

FAMILY MATTERS Janet Wyllie

## Roundtables prove valuable for family business

Life as the owner or manager of a business is a day-to-day learning experience. New challenges arise whether welcome or not and all employees look to management for guidance and decisions. How do those challenges change when the business is a family business? Wouldn't it be great to meet with people who have been through similar situations and use their experience as a guide?

For the past 22 years, the Grand Rapids Area Chamber of Commerce has offered family business members the opportunity to share experiences and ideas through the Family Owned Business Roundtable, part of the CEO Roundtable program.

The CEO Roundtable program has provided a rewarding learning experience that has benefited more than 2,000 local business people in a variety of industries including advertising, manufacturing, retail, finance and nonprofits. There are currently two roundtables dedicated to family-owned businesses that meet on a monthly basis throughout the year.

Camille Donnelly, Donnelly Leadership Counseling, was part of the team that helped develop the family business roundtables at the chamber. She says, "It is a testament to the success of these roundtables that they have been helping family businesses since 1987."

The roundtables have been so beneficial that many participants

have continued with the program year after year. For instance, Stewart Healey, president of Handicomp Inc., joined the program in 1994 and is now one of the roundtable facilitators.

Healey explains his roundtable as half business/half therapy.

"You don't want to lose the family for the business, and you don't want to lose the business

Sara Wesche, Summit Training Source Inc., the program provides a sounding board for dealing with family issues in a confidential forum.

Wesche — whose mother is president/CEO and whose brother is the general manager — is the marketing director for the safety and compliance training company. Her mother and brother have also

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for the family," he said. During his roundtable sessions, Healey said his group talks about everything from generational issues and sibling rivalry to 401(k) plans and insurance.

Janice Barnes, CFP, Northview Financial Services, has been part of the program for more than 10 years and says her roundtable gives her a chance to gain insight from other business owners on how to solve problems. Barnes, who works with her sister, said that when siblings work together in a business relationship, there is a need to protect the family relationship.

Generational issues and transition are common topics that are discussed in both roundtables. For third-year roundtable participant

participated in the CEO Roundtable program.

At 28, Wesche is the same age as the business. "I didn't see myself going into the business and thought I would do my own thing," she said. During her junior year in college, she decided to join the family business. Wesche added, "Who better to be in business with than family?"

Having members of the roundtable from different generations is helpful, Donnelly said.

"You may have someone in the group who is 60 and someone who is 30. They can share their perspectives and help the other generation see an argument from a viewpoint that they had not thought of."

Healey said the roundtable

helps family business members realize that the issues they are dealing with are not unique. "You think only your family has challenges working together in business, but you learn that other family-owned businesses are having the same struggles."

Donnelly feels that having facilitated groups is a key. "It is hard for family business members to talk about family issues in a group setting. They may feel as if they are being disloyal. It takes some coaching to get participants to talk about the family members." Once they are able to feel comfortable in the group and share, they are able to learn from one another.

The topics discussed in the roundtables are a 50/50 split between family issues and business issues. Many of the issues with family dynamics take years to play out, and in the meantime, there are daily business issues such as health care, benefits and day-to-day leadership.

Barnes compared her roundtable to an informal board of directors with whom she can discuss those problems she wouldn't discuss with other employees. Like a board of directors, the roundtables are completely confidential. Participants openly express their concerns in a setting that would be difficult to duplicate.

With the variety of businesses in attendance, Barnes said she is able to get a better handle on how the economy is affecting other industries. This information helps

her make decisions on how to move forward with her own financial services businesses.

The CEO Roundtable program requires a one-year commitment to a two-hour meeting at the same time each month. The roundtables consist of 10-12 participants who each have the opportunity to host a meeting and have the group focus exclusively on offering suggestions, innovative solutions and strategies for his or her particular interest.

While the benefits of the roundtable are priceless to a business, the cost for participating is only \$60 a year per participant for chamber members. If you are interested in joining this program, registrations are currently being accepted for the spring series (April 2009-March 2010). For more information, call Bridget Meyers at (616) 771-0342.

*Janet Wyllie is vice president of membership programs and events at the Grand Rapids Area Chamber of Commerce and a member of the Family Business Alliance board of directors. Family Business Alliance is a collaboration spearheaded by the Grand Rapids Area Chamber of Commerce and the Family Owned Business Institute of Seidman College of Business, Grand Valley State University, and supported by family-owned businesses and service providers. For more information, visit [www.fbagr.org](http://www.fbagr.org) or contact Mary Novello, FBA director, at (616) 331-6827.*