family enterprise audiences worldwide including bespoke private programs for individual families and organizations. She has authored several publications pertaining to the success of family enterprises, including articles, Harvard case studies, and the book, *Next Generation Success*, a 10-year study of next generation talent development in global family enterprises. Ms. Collette spent a decade as a trusted advisor to business families on the issues of governance, family relationships, succession, and next generation readiness.



### PROFESSOR JOHN A. DAVIS

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John A. Davis is a globally recognized pioneer and authority on family enterprise, family wealth, and the family office. He is a researcher, educator, author, architect of the field's most impactful conceptual frameworks, and advisor to leading families around the world. He leads the family enterprise programs at MIT Sloan. To follow his writing and speaking, visit [johndavis.com](http://johndavis.com) and twitter [@ProfJohnDavis](https://twitter.com/ProfJohnDavis).

## ABOUT CAMBRIDGE INSTITUTE FOR FAMILY ENTERPRISE

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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. Its sister organization, Cambridge Advisors to Family Enterprise, is a highly specialized, international, advisory firm that assists family enterprises with navigating the new economy, solving sensitive issues, and making the entire family enterprise strong and united over generations.

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