

Integrating Family Systems Theory

Interview with David Bork, pioneer in the field of counseling family businesses, by Raz Ingrasci



David Bork

For 25 years HQP graduate David Bork has been a leading pioneer in the field of counseling family businesses. Integrating Family Systems Theory with sound business practice, he has had in-depth, long-term involvement with more than 325 families in business and has assisted them in charting their way through every imaginable family business situation. He is the author of Family Business, Risky Business and has been featured in Fortune, The Wall Street Journal, Money and Nation's Business. David is also a member of the Hoffman Advisory Board.

Raz: You and your associates successfully assist family-owned businesses to overcome dysfunctional family behaviors that are being acted out in the business. The Aspen Family Business Group now serves major international corporations and is at the top of its field. How do you affect change?

David: We face a broad spectrum of issues that range from succession or transfer of control between the generations, death of the founder, sale of the business, and the complexity of dealing with wealth. Our focus is to build a comprehensive business plan that accommodates the current and future needs of the owning family. The "keys" to implement these plans are often imbedded in the psychology of the family. The Hoffman Process is one of the tools we use to help families let go of the negative past and move forward in a constructive manner.

Raz: Why do family patterns tend to show up in our work life?

David: Contrary to popular belief, our lives are not compartmentalized into work, home, hobby, recreation, past and present. Life is one large experience and we take all of our life experiences with us wherever we go. We all have learned patterns of interaction in our family of origin and we simply repeat them in the next experience wherever it might be. We may not be aware of doing it but it happens all the same.

Raz: It seems then that all organizations inevitably create the kinds of pressures on individuals that can spontaneously regress people to the emotions and behaviors learned in childhood.

David: Yes, that is true. We do regress to the emotions and behaviors learned in childhood. There is a body of knowledge called "Family Systems Theory," that speaks to this phenomena. The family is a system; in the system there are rules for how one functions and expresses one's self. We can and do learn other patterns of functioning, but, under pressure or stress, we revert to the pattern of our family of origin unless we learn how to circumvent reverting to that original pattern.

Raz: Organizations often have a dual nature. On the one hand empowering us by being part of a larger body and on the other hand stifling the very creativity we need to make those larger contributions. What is a person to do?

David: The sooner we learn that life is a series of compromises and that nothing is perfect, the happier we are likely to be in all parts of our lives. Many persons have a notion that everything must be "perfect" and the only way they can live is to have things "just so." In corporate life there are "trade offs" and one must be clear about them. Learning to negotiate and compromise is a basic life skill, often learned in one's family. One would hope that it is possible to negotiate an acceptable work situation that is acceptable from an emotional, creative and work content point of view. If not, the only sane thing to do is to look for other employment where your creative talent is valued and appreciated.

Raz: In addition to financial security, what is really at stake — emotionally and spiritually — for people in their work lives?

David: The answer to this question lies in the research on motivation. The research tells us that people are motivated by the following:

Recognition — we all love to be acknowledged for the contributions that we make.

Input — each person wants to be able to influence their circumstances. It is when we are able to contribute and see the results of our contributions that we feel happiest about our work.

Intrinsically Interesting — our work must hold our attention. When the work, by nature, is interesting, we all focus at a higher level.. Corporate work life, indeed all work situations, should provide these basics for it leads to a life of greater satisfaction. When we have them, we have emotional and spiritual balance but without them, life is pretty bleak.

Raz: You and members of your family have participated in the HQP. What did you derive personally and/or professionally from that experience?

David: The nature of my work has caused me to look at many of my family of origin issues. The HQP was by far the best thing of that genre that I have ever done for myself and my family. Through The HQP I gained insights into my self, my family of origin, my wife and children that I never got through education or traditional therapeutic avenues. Because I was able to release myself from many of my family of origin patterns, I feel I have a much better relationship with family members, that I am more insightful and effective in my work and have a greater sense of inner peace. Because of the HQP I am more "comfortable in my own skin" than ever before in my life. The Dark Side work in the HQP opened my eyes to aspects about myself that, previously, I simply couldn't or was unwilling to examine. That piece alone was worth the time invested in the Process.

The work I did through the Process made it possible to appropriately grieve the death of my mother. I completed the Process prior to her death and thus was free of the negative aspects of our relationship. When she died I was able to celebrate her for all that she was and not dwell on other aspects of our relationship.

Raz: Over the years you have referred executives to the Process. What does the Process have to offer these individuals?

David: I think that the HQP offers executives an avenue to personal growth and self insight that, once complete, will make them more effective in their work, increase their sense of satisfaction in all parts of their lives and help them to unhook from the negative patterns of their lives. The HQP offers a structured setting for doing this important work under the direction of a caring, highly skilled professional staff.

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