



# ASPEN FAMILY BUSINESS GROUP, LLC

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DEEP RELATIONSHIPS. ENDURING LEGACIES.

## Entitlement

by Joe Paul

Except for his eyes Howard was motionless. Conflicting feelings churned. His side-long gaze went back and forth between his wife and his daughter. Anna's head slowly moved side to side; as much in disbelief as in disagreement. She was accustomed to her daughter's anger looking for an excuse to lash out. But this kind of emotional blackmail was new to her parents.

Howard and Anna had spent \$55,000 in advisors fees on their estate plan so that their two sons and only daughter could continue on with the family company. They had just begun to privately explain the plan to their children, and Susan was first. They were stunned when Susan said through her clenched teeth, "If you make my brother the president, you will never see my children again."

That was four months ago. The parents are now getting calls from their advisors about the need to implement the estate plan. But Howard keeps putting them off. He is embarrassed about what is happening in his family and is loath to talk to advisors about it. Because of Susan's threat, he is worried about the consequences in his family if he implements the plan. Secretly he has been thinking about just selling the company to avoid the family conflict.

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When an elegant estate plan sits in a client's desk too long without being implemented, it usually means that something important was missed in the assessment process. Often the reason is that the wealth creator is worried about how the consequences of the plan will play out in the family. Destructive entitlement is one of the most frequent factors that slows the succession process.

Entitlement is a psychological attitude toward relationships that results from the balance or imbalance of fairness and trust early in life. Chronic states of feeling entitled are often created in offspring by parents based on their capacity to give to their children. *Destructive entitlement* is based on the unwillingness to care about others. *Destructive entitlement* can also result from "over-giving" of things, or overindulgence in permissiveness by a parent. Having a "chip on their shoulder" or "acting like the world owes them a living" are phrases that people use to

describe *destructive entitlement* in others. Susan's ultimatum about her brother exemplifies the way in which destructive entitlement gives a person the misguided justification to behave in aggressive ways.

Expression of entitlement is not limited to the relationship in which it was engendered. The negative effects of destructive entitlement can have long lasting effects on all significant adult relationships.

Long standing destructive entitlement is typically the source of litigation between family members, although the focus of the litigation may only be a "red herring" that disguises a deeper issue. For instance, a conflict over compensation might actually be driven by the belief that one sibling is treated better than another by parents.

Sometimes the sense of injustice comes from what has actually transpired between family members. This is called *retributive injustice*. An example of this kind of injustice is seen when the children feel like their father's business is more important to their dad than they are. This leads to various versions of "Father Hunger" that fuels self doubt in his children and competition among them for limited attention the father is able to give.

The other kind of injustice is *distributive injustice*, which is not based on the actions of anyone. It results from the cards that life has dealt. Having a learning disability is an example where no matter how hard the child studies, he cannot excel academically. This was the case with Susan. She is very clever in many ways, but a mild learning disability really stood out in an otherwise intellectually gifted family. She grew up feeling patronized by her family and envious of her brother's accomplishments.

But both kinds of injustice can lead to a sense of entitlement that is destructive to relationships. In both cases the feeling of "being owed" or being mistrustful of others shows up in most or all of their relationships. In Susan's case, what started out as distributive unfairness became more complicated as her resentment lead to being labeled "the one with a chip on her shoulder."

Destructive entitlement ranges from mild, where it is just a nuisance sometimes, to intense expressions that can immobilize a family like Howard's. The more intense and long standing the feeling of entitlement is, the more difficult it is to resolve. Professional facilitation of difficult family issues that resolve understandings can work very well if all parties are committed to the process. Personal counseling or coaching can also be beneficial. However, in the more serious cases, a difficult question needs to be asked: "If this issue didn't involve a family member, would I know what to do?" The answer is usually, "yes".

In most of these very difficult cases, the solution for a non-family member is exactly what needs to be done.