



# ASPEN FAMILY BUSINESS GROUP, LLC

---

DEEP RELATIONSHIPS. ENDURING LEGACIES.

## Assumptions about Leadership

By Leslie Dashew

### When you think about “leadership,” what occurs to you?

- A charismatic man who is handsome, articulate and gains the commitment of followers to implement a vision?
- Three siblings who have differences of opinion over what direction to take the family business and who develop a shared vision through their Board of Directors?
- Two cousins who share the Office of the President and whose individual expertise compliments the other’s and allows them to lead a complex organization with breadth of perspective and intelligence and support from both of their branches?

Most of us will acknowledge that the stereotype in the first bullet point captures our image of leadership. Yet in family-owned businesses, this choice for a model of leadership may not be the best. Today, with rapid change, a complex business environment and access to information and constant connection to information and communication leading alone doesn’t always work.

To assure continuity of the family and/or the business, we must consider the assumptions that we hold and challenge them: what worked as leadership in the past, may not work going forward. For instance:

- The oldest son is entitled or required to lead the business.
- The “Buck Stops Here” requires that one person must be the decision maker.
- Daughter is busy raising children. She can’t possibly lead the business, too.
- A single leader is required to be efficient and to avoid power struggles.

**One model of leadership does not fit all organizations.** In looking ahead at your organization, consider where you are headed and how to optimize leadership in the future. The following are some considerations:

1. Family businesses have multiple constituencies: The family needs a Chief Emotional Officer, the business a President and the shareholders a Chairman of the Board. The Laird Norton family has a President of the Family and a President of the Business. Paying close attention to each constituency increases the odds that this complex system will thrive.
2. External requirements vs. internal requirements: do you have a leader who focuses his/her attention on customers, the community and suppliers while another focuses on production or financials? J.M. Smuckers (Jellies and Jams) has two brothers in the office of the president: "Mr Inside" and Mr. Outside."
3. New directions vs. old directions: the core business may require leadership that is more typical and conservative. Moving into new realms may require a different type of intelligence and disposition. Yet a family may realize that they need both types of business directions during the upcoming era. Having shared leadership that includes talent in both areas can help assure both are addressed.
4. Transitioning: Passing the Baton. In a relay race, there is a point in time when the first runner and the second runner both have their hands on the baton. The keys to success include the fact that the first runner trusts that the second has the capability, motivation and energy to carry the baton forward while the second runner knows that the first runner has done his or her best and will let go of the baton. This intergenerational partnership requires shared leadership between generations.

My assumptions about success factors in all types of leadership include mutual respect, trust, and ability to thoroughly discuss and resolve differences, healthy decision making, clarity of roles and responsibilities, shared vision and values and great communication. As you consider the future of leadership don't be trapped by "one best way" thinking: explore the options and your assumptions about them.