

## **ADHD Family Business**

By Louise Levin

Family businesses account for 85% of businesses owned and operated within the United States. Though no study has been conducted to determine the percentage of individuals within family businesses diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), one can infer from general population statistics and the hereditary nature of the disorder, that the family business structure is significantly affected. ADHD is a neurobiological disorder located in the prefrontal lobe that compromises attention, impulse and executive function. It is estimated that over 18 million adults and children in the United States are diagnosed with ADHD. Because it is primarily passed from parent to offspring, its prevalence within the family business is perhaps more visible than in more diverse corporations as the management structure will, more often than not, include more than one affected individual.

In order for the family business members to effectively utilize the invaluable talents inherent to their ADHD individual/s, each must first acknowledge the challenges associated with the disorder, and their potential to contribute to or detract from the optimal functioning of the business of the family and the family business.

On a very basic level a family can be defined as a system comprised of distinct individuals. Distinctions, or roles within the family system, are established as members begin to assert their individuality in response to one another. Basic roles may include the “comedian,” “the peacemaker,” and “the troublemaker.” These roles are supported within the family business and are only altered to reflect the professional roles of each; perhaps “the comedian” is best suited to social networking, “the peacemaker” to settling familial or inter-professional disputes, and “the troublemaker” the emotionally volatile visionary. When you look at familial systems, recurring issues or problems are usually attributable to this “troublemaker.” For the purposes of this discussion, the member with ADHD will be identified as the family “troublemaker.”

Though there are challenges inherent to the ADHD professional, the family will do well to remember the benefits of such an individual to their business. ADHD individuals are the visionaries; they are the ones who see and think “outside of the box.” They are often endowed with exceptional intellect, are able to visualize the “big picture,” and have an invaluable capacity to hyper-focus, especially in moments of creative stimulation. ADHD individuals are often more adept than most at multitasking, though their ability to micro-manage may fall short of others more capable of long-term commitment and focus. In order that one may mitigate the challenges associated with ADHD and the diagnosed individual, they must be first understood. The following functions are most likely to be compromised by ADHD:

- **Impulse control:** an individual may blurt out inappropriate comments or divulge sensitive information/secrets. Lack of impulse control can also lead to other inappropriate behaviors, including inter-office relationships, untoward remarks and, potentially, substance abuse issues
- **Compromised Executive Function:** ADHD individuals find it difficult to effectively prioritize and execute basic tasks, often leaving the “to do list” unfinished
- **Generalization** (the ability to translate the cause and affect relationship from one situation to another, similar situation)
- **Time Management:** an ADHD individual may consistently arrive to meetings late, or not at all, potentially damaging the reputation of the business and belief in its professional integrity

- Inconsistent performance/attention may compromise an ADHD individual's work output and not necessarily reflect their actual potential

The value of an ADHD individual to the family business structure exceeds any minor concessions necessary to facilitate their productivity. From employee to CEO, these individuals have the tools to become effective team leaders. Conception of innovative business practices and anticipation of emerging markets and trends are two major benefits to the ADHD thought processes. An ADHD individual can easily grasp "what needs to be done," and their high levels of energy are often effective in motivating others to work towards, and to believe in, the final objective, or end result. A family business in which one or more members are diagnosed with ADHD can excel, as long as the appropriate actions are taken to ensure cohesion of the family business unit.

Due to attention deficiencies, many ADHD employees may require highly trained, executive-level secretaries to assist in the scheduling of appointments, and in ensuring that he or she is continually kept "on task." Fixed-term assignments, consisting of flexible hours, are ideal for the ADHD employee. Levels of productivity are relatively unorthodox and will not necessarily synergize with the standard "nine to five" method. The family business is better equipped than most to acquiesce to these demands, as the family generally comprises the overall management structure. This does not, however, mean that an ADHD employee should be permitted to work lesser hours than their colleagues; instead, they should be responsible for understanding their own daily biorhythms and request permission to work within their greatest hours of productivity.

In any successful business, non-negotiable rules and regulations regarding compensation, promotion, demotion and termination must be in place to ensure uniform levels of commitment and culpability among employees. The failure to establish criterion for determining roles of immediate and extended family members with ADHD within the business may lead to a lack of appropriate understanding of cause and effect. Taken on a case-by-case basis, different standards may be employed to "deal" with the ADHD family member in contrast to those unaffected, who are expected to "play by the rules."

Currently, the designated courses of treatment may include a combination of talk therapy with a licensed family therapist, allopathic or alternative medications and/or an ADHD coach. The ADHD individual is never just the person impacted by the disorder, and a systemically trained life coach is integral to achieving a family's collective understanding of the disorder.

#### SUMMARY OF BEST PRACTICES:

- The family business advisor should assist in educating, normalizing and demystifying this very real neurobiological condition
- A first session should be held with the entire family to assess the levels of anger, blame and areas impacted by the disorder
- A second session, alone with the affected individual should take place to get that individual to own and to take responsibility for their disorder and to agree to be coached in much the same way that one is coached to learn a new language, instrument or sport
- A third session should be held for all family members, without the affected individual, so that they feel "heard;" discussion of appropriate coping, managing techniques should be forwarded, with a focus on minimizing residual anger or tensions. Professionals may also raise the possibility of the presence of ADHD in one or more family members, as yet undiagnosed

- The following sessions should include the entire family unit in order to keep an ongoing, productive dialogue and to continue to set and meet both existing and future goals.
- An ADHD individual can be further assisted in meeting family business goals with the aid of a professional career coach specializing in the disorder.

As efforts to mitigate and manage the disorder continue, ADHD employees will find themselves, with the assistance of a supportive and educated family unit, better equipped to manage. They will also be able to optimize their positive roles in both the business of the family and the family business. As stated above, the inclusion of compensatory accommodations in the workplace such as an executive assistant, flexible schedule etc. will materially assist an individual's efforts. This will also provide a tangible support structure.

Our future leaders will undoubtedly be sourced from all walks of life, constitution and temperament; there is no doubt that, among these exceptional individuals, a large contingent of ADHD professionals will establish themselves, and their families, among the great business leaders of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.