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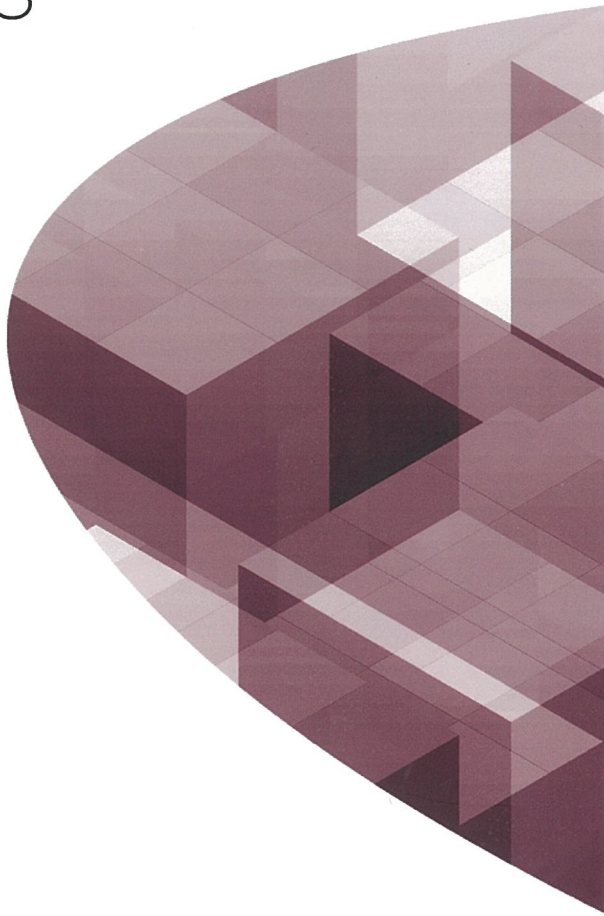
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Trapped in the Family Business

Michael Klein

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Prior to becoming an academic I was an investment banker in Los Angeles. My clients were mostly middle-market firms, with quite a few family-owned enterprises among them. In visiting with the family members of these businesses I recall, at times, feeling quite envious of their positions. After all, who wouldn't want to be part of a company where your co-workers are also your kin? How carefree and uncomplicated it must be to have one's career path already mapped out. And what about the perks of blending work and home life into one? From an outsider's perspective, working in a family business can make it seem like those folks sure have it made.

For outsiders, Michael Klein's *Trapped in the Family Business* will swiftly fracture this illusion by highlighting how family businesses can indeed become veritable prisons for their family members. More importantly, however, for anyone who feels trapped in the family enterprise, Klein's book serves as an acknowledgment that they are, indeed, not alone. At 132 pages, the book reads much like a primer, taking the reader through the stages of the "trappings" of family businesses and how to find ways out of them. The first and shortest chapter entitled "Trapped?" brings awareness to the phenomenon of family members becoming shackled with "emotional handcuffs" that accompany the business. It ends on a short anecdote to drive home his main point, a feature Klein uses throughout. The second chapter, "Beginnings," delves more deeply into what constitutes those handcuffs: sticky topics such as unspoken promises within the family, the shoulder weight of legacies, the dread of letting down a parent or sibling or, simply, lack of motivation to seek out other employment all constitute potential drivers that can cause someone to get stuck in the family business against their own best interests. In Chapter 3, Klein relies on his training as a clinical psychologist to offer a checklist of telltale signs, both physical and emotional, to help identify family members who are struggling. These signs may be as subtle as a distancing from the day-to-day operations in the business to relying on substance abuse as a means to an end. What underlies all of these different causes that lead to family members' dissatisfaction in the business is covered in Chapter 4. Here, Klein strips many of the aforementioned drivers to their bare essentials: history, legacy, relationships and career. These themes serve as prompts for individuals and those wanting to help them. For example, Klein makes the case that, in family businesses, history matters. In fact, the history of the family and its involvement in the business can and does extinguish the ability of individual family members to create their own identify and, by extension, write their own history. Similarly, Klein makes explicit that identifying and defining individuals' conceptualizations of the family business "legacy" from multiple vantage points (e.g. multiple family members, multiple generations, etc.) provides an important talking point, especially if it can break the perpetuation of vicious cycles. Lastly, but just as importantly, is Klein's highlighting the messy decision making that can occur in family businesses. Here, he already

provides some solutions by suggesting that those seeking to open the communication channels within the organization clearly plan their talking points with family members. Alternatively, finding impartial “listeners” such as advisors and professionals can bring more objectivity to otherwise highly subjective issues. Klein dedicates the last chapter, “Action: what can be done” to possible end-point scenarios. These are quite simple, yet effective, in the sense that if you’re trapped, there are only so many ways out: change your attitude, change your situation (e.g. role, responsibility, etc.) in the family business, or change the business.

Readers expecting an extensive academic treatise or an in-depth manual to resolving some of the aforementioned issues will not find it in Klein’s book. Instead, what *Trapped in the Family Business* offers is a quick read principally to draw attention to this often concealed yet widespread problem. In writing this book, Klein cracks open an important part of the family business black box. But beyond simply raising awareness, Klein also proposes a rudimentary roadmap to teasing apart why family members may become trapped in the work place and how they can begin to think about getting out of this particular predicament. The section entitled “Resources” presents a list of organizations and service providers (including Klein’s) who can tender advice and guidance. Given its tenor and structure, the book benefits first and foremost individuals who currently find themselves ensnared in a family concern or even those contemplating joining their kin in the business. Correspondingly, the book’s usefulness also extends to the rest of the family members, including the primary decision makers, in that it can help shift perspective and bring important questions to the foreground: are we taking into consideration everyone’s individual interests? Are family members’ work-life balances in check? And, ultimately, is this business good for the family as well as for its individual participants?

Beyond the readership of the immediate family, Klein’s primer has a place in the library of every family business’ human resource department. Since how the family’s management of their organization affects not just its blood relatives but also its non-family participants, *Trapped in the Family Business* can help give additional consideration to hiring, training, promotions and conflict resolution decisions to the long-term benefit of all stakeholders in the firm. Considering the ubiquity and importance of the family business in the global economy, it is crucial that the entire organization have access to the tools needed to effectively manage it.

Klein’s book is a must for service providers catering to family-owned enterprises. Lawyers, financial advisors, accountants and insurance providers, among others, will greatly enhance their offerings if they can get a better grasp on the potential drawbacks faced by family members. By extension, it can also offer these service providers an opportunity to differentiate their solutions by targeting this unique customer segment.

Last but not least, researchers studying family-owned enterprises would be well-served in reading Klein’s *Trapped in the Family Business*. Over the past two decades, the scholarly agenda on managing family businesses has grown exponentially, with multiple journals exclusively dedicated to this hot topic. That said, there are numerous scholars with little or no prior experience in family businesses who are jumping on this research bandwagon. To build a body of work without a deeper understanding of what actually happens inside this unique organizational form not only undermines the research contribution of the field but also ignores the very audience these studies are intended for – those who wake up every day to find themselves toiling away in the family-owned enterprise.