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IN THE HUNT

## The Fighting Business Brothers and Other Tales

By BRENT BOWERS

WHEN a fistfight breaks out between two men in the office, you have to figure that the ill feeling between them runs deep.

Especially if they are brothers and business partners who are duking it out in front of their horrified employees.

Ernie Doud Jr., who helped the parties eventually sort out their difference, said: “It was the most petty conflict I can remember. They bloodied each other up pretty good.”

Mr. Doud, the president of Doud Hausner & Associates ([www.doudhausner.net](http://www.doudhausner.net)) in Glendale, Calif., has been counseling family firms on matters large and small for decades. He specializes in what he calls “transitions,” which can mean anything from persuading an autocratic patriarch to relinquish the reins to advising a third generation of owners on how to share power.

And the catalyst of that fight? The 20-year-old pickup truck the brothers used to haul equipment around their California agribusiness had a broken clutch. One of them wanted to fix the clutch, the other wanted to buy a new truck.

Mr. Doud traced the bad blood between the brothers to a childhood spat, and learned they had been feuding for years over everything from what crops to plant to when to irrigate them. Most important, Mr. Doud knew that the parents, basking in retirement in a faraway location, still owned the business.

So he hopped in his car, drove to their home, told them what was going on and asked them, “How important is it to you to keep the farm together?”

The father, Mr. Doud recalled, replied: “We don’t care. We did what we wanted to; now, they should do what they want to do.” This was news to his two sons, who, when they heard it, split up the property. They have since become friends.

Mr. Doud has a huge storehouse of anecdotes about putting out fires in family firms, and the lesson he draws from most of them is pretty much the same: Figure out what is eating the kinfolk, tell them what he has learned and let them work out a solution.

“Families left to their own devices often fail to have the conversations they should be having,” he said. “It’s our job to nudge them into talking about it.”

Listening to him got me to thinking about a larger question: the foolishness of trying to solve all your problems without outside help. Tenacity alone can’t always win the day. A healthy dose of pragmatism is called for, and turning to experts in times of trouble should be the first reflex, whether it be a friend or colleague or a professional consultant like Mr. Doud. There are other options, including seeking advice at Small Business Development centers ([www.sba.gov/sbdc/](http://www.sba.gov/sbdc/)) that the [Small Business Administration](#) operates in every state, enrolling in a crash course in entrepreneurship at a nearby university, or seeking out a specialist at a national network of volunteer business counselors known as Score ([www.score.org](http://www.score.org)).

Joey Tamer, president of S.O.S. Inc. in Marina del Rey, Calif. ([www.joeytamer.com](http://www.joeytamer.com)), said one path to wisdom for fledgling entrepreneurs would be to offer their services to a start-up company for stock instead of salary. That way, they can get a crash course in crisis management.

Early in her consulting career, Ms. Tamer said, she helped inventors, curators and artists build businesses from scratch to the point where they could quit their day jobs. Without her intervention, she believes, many would have floundered.

“My secret: I was a realist,” she said. “Most entrepreneurs are dreamers. But dreaming doesn’t pay the rent. I’d say: You have to do these eight things. I’d know when they should turn down a contract. I also gauged their personalities; I could tell whether somebody did or didn’t have the discipline and perseverance to follow a project through to the end.”

The big challenge at many family firms is maintaining the peace. Mr. Doud says a grievance can fester for years or even decades until the right words bring it out into the open and pave the way to a resolution.

He recounted the story of a family business that owned a huge expanse of property in California, whose patriarch had put one of his sons in charge. Under his stewardship, the firm lost money year after year, exasperating his siblings and their adult children, or nearly 30 heirs in all.

Invited to the annual family retreat to help get to the root of the predicament, Mr. Doud interviewed the clan one by one. He heard a great deal of carping about the chosen son's supposed incompetence, but paradoxically, also got the message that the family didn't want him to rock the boat.

His very presence, however, forced a showdown. The manager, aware of what was going on around him, stood up at one point during the retreat and revealed a long suppressed secret. "I know you all think I'm a lousy manager, and you're probably right," he said, according to Mr. Doud. "I'd have to be dead to miss the signals."

"But I want you to know that, 25 years ago, I was a young naval officer with a wife and a new baby and I was doing exactly what I wanted to be doing. Then one day, I got a call from Pop. He said, 'I need you at the ranch.' I resigned my naval commission, and I have been here ever since. But the first time I was ever able to make my own decision was last December, on the day that Pop died."

In an instant, Mr. Doud said: "All the tension in the room crumbled into dust. Everybody rushed over to him and surrounded him, giving him their sympathy and support. It was because he spoke the truth."

That short speech changed everything. The family sold off most of the land, reinvested the money in real estate, parceled out management of it and began receiving checks in the mail instead of paying off loans.

There you have it: another happy ending. If like Mr. Doud's clients, you had to call in an outsider to rescue you from a looming crisis, tell me all.

*Brent Bowers, a longtime small-business editor at The New York Times and The Wall Street Journal, is author of The Eight Patterns of Highly Effective Entrepreneurs, due out in paperback next week (Doubleday).*

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