

MUDDY WATERS— THE WORKING WITH FAMILY BLUES



Families can be great for drama on TV but they are a potentially good or bad mixed bag in the workplace. If a family member isn't performing, it's better to 'go ugly early', says Terry Williams. They should be treated the same as any other employee.

ONE THEME OF THIS ISSUE IS 'family matters.' That sounds like the title of an 80s sitcom where conflict arises after the first act, it seems to have heightened at the end of the second act, yet the dad sorts it all out with some patronising moralising at the end—all with terrible clothes and hair.

That's not the kind of family matters *Employment Today* is talking about, but I think there is a parallel with families in the workplace—especially that three-act dramatic structure.

In the first act, an entrepreneurial business person through innovation, managed risk-taking and effort establishes a business and gets it through to a moderate level of success.

In the second act, the business is passed down to the next generation. Raised in an environment of hard work and sound business thinking, the business is grown and perhaps even transformed into something well beyond even the wildest aspirations of its original founder.

And in the third act, the grandson gets busted on meth-amphetamine charges and the only thing higher than himself is his own sense of entitlement.

GO UGLY EARLY

I gave a series of presentations around the country last year about engaging employees and building teams. One of my suggestions was that it would

be better for employees who neither fitted your workplace, nor achieved performance standards, to not be there.

This could be achieved by a rigorous recruitment process minimising the chances that they'd arrive in the first place, or a managed process if the lack of fit and performance wasn't identified until it was too late—following all the dotted i's and all the crossed t's of the law and due process.

The general thrust of my point was that it was better to deal with such situations early before they demotivated others in the team or had other negative flow-on effects. "Go ugly early," I say. Better to deal with a pimple than a volcano.

People would come up for a chat afterwards and share tales of the 'rotten apples' spoiling their barrels.

ALL IN THE FAMILY

In probably about half of these cases, the employer had a beef with an employee who also happened to be a family member. This muddied the waters somewhat, they reckoned, when it came to my sage and independent advice to go ugly early and deal with it as soon as possible.

I disagreed then and disagree now—it makes it even more important to deal with it right away. This at least lessens the stress to the employer and the inevitable damage to the

business and the central familial relationship—plus strains and breaks of other family ties when people take sides. (I think this is how the Hatfields and McCoys started.)

Quite apart from the drama of having to fire a sister-in-law or the irrationality of delaying that action, even if the sister-in-law is an adequate performer some workplaces have nepotism risks.

If it's your business and you can do what you want to, that's one thing. Remember that episode of *Friends* where Brad Pitt showed up in a cameo role while, in real life, he was married to Jennifer Aniston? Well, that didn't turn out too well, did it?

ON THE LIST

The Government has a list of guidelines online for employing family members. (Does anyone else find it concerning that the Government consider themselves experts at employing family members? I meant the New Zealand Government, not the North Korean one.)

I like how in their list, they stipulate that they're referring to people you're married to, civil unioned with or in a de facto relationship with. (As opposed to a *de jour* relationship?)

They're very clear to point out that they're not talking about your ex. You're fine to employ your ex. I guess New Zealand's too small.

Accounting firms have similar lists of advice. Many recommend

that if your intention is to employ your kids and one day hand over the keys to them, that you should send them out into the big wide world first—to gain different perspectives, experiences and network.

Accounting firms recommend this, as do organised crime families—and for much the same reason. How much stress did Chris and Adriana cause Tony Soprano? Well, that didn't turn out too well, did it?

SAME RULES, SAME EXPECTATIONS

So, family matters might range from inheritances and intergenerational business ownership to employing family members or 'bring your daughter to work day' (which is a terrible idea if you own a strip club.)

Employing family members should be treated the same as employing anyone else. The same rules, expectations, support and remuneration should apply. That said, obviously you'd like to groom them for future leadership and you should have a structure in place for this—as indeed you should for any future leaders.

The only real difference should be how much worse it is when they forget your birthday morning tea.

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