



ASPEN FAMILY BUSINESS GROUP, LLC

DEEP RELATIONSHIPS. ENDURING LEGACIES.

Ceremony, Commitment and Intent

By Joe Paul

The more complex the family business issues the more important ceremony becomes. Eight years ago the Smith family was in chaos over ownership and management issues. Now they are a role model for family governance.

At the 7th Annual Gathering the Smith Family Assembly the 6 members of the Smith Family Council stood behind six chairs arranged in a circle in the middle of a hotel meeting room. There are 3 family members from Generation-3 and three from Generation-4. The remaining 18 members of the Smith Family Assembly become quiet and take seats as they prepare to observe the Annual Meeting of their Family Council.

One at a time in no particular order each family member crosses the boundary of the circle of chairs. As they cross the boundary each of the 6 say “As I enter the Circle of our Family Council I promise to be a steward of our legacy and to always act in the best interests of our family.”

Harold Smith, age 68, a member of G--3 is the Chairperson of the Council. He calls the meeting to order and says, “As is our custom, we begin each Annual Family Council Meeting by hearing our Mission Statement and the Code of Conduct for Council members read aloud. Cousin Ellen, would you do us the honor?”

A ceremony’s power is generated by intent, organization and symbolic meaning along with patience and creativity. Many of us are predisposed to first think of ceremonies as mumbo-jumbo practiced in exotic places or by impressionable, a-rational people in our culture. But ceremonies are not necessarily religious -- they can be very practical and help people connect with what is most important within their family system. Ceremony is used to make a point about something in a way that people will remember the point. It does so by differentiating an object, a place, an event, or person so that we remember it. And we remember it because in a ceremony the object, place, action, event or person becomes symbolic of an idea. Family legacies are collections of memories that usually stand out because of remarkable events that were either intentional (ceremonial) or accidental.

An annual tax exempt gift check that comes from your grandmother's accountant by mail will leave much less of an impression than the same check handed to you by your grandmother as she gives you her blessing for how you are living your life.

Interrupting the normal work day in your office by surprising a loyal employee with a vase of flowers and your public appreciation of an action they took will build a lot more good will mumbling "good job" as you pass her desk.

And in the Smith family described above, everyone, both Council members and observers alike, are more likely to feel they are part of something that is serious and important because of Harold's ceremonial way of leading. It would be much less memorable if Harold had said instead, "Well folks, we have a hell of a list to get through today so I suggest we get started."

If you are interested in being more purposeful in the events connected with your family and business you will enjoy a recently published book called, The Power of Ceremony, by Linda Neale.