

The Experience, Expression and Effects of Anger in Family Business

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Abstract

Family business consultants are reporting an increase in conflict and anger in family firms. Intergenerational conflict, sibling rivalry and succession issues all fuel a multitude of negative emotions, including anger. However, family business research gives little guidance about how anger operates in the family firm. This paper draws on the growing emotion literature to develop a series of testable propositions about family co-workers' experience and expression of anger, and how this anger affects the family business. A greater understanding of the potential harm and possible benefits of anger will benefit all who study, advise or work in family business.

Introduction

The incidence of anger in the workplace is increasing at an unprecedented rate (Moss Kanter, 2010; McShulskis, 1996). A recent poll of American workers found that 25% of workers experience chronic work-related anger (Gibson & Barsade, 1999). In response to this upsurge, management researchers have recently begun to focus greater attention on the emotion of anger (for an excellent review, see Gibson & Callister, 2010). Family business consultants also report an increased incidence of anger, especially in small businesses that are second generation, or in first generation firms that are undergoing succession (Fiore, 2007). However, despite the reported increase of anger, family business researchers have yet to examine how this emotion functions in family firms.

The successful survival of family businesses is dependent on functional relationships among family co-workers (family members who work together in a family business). Smooth, positive interactions can give the family firm a strong strategic advantage, whereas emotional issues arising from negatively charged interactions can be highly detrimental to business performance (Cabrera-Suarez, Saa-Perez, & Garcia-Almeida, 2001; Danes, Zuiker, Kean, & Arbuthnot, 1999; Eddleston & Kellermanns, 2007; Schulze, Lubatkin, & Dino, 2003; Schulze, Lubatkin, Dino, & Buchholtz, 2001; Sirmon & Hitt, 2003). Thus, there is a pressing

need to understand the role that a powerful, increasingly common emotion such as anger plays in family co-worker interactions and its subsequent impact on their interpersonal relationships and the family firm.

According to the Carstensen et al. (1996), close personal relationships are likely to evoke the greatest intensity of emotional experience. Since workplaces and families are two settings where individuals spend a considerable amount of time, they provide rich contexts for research in emotions (Schieman, 2006). However, to our knowledge, no-one has explored the overlap or intersection of these two contexts that occurs in the family business setting. This overlap creates a unique mix and intensification of communication and behavioral patterns. Living and working with family members presents special challenges. In a non-family workplace, frequent interactions between employees increase the likelihood of experiencing and expressing anger during workplace interactions (Geddes & Stickney, 2011).

For family co-workers who live together or socialize regularly outside work, the frequency of interactions is greater still. Therefore it is not surprising that conflict is very common in family businesses (Eddleston et al., 2007; Kellermanns & Eddleston, 2004). Such conflict is often accompanied by the powerful emotion of anger (Van Kleef & Côté, 2007). Hence, the co-mingling of work and family domains makes it highly likely that family co-workers will experience and express anger when they interact with each other.

This paper makes a unique contribution to the family business literature. Although family business researchers have studied conflict, they have largely ignored the emotions that arise from such encounters. In particular, the dynamics of family anger and its impact on the family firm remain unexplored. In this conceptual paper, we redress this gap by building a theory of how the experience and expression of anger among family co-workers impacts the family firm. Specifically, we explore how anger affects workplace behaviour, organizational climate and long-term family relationships.

The emotion of anger

Ekman (1999) identified anger as one of twelve innate, basic human emotions found in all cultures. Anger is defined as “a psycho-biological state or condition consisting of subjective feelings that vary in intensity, from mild irritation or annoyance to intense fury and rage, with concomitant activation or arousal of the autonomic nervous system” (Spielberger, Reheiser, & Sydeman, 1995 : 213). Anger also involves a cognitive appraisal that another person is a

threat (Canary et al. 1998), or has harmed the agent in some way (Schieman, 2006). In addition to its physical, emotional and cognitive components, anger also has a social/relational component (Gibson & Callister, 2010) in that the experience of anger generally occurs in response to the behaviours or attitudes of other people. Socially, anger functions as a means of communication (Levenson 1994), alerting the self and others that a perceived wrong has occurred (Gibson & Callister, 2010). Anger can also signal the desire of the angry person to redress the perceived wrong by approach to take control of the situation (Schieman, 2006).

The experience of anger in family business

Family-workplace overlap

The overlap of the family and work domain that occurs in family businesses is likely to intensify both the experience and expression of anger in the family firm. Close, intimate relationships tend to evoke a higher incidence of emotional experience (Carstensen et al., 1996; Schieman, 2006). In the family business, boundaries between the family and the work domains often blur. Family co-workers are likely to openly express more anger to each other (Geddes & Stickney, 2011) than would be the norm in a non-family workplace, where emotional neutrality and professionalism is generally expected (Lively, 2000). We therefore expect that the personal, family nature of the relationships and the amount of time that family co-workers spend together at work and at home is likely to cause family members greater opportunities to both experience and express anger.

Proposition 1:

Family co-workers will experience and express more frequent occurrences of anger than do non-family co-workers.

Recently in the work-family literature, researchers have drawn attention for the tendency of emotions to spillover from one domain to the other (Rupert & Stevanovic, 2009). We predict that the anger triggered by an incident in the home may spillover into the workplace, triggering subsequent angry interactions. Similarly, anger experienced in a family co-worker interaction at work may carry back over into the home.

Proposition 2:

Anger experienced between family co-workers in one domain will spillover to the other domain, thus increasing the incidence of anger experienced.

Family business environment

The family business context itself also makes it likely that family co-workers will experience and express anger in the workplace. Lindebaum & Fielden (2011) found that organisations which focus on profits and competition create a backdrop that requires assertive behaviour by company leaders. Furthermore, business venturing creates an environment where anger and aggression is given more free rein, with entrepreneurs likening the business context to a battle (Goss, 2005). Often, the expression of anger may also be seen as an indicator of power and hard-nosed business acumen (Goss, 2005). Thus it is possible that in family businesses, the expression of anger may be valued as an indicator of an effective and competent manager (Lindebaum & Fielden, 2011).

Proposition 3:

In a competitive, entrepreneurial family business environment, family co-workers are more likely to experience and express anger.

The expression of anger in family business

Research has shown that the expression of anger differs between work and family contexts (Lively, 2000; Lively & Powell, 2006). In most workplaces, emotion display rules tend to enforce emotional neutrality and professionalism (Lively, 2000), whereas in the family domain, emotional expressivity is permissible (DeVault, 1999). Family members are more likely to either express their anger directly to the target of their anger, or to manage their emotion on their own and speak to no-one about it. On the other hand, in the workplace, employees are more likely to either suppress their anger or contain it below an acceptable threshold (Geddes & Callister, 2007; Lively & Powell, 2006). Co-workers are less likely to express their anger directly to the target (especially if the target is of higher status) and more likely to speak to others about it, than to say nothing at all. However, in the family business, the overlap of family and work domains may blur these display rules and make appropriate expression ambiguous for family co-workers. Due to their family ties, it is possible that family co-workers may be more likely to be less inhibited and show more impulsive and expressive behaviour with each other (Geddes & Callister, 2007) in the workplace.

Proposition 4:

- a. *Family co-workers are more likely to express their anger directly to their family co-workers than do non-family co-workers.*
- b. *Family co-workers are less likely to talk to others about their anger towards another family co-worker than are non-family co-workers.*

The effect of anger in family business

What are the consequences of the experience and expression of anger among family co-workers in the family business? Research findings are divided over whether anger is a constructive or destructive force. Research in conventional work settings reports mixed outcomes of expressions of anger during workplace interactions (Geddes & Callister, 2007). Therefore, we propose to test a number of contesting hypotheses to unravel the effects of anger in the family business context.

Positive effect of expressed anger on follower compliance

Contrary to earlier findings about the negative effects of anger, several recent studies suggest that the expression of anger may be functional in workplace interactions (e.g. Lindebaum & Fielden, 2010). Some suggest that the expression of anger can be an effective tool in “a manager’s repertoire of social influence tactics” (van Kleef et al., 2009: 574). They argue that a leader’s emotional displays can influence subordinates to think and respond in ways that the leader desires. Expression of anger plays a critical role in interpersonal interactions because it is also associated with establishment of status relative to others (Lindebaum et al., 2011). Hence expressions of anger can be used as a method of asserting one’s social status when the individual perceives they are being challenged by another (Clark, 1990; Ridgeway & Johnson, 1990). Studies of reactions to facial expressions have shown that whilst people with angry faces are perceived as threatening, they are also assessed as being dominant, powerful, and competent (Clark, Pataki, & Carver, 1996; Tiedens & Linton, 2001).

Most family co-workers hold leadership positions in family firms thus they are in a position to use the expression of anger as strategic tool. Therefore, if the rationale of van Kleef et al. (2009) and Lindebaum & Fielden (2010) is correct, we would expect that anger may exert a positive effect for family managers by allowing them to asserting authority and thereby directly influence the behaviour of family co-workers. This may be particularly useful if there are power struggles or conflicts between generations in the family firm.

Proposition 5:

The expression of anger by family leaders will result in greater family co-worker compliance.

Positive effect of experienced and expressed anger in signalling a problem

It is possible that the effects of greater anger expression between family co-workers in the family business may be more positive than in a non-family business workplace. While family co-workers are more likely to express anger during their interactions with each other (Lively, 2000; Lively & Powell, 2006), these expressions are also more likely to be acceptable to other family co-workers. Instead of leading to negative consequences, Geddes & Stickney (2011) argue that acceptance of a wider threshold of anger expression could benefit an organisation. This is because the expression of anger alerts the interaction partners that there is a problem and provides the opportunity to resolve the issue(s) that trigger the anger.

Proposition 6:

The expression of anger by family co-workers will lead to greater problem identification and resolution.

Long-term relationship effects of anger

Whilst the above research has suggested that there may be short-term task related benefits from the experience and expression of anger, what are the consequences of the experience and expression of anger on the critical interpersonal relationships among family co-workers? The positive outcomes of the expression of anger as an influence strategy are only supported by studies in industries where no intimate, close relationship exists between co-workers, for example, in construction (Lindebaum et al., 2011), or in brief laboratory experiments (e.g. van Kleef et al., 2009). In addition, research in conventional work settings suggests that the positive consequences of anger display may be related to achieving success in short term task related goals (Lindebaum et al., 2011). Family co-workers are in long term relationships and frequently interact with each other in both the work and family domains. Hence, it is not clear whether these findings are applicable to family firm settings. While few managerial studies have examined the long-term relationship consequences of expressing of anger, Lindebaum et al. (2011) suggest that there can be impacts on longer-term well-being, not only of the individuals who express anger, but also of their targets. Family co-workers in particular need to focus on long term goals for family firm sustainability and to consider long term relationship goals.

Traditionally, anger has been viewed as a negative emotion, and negative emotions are often linked with negative outcomes (Lindebaum & Fielden, 2010). Anger has the capacity to damage and destroy (Scheff, 1994) and is often considered to be harmful to interpersonal relationships (Lively & Powell, 2006). In fact, anger is often considered to be one of the most

disruptive emotions in human interactions (Lively et al., 2006). If this finding holds in family firms, then we would expect that anger frequently experienced and expressed between family co-workers may actually damage relationships by creating ill will and resentment.

Proposition 7:

The frequent experience and expression of anger between family co-workers will lead to a lowering of relationship quality.

Methodology

To explore the nature of the experience, expression and effects of anger among family co-workers in family businesses, we propose the use of qualitative case studies. Such an exploratory method is particularly useful for theory building when a phenomenon is largely unexplored (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). Data will be collected through interviewing multiple family co-workers from a sample of fifteen family businesses.

Conclusion

This study advances a series of propositions to guide a case study exploration of the untested field of the experience, expression and effects of anger in the family business. Within a single domain (such as work or family alone), the individual is subject to a single set of display rules that govern the expression of anger. However, when these two domains overlap, as they do in the case of families working together in their family business, the rules for expressing emotion to family co-workers can be ambiguous. We are interested in examining what happens when these family and business roles intersect, creating hybrid rules of power and status within the family business context.

Given that interpersonal relationships between family co-workers are critical for the healthy functioning and performance of the family business, the findings from this study will have important implications for both family business practitioners and researchers. A greater understanding of anger in the context of family business will help better navigate the interpersonal relationships key to family business success. We know that a large proportion of family businesses do not survive intergenerational transition, and part of the reasons for such failure can be traced to relationships between successor(s) and the predecessor(s). By understanding the experience and expression of anger in such situations, potential trajectories and strategies for mitigating the negative impact of anger can be identified.

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