

Features - Cover Story

All in the Family

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Three companies discuss how they manage sibling rivalry, work with their children and fire family members. (The answer: Carefully.)

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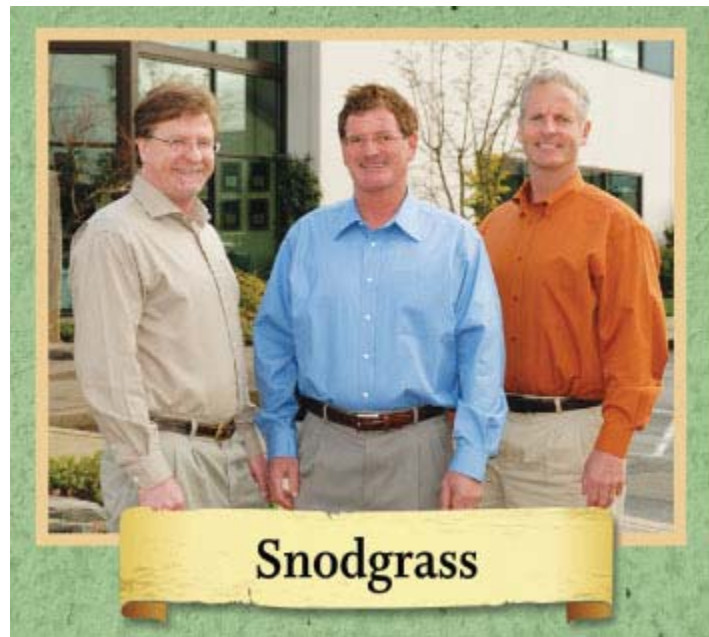
One of the best aspects of the landscape industry is that it's one where family businesses are likely to crop up. It's not uncommon to see multiple family members and generations – husbands, wives, sons, daughters – all working for the same company. For some, it works great, but unfortunately there are also many cases where it fails miserably. Here, we take an inside look at the dichotomy of the family-run landscape business to find out what works and what doesn't.

Sibling Rivalry

Family businesses bring out a whole host of problems that other companies don't have to deal with. When working with brothers and sisters, for instance, it can be hard to completely shake feelings of sibling rivalry.

"You're dealing with people that you grew up with and no matter how close the relationship, there's typically some degree of sibling rivalry," says David Snodgrass, president of Dennis' 7 Dees Landscaping & Garden Centers in Portland, Ore., and president of PLANET. He operates the business with two brothers, Dean and Drew, and says that sibling rivalry is one of the hurdles they've had to overcome. Communication was the answer, says Snodgrass, as well as accepting that each of them had their own areas of expertise, and their own methods of management. "I spent a lot of time writing down each person's job description including their roles and responsibilities," he says. "That included my own responsibilities. As president, I'm as accountable as anyone for what I'm expected to handle."

In addition to clearly delineated responsibilities, and accepting that each of them has their own way of managing them, Snodgrass also says that assigning roles that didn't overlap was important. As president and CEO, Snodgrass focuses mostly on long-term vision, administration, financial planning and budgeting. Dean handles the production side, including equipment purchasing and crew scheduling. Drew is responsible for key client design/build sales. "This gives each of us our own space to work," he says. "In my experience, that is important."



David Snodgrass, middle, his brothers Dean and Drew work hard to avoid sibling rivalry at Dennis' 7 Dees.

Giving everyone some space has also worked for The Pattie Group, in Northeastern Ohio, where President Steve Pattie's three children all joined his company. "Our business is big enough and diverse enough that we're not on top of each other," says Jonas Pattie, the eldest son and director of sales and marketing. "Our paths cross with each other but we're not working hand in hand on every single detail. We have room to be our own persons and to be independent, while still making up a team."

Ira Bryck, director of the UMass Amherst Family Business Center says this is a good business model, whether family is involved or not. "Good employees need to be given the authority to get the job done in the way they see fit, to a reasonable

degree," he says. "Overlap (in job responsibilities) only leads to role confusion, second-guessing, and micromanaging. It's a good investment to discover what people are good at so that you don't spend time reinventing a wheel that will never be round."

Overcoming Entitlement. Another issue that often arises in family-owned businesses is a sense of entitlement. Family members may expect to be treated in a different manner than other employees, anticipate being hired for the business no matter what or may even want special privileges.

This happened with Eric Seatz, owner of ELS Landscaping & Lawn Service, Cedarburg, Wis., when he gave his brother a job. Seatz takes the blame for failing to set boundaries early on.

"I gave my brother some luxuries," he says. "I didn't make him punch in like the other guys and allowed him to use equipment for personal use. When I decided to make some changes, he took offense. I should have written a letter that laid out expectations and guidelines from the start. It's important to establish that you're hiring that person as an employee, not a brother. Then, you can enforce those expectations without feelings being hurt."

Seatz says that his brother left the company after this fallout, and though it took a little bit of work to patch things up and let go of some resentments, their relationship is strong again. "It's so important to be respectful and make sure you're not hurting your family," Seatz says. "You don't want to go to Thanksgiving dinner and be holding resentments against each other. It takes extra work and being careful with your wording when family is involved."



Eric Seatz, middle, at ELS Landscaping & Lawn Service had to part ways with his brother Todd (left) and dad, Tom.

Steve Pattie established rules that looked to eliminate any sense of entitlement that his kids might have felt. The kids had to earn their jobs in the business. They were expected to complete college and had to work for at least two other companies before they'd be considered for a position.

"We had jobs in the field starting in high school," says Carla Pattie-Fitzpatrick, executive assistant to her father. "We worked our way up and learned about the company from early on. We didn't just walk into a job."

"My motto is that with a family business you need to work twice as hard to get half the respect," says Brian Pattie, operation manager for the company's division on the west side of Cleveland and youngest of the Pattie children. "Society wants to picture you as having been handed a job, but we all had to start at the bottom and earn everything we received."

Bryck says this method has been employed by other successful family-run businesses. "It's considered one of the more common 'right' answers for entry into a family company, hoping it sets a standard that the company is a privilege, not a safety net," he says. "Aside from giving the adult child some legitimacy, it also gives them the confidence that they can make it in the 'real world' if the family business isn't a good match."

Separating Business from Family

Struggling to keep business and family separate is another hurdle that family-run businesses are constantly facing. Everyone has a different method of coping. For Snodgrass, talking business outside of the office is OK. "It's a big part of our lives," he says. "You certainly try to keep the conversation lighter at family gatherings and holidays, but you also don't need to pretend that side of your lives doesn't exist."

For Seatz, who had also hired his mother and father into his company, it was the flipside – bringing family issues into work – that caused a problem with his mother. Though she worked hard as an office administrator, his mom was bringing too much gossip and family drama into Seatz's business days. "I'd be trying to run a business and she'd be questioning me about why I wasn't going to a family gathering," Seatz says. "The problem was that she struggled to keep business and family separate."

The Pattie family certainly faced these issues as well. Brian Pattie says it was a big transition to learn how to keep family and business separate and says there were times when it was very difficult. "It came down to learning how to talk about it and when to talk about it," he says. "In the past, it wasn't so easy. Thanksgiving would turn into a management meeting. When you're always talking about work, and you don't get a break, it can burn you out. If I had a

The Pattie Group balances family and business relationships. From left: Jonas Pattie, Linda Pattie, Brian Pattie, Steve Pattie, Carla Pattie-Fitzpatrick and Jeremy Fitzpatrick.

bad day at another company and approached my dad about it, he'd talk to me like a father and give me some ideas. But since he's also the owner of the business, if I talked to him about a bad day, it turned into a meeting: 'Who are we going to fire? What do we need to change?' It suddenly became critical thinking on a Sunday night. So we learned to make those out-of-office work conversations more casual. We could bring up the issue, but decided not to troubleshoot until we get back in the office. You have to keep some of those issues where they belong."

Steve Pattie says it's come down to hats – knowing when to wear the "Dad hat" and when to wear the "boss hat." He literally has two hats (one that says "Dad" the other that says "boss") displayed prominently in his office. "It reminds me that I have two hats to wear and sometimes I have to take off the boss one and just be a dad," Pattie says. "It's a fine line to walk and it can be a lot of work to keep them separate, but it's paid off."



Hidden Gems

While it sounds like a lot of extra effort and stress for families that work together, there are some great upsides too. "Family can be a real asset," says Snodgrass. "They come with built-in loyalty to the company. They also come from the same or similar background. That makes for a lot of consistency and fit – something that can be harder to find with other employees. That often means that they contribute at a higher level. For me, even though we've faced challenges as a family business, we've worked through them and, as a result, I think that's allowed us to grow into a better company."

The Pattie family members all have their own reasons why they love the family business. Carla says she enjoys seeing her family regularly and likes that she gets to drive to work with her husband, who works as a fleet mechanic for the company. Jonas says he values the legacy. "There's something special about working for a company that has your name stamped on the side of the truck," he says.

"And we're leaving a legacy behind. The work we do will still be here long after we're gone. And by all of us working together, and bringing our own individual strengths to the table, collectively we can do some amazing things. To me, that makes it worth the work."

Making it work

There's a lot involved in turning any business into a success story, but that may be especially true of family-run businesses, where extra issues can lead to conflict. Ira Bryck, director of the UMass Amherst Family Business Center, says that in order to run a successful family business, you should keep these three things in mind.

Hire the best candidate. If your son or daughter isn't capable of doing the job, then they aren't going to do well. Some use the logic that there's a little "affirmative action for family" meaning that if they weren't the top candidate – but they were almost as good as the top candidate – they'll still do well in the position. That can work; family comes with more loyalty because they feel the glue of the family business, so that can make up for it.



Take time out. Bryck has assigned siblings to go out once a month for dinner and to talk about totally philosophical aspects of the business instead of getting lost in the weeds of it all. Many people never get the chance for that 10,000-foot view. What are the values that helped this business survive the Great Depression? Take time out for philosophy.

Get a flu shot. Metaphorically speaking, that is. You can build immunity to the diseases that are going to infect your company often by just discussing issues openly beforehand. There's also that famous line, "Sunshine is the best disinfectant." You need a special kind of transparency in a closely held company because there are too many nooks and crannies where dysfunctionality can fester. Be open and honest when you communicate.

The author is a frequent contributor to Lawn & Landscape magazine.