

## Why does showing your emotions during family business decisions sometimes make things worse?

*How family members manage emotional boundaries shapes whether a strategic decision feels fair.*

ETHEL BRUNDIN · JEAN-CHARLES LANGUILAIRE

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A family gathers on a Friday evening to settle the future of their company. Wine, snacks, the living-room sofa. By the end of the night one daughter has been asked to step outside and cool down, another has gone silent, and the parents are left wondering what just happened. The decision they came to announce, who becomes the next CEO, was technically made. Whether it was a good decision is a different question.

Ethel Brundin and Jean-Charles Languilaire follow exactly this kind of meeting, and their conclusion is uncomfortable for anyone raised on the standard advice about family communication. Showing emotion is not the same as managing it well. In a family firm, where the line between "this is business" and "this is family" is never fixed, the way each person draws that line is what decides whether everyone walks away satisfied.

### WHAT THE RESEARCHERS DID

The study is built around one carefully reconstructed case. The authors drew on interview material from a larger project on emotions and ownership, collected over more than a year, and assembled it into a narrative of a single succession meeting at "Escape Conference and SPA", a disguised Swedish hospitality business then in its second and third generation, with 209 employees and a turnover of 244 million euros.

Five family members sit at the centre. Margret is the CEO and mother. Matthew, her husband, joined the firm decades ago and holds no shares. Their three children complete the group: Ben, the deputy CEO;

Brenda, who built and ran the spa division; and Denise, the youngest, who works in banking and owns nothing of the business. Peter, an external accountant, is also present. The parents arrive with a plan already formed, Ben as CEO, Ben and Brenda holding the majority of shares, Denise offered a small stake.

The analysis is interpretive rather than statistical. The researchers read each person's own account of the evening and traced how they interpreted three clues, time, space, and relationships, and how those interpretations governed which emotions each felt able to show. The theoretical engine is emotion boundary management, built on work-family boundary theory and on Hochschild's distinction between authentic display, surface acting, and deep acting. This is a conceptual contribution illustrated by one rich case, not a large-sample test. Its value lies in the mechanism it makes visible.

### KEY INSIGHTS

#### ***The same room, read five different ways***

Everyone attended the same meeting. Nobody experienced the same meeting. Ben treated it as a work event that happened to take place at his parents' home, so he held back both his quiet satisfaction and his irritation at his sister. Brenda read it as a family council, Friday night, the family living room, wine on the table, and felt fully entitled to show her anger. Denise saw the accountant on the sofa and concluded that no real feeling could be shown at all. Three siblings, three incompatible rulebooks, all in play during the same forty minutes.

### ***Showing real feelings can still backfire***

Brenda did the thing communication coaches recommend. She was authentic: she named her frustration, stood up, let it into her voice. In the framework's terms her displayed emotion matched her felt emotion, which counts as emotional balance. It did not help her. Because she misjudged the rule about an outsider being in the room, her honesty read as a loss of control, her mother asked her to leave, and within days Brenda herself felt she had overstepped.

### ***Silence carries the longest bill***

Denise is the most quietly damaging case in the study. She wanted in. She had wanted in for years. But the family rule against showing private feeling in front of an outsider pinned her in place, and she said nothing. The authors describe surface acting that has hardened into emotional stamina, a stuck, long-term state rather than a passing discomfort. Over the years her unspoken jealousy turned into what family systems theory calls emotional cutoff, a slow withdrawal from the family itself. This is the most underappreciated finding in the paper: the person who stays silent in the meeting is not neutral, but accumulating a cost the family will pay later and that no one in the room can see at the time.

### ***A decision can be made and still be poor***

The authors are exact about what quality means. A decision is high quality only if every participating family member ends up satisfied with it. By that standard the Escape succession is a low-quality decision dressed up as a settled one. Ben and Margret are content; Brenda, Denise, and Matthew are not. The parents announced an outcome. They did not produce agreement.

## **TAKEAWAYS FOR FAMILY BUSINESS LEADERS**

For owners and advisors, the practical lesson is that the emotional architecture of a meeting is a design choice, not a neutral backdrop.

### ***Name the room before you fill it***

Most of the damage at Escape came from people silently disagreeing about whether they were in a family setting or a business one. Margret saw it only afterwards, that a conference room during working hours would have sent a clearer signal than the family sofa on a Friday evening. Decide out loud what kind of meeting this is before the hard part begins.

### ***Watch the quiet ones more closely than the loud ones***

Brenda's outburst was visible and got a response, however clumsy. Denise's silence got nothing, and it was the more serious problem. The member who withdraws is often carrying more unresolved emotion than the one who erupts.

### ***Treat no objection with suspicion***

Margret took the long silence and eventual quiet for something close to consent. It was not. In a close-knit family where showing negative emotion breaks a rule, silence is the least reliable sign of agreement you can get.

## **WHY IT MATTERS**

The study lands in a literature that has tended to treat the family as a single unit with one shared view during big decisions. Brundin and Languilaire push hard against that picture. They show a family pulling in three directions at once, each member running a private rulebook for what may be felt and shown. That reframes succession conflict itself: the trouble is not always disagreement about the decision, but mismatched and unspoken rules about how emotion is allowed into the conversation.

The authors tie this to emotion governance, the formal and informal mechanisms a family uses to handle feeling. The Escape family has almost none. There is no external board member, decisions are made nearly unilaterally, and there is little room for open dialogue. The encouraging implication is that such mechanisms can be built, and that building them might change how strategic decisions actually land.

The dynamic is not unique to family firms. Any setting where people hold overlapping roles, a founding team, a board, two merging companies, runs on the same competition between emotional rulebooks. The family business is simply an unusually concentrated version of a general problem, which is why the authors argue their model travels well beyond it.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. Set the frame explicitly. Before a high-stakes meeting, state whether it is a family conversation or a business one, and choose the place and time to match. Ambiguity about the setting is where the misreadings begin.
2. Separate announcing from deciding. The Escape parents arrived with the outcome chosen and presented it as open for input. Be clear about whether you are consulting or informing, and do not blur the two.
3. Build in a second conversation. Strong emotions need time. A meeting that ends in silence or an outburst is the start of the discussion, not the end of it.
4. Create a route for the quiet members. Someone who cannot speak in front of an outsider may speak freely in a one-to-one beforehand. Make that channel exist.

5. Introduce light emotion governance. Even informal norms, who attends, how disagreement is raised, when a decision can be revisited, give a

family somewhere to put feeling other than into the decision itself.

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#### CEFEO AUTHORS



**Ethel Brundin**

*Professor Emerita*

*Jönköping International Business School*

ethel.brundin@ju.se

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