



## THE JUGGLING ACT

### “A First Person Account of Family Business Joys and Challenges”

By Kathleen Thurmond

---

As the youngest child in a family of six, I never imagined that I would be running my father’s company. At the age of 6 or 7, I would accompany my father on Saturdays to fill his soda machine while he did paperwork or fixed a piece of equipment. My reward was always a chocolate soda which I relished.

I remember the dry cleaning and laundry smells and the interesting, robot- like machinery. It was an exciting playground for a young girl. Walking into the buildings 36 years later to step into my father’s shoes brought back rich memories filled with wonder, excitement, and a big dose of fear that I would now be at the helm of his company...alone.

I am a family business survivor, the youngest in my clan who took over the reins from my father who fell into ill health. My siblings were into their own careers or uninterested, so I stepped in. Not an uncommon story. I was under-prepared and knew it so I read all I could find on the subject, did an MBA at USC and asked for help from my peers. In hindsight I wish I had found a coach and consulting organization to help my family with all of the changes we went through to keep the business growing and our relationships intact.

It would have helped to learn about the impact birth order has on operating a family organization. It would have helped me to know that families often view the “baby” as the family favorite and as either lazy or not as smart and capable as the older siblings. It would also have helped to know that as the youngest my feelings of inadequacy were normal. Why? Simply because everyone else had been around so much longer and knew more so I was always trying to catch up. I wish I had had the insight to seek outside help to heal the rift between my siblings and me over the normal jealousies and miscommunications that come with mixing business and family. It all could have been so much smoother. Maybe that’s why I tried raising my daughter, building the business and getting an MBA all at the same time. I didn’t give enough attention to my relationships and they suffered because of it. It took my 14 year old daughter getting angry with me because she didn’t get to see me enough for me to examine what I was doing and to change.

What I discovered was how enormous the task it is to maintain strong family ties, negotiate the ever changing world of business and stay true to the company’s vision.

Management seminars and business classes teach that good business decisions require professional relationships among personnel. It's difficult to achieve with family members. James Collins in Good to Great writes about getting the right people on the bus. What if one of the wrong people on the bus is a sibling? How do you correct that? How do you structure a company so that family decisions and business decisions are not in conflict? During my 11 years of running the family business I did not come up with a satisfactory answer to this simple yet difficult question: how to balance family and business? At the time, my business advisors and I concluded I had no choice but to remove my siblings from the Board and replace them with qualified business people.

While this decision was essential for the well-being of the business and its 50 employees, it challenged our family relationships. I had been worn down by the criticism of my older siblings who had very little business experience but felt a deep sense of ownership for the company.

The difficult move of re-establishing the Board led to rapid growth and an elevated standing in the industrial laundry industry. This, in turn resulted in a successful sale of the company with great financial benefit to all family members. While it should have been a time of joy and celebration it was a period met with silence from the family. So much could have been resolved with the assistance of a family business consultant.

Being in a business with people you love and trust can be tremendously fulfilling if you plan it and seek outside help when family and business issues conflict. After 2 years, my family is healing nicely as we have come to appreciate the success that the family business has afforded us.