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All in the family

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Families operate between 75 to 90 percent of the companies in the country.

By Hilary Bentman, Staff Writer

At 5 o'clock, millions of Americans get in their cars and drive away from a stressful job and an angry boss, thankful for the haven home and family can provide, at least until the next day.

But if the boss follows you home, moonlighting as mom or dad, keeping professional and personal lives separate is challenging.

"It's impossible not to bring business home. At the dinner table we talk about other things but business always comes up. And we don't apologize for that," said David Thompson Sr., owner of Laminators Inc. in Hatfield Township.

Thompson, his four sons and his wife work for the company that was started by Thompson's father.

Family-run businesses, as large as Levi Strauss or as small as the corner grocery store, face similar hurdles: rivalry within the family, reduced opportunities for non-relatives and the challenge of handing the business to the next generation.

The Delaware Valley Business Center Family Forum in Sellersville is helping family-run companies tackle some of these issues. According to Henry Landes, the organization's president, the biggest challenge family-run businesses face is passing the torch.

An estimated 75 to 90 percent of all businesses in the United States are family operated, accounting for 50 to 75 percent of the Gross Domestic Product. But only 30 percent survive into the second generation, according to the Boston-based Family Firm Institute.

Although it's at least five years away, Thompson is already preparing his outdoor sign panel company for the day he steps down, including choosing one of four sons to succeed him.

"One had to be chosen to take my place. I chose the oldest because of his leadership skills and marketing skills," said Thompson, who acknowledges that over the years friction has transpired between the brothers. "They are all competitive people but they also get along well together. Each found his niche in the company."

For a business to survive, the most qualified leaders must be chosen, even if that person does not share the same bloodline, said Landes, who advises companies to consult an objective party to evaluate employees.

"Just because dad started the company, doesn't mean junior is the best choice., he said."

During a company's transition, apprehension and uncertainty are common, with owners not ready to leave their life's work and their children anxious for a shot at the helm.

Heather Hartman, 32, is a sales manager at Sealstrip of Boyertown, a family business that manufactures resealable tape for food products.

"Right now we're in a tough stage," Hartman said. "I'm ready but they're not sure they're ready for their next step. The business is like another child to them. My father says 'oh my gosh I can't go away.'"



Diane and David Thompson Sr. are shown with their sons (from left) Marc, David J., Scott and Garrett. All work at the family business, Laminators Inc. in Hatfield.

Hartman's mother is company president and he stepfather is the company founder. "People say 'oh you work for your family business. That must be nice, a cake walk,' Then they stop and think about working with their mother and father and realize it's not."

While many people may view family-run companies as breeding grounds for nepotism or a place with little advancement for non-relatives, Hartman said Sealstrip encourages all employees to take leading roles, although the goal is to keep the company in the family's hands. Sealstrip's management team consists of four relatives and two non-family members.

I certainly value everything they bring to the table equally. I feel strongly that a person has got to be qualified," said Hartman who has both her MBA and law degree. "My mom is clear about expectations and if I'm not measuring up she doesn't hesitate to tell me. Working with your family, there's more opportunity for pain and joy. If something comes up that I haven't done properly, normally you'd say 'my boss is a jerk.' But these are my parents and much of the approval you get in life is from your parents."

