

CELEBRATING in a FAMILY BUSINESS

Let's make a toast.

BY CHARLIE CARR

“We really want to have a culture of celebrating, but in reality, we suck at it.” A recent statement from a family business leader echoes sentiments expressed by family businesses nationwide for decades. Whether a business has 10 employees or thousands, the challenge of cultivating a culture of celebration is universal. Perhaps it is time to reflect on the true meaning of celebration and adjust our behavior to align with the culture we aspire to create.

An analogy from the farming world sheds light on this challenge. We plant in the spring, but we can't celebrate because we're uncertain about the weather and the success of our crops. We begin harvesting in mid-summer, but even if the initial harvest is promising, we remain uncertain about its ultimate outcome or if we'll complete it before the first freeze. After the harvest, even if everything went well, we store and sell the produce throughout the year, leaving us uncertain about prices and product freshness. And just as we sell the last of the previous year's crop in mid-summer, we find ourselves starting the next harvest, making it seem odd to celebrate the past year when the success of this year's crop is uncertain.

Most family businesses are not akin to baseball teams that celebrate winning the World Series at the end of the year. If that were the sole criterion for celebration, only one out of 30 teams would celebrate each year. Businesses are continuous endeavors with inherent uncertainties in each step and season. However, the behaviors we celebrate multiply, resulting in more of the desired behavior. Additionally, working in an environment that values celebration is more enjoyable. Existing staff members are more likely to stay, and attracting new talent becomes easier. Family businesses possess unique cultures, and celebrations should be a defining feature that sets them apart.

But what constitutes a celebration?

According to Merriam-Webster, it involves marking something with “festivities or other deviation from routine.” Celebrations can take various forms, such as parties, happy hours or large gatherings. They can also involve providing breakfast or lunch for the office or a specific group. Personal acknowledgments, such as pulling someone aside to recognize and thank them, can also serve as celebrations. It could be as simple as taking someone to



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lunch or giving them tickets to a game. While grand celebrations are enjoyable and noteworthy, small and personal celebrations can hold even greater significance for some of your staff members.

Now that we have committed to making celebration an integral part of our culture (which you implicitly agreed to by reading this far), let's explore some strategies for making it happen. Regardless of whether it has been a financially successful year or a challenging one, there is always something to celebrate.

FAMILY CELEBRATIONS

While our focus primarily lies on benefiting staff and customers, we should not overlook celebrating with our family and owners. This can take the form of an annual or semi-annual dinner, a family retreat or another special event. Taking the time to recognize and appreciate our collective accomplishments allows the younger generation to witness and understand that celebration is an inherent part of our culture. It may even pique their interest in joining the business.

SIGNIFICANT MILESTONES

When was the business founded? Don't miss the opportunity to celebrate significant milestones like 100 years or even 10 years in operation. These occasions are the obvious ones to acknowledge. Seek out other key anniversaries and celebrate them as well. When did you launch a pivotal product line or open a landmark store? Let's not overlook important moments simply because we didn't think about them in advance.

FUN AND UNIQUE CELEBRATIONS

Remember Grandpa Harry, the founder of your family business who passed away 20 years ago? Perhaps it's time to start celebrating his birthday annually. Bring cakes to each location and throw a lighthearted party with your staff. When times are good, this celebration can be more extravagant, but even during lean years, there are still ways to commemorate the occasion. We've



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seen businesses in Kentucky celebrate Derby Day, while others in California and Texas mark the beginning of rodeo season.

STAFF RECOGNITION

Continually be on the lookout for staff members who exemplify your company values, accomplish great things or take the initiative to innovate. This might be a department or group within your business that successfully implemented a new feature, created a new product, executed a successful sales campaign or survived another tax season. Reward their behavior. It can be as simple as treating them to lunch or providing a gift card, or as elaborate as publicly acknowledging them in a company-wide meeting. Each leader should regularly identify someone to acknowledge. If you can't find someone to celebrate at least once a month, it's a sign of complacency.

ACHIEVEMENT OF GOALS

Let's not become so fixated on the next goal that we forget to pause and acknowledge the one we just achieved. Even if the upcoming goal or milestone is more significant than the current one, your staff deserve recognition for their accomplishments. This acknowledgment might be the encouragement they need to tackle the next challenge with enthusiasm.

BIRTHDAYS AND ANNIVERSARIES

Decades ago, during a leadership seminar, a fellow attendee mentioned that he personally delivers a card and gift to each staff member on their birthday and work anniversary. This was no small feat,

since he oversaw a call center with over 1,000 employees! The rest of us were amazed and asked how he managed to find the time. His response was profound: "Those people are my job." He prioritized his staff above everything else because he recognized their importance. Remarkable!

CELEBRATE THROUGHOUT THE BUSINESS CYCLE

Remember the farming analogy from the beginning? Even though there may be setbacks at each stage of the process, let's continue to celebrate every step. It is part of our culture, or the culture we are now striving to establish. Make a party out of starting to plant, provide pizzas when planting is completed, serve bagels when harvesting begins and throw another celebration when the harvest is finished. Personally acknowledge individuals who went above and beyond during each cycle, perhaps by treating them to lunch or offering a gift card.

Your business is unique, and so should be your approach to celebrations. It is crucial to decide to make celebration an inherent part of your culture and take proactive and deliberate steps in that direction. Instead of solely focusing on the next challenge and its associated risks, take a moment to celebrate your recent achievements. Proper celebrations will inspire staff to embody your company values, foster loyalty, and differentiate you from competitors. Let it be your competitors who "suck at celebrating," not you. **FB**

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