

## How Coaching helps Family Businesses Grow...

Level Up is a business coaching and mentoring practice based near Langport in Somerset.



Started in 2006 by Graeme Crosbie, they have successfully coached and trained hundreds of family businesses across the West Country for growth, greater profitability, better lifestyles and successful exit.

Level Up is delighted to offer a FREE one-to-one business review consultation to any business in the West Country. Simply call on 01458 253366 or contact us through our website [levelupbusiness.co.uk](http://levelupbusiness.co.uk) to arrange a meeting.



I am a firm believer that the performance of any business – indeed the performance of any business owner or senior manager – can be most effectively improved by good quality coaching. Coaching works better than training, as it ensures that new skills are properly embedded. Coaching works better than consultancy as it leaves a legacy of changed behaviour that lasts long after the assignment is completed. And Coaching can work to improve the success of internal, go-it-alone management initiatives by ensuring a high degree of accountability, and avoiding ‘drift’.



But in the seven years I have been in practice, one thing I have noticed is that, when applied to family businesses, the degree and speed of performance improvement brought about by high quality, professional Business Coaching appears to be greater and more transformative than in other business types. And I have been looking into why that might be...

Having researched this in consultation with a number of our Family Business clients at Level Up and other coaches, I have concluded that there are 6 key factors that make the difference.

### 1. Perspective

In many family businesses, there is little escape for family members from the pressures and challenges of work. Families who work together and live together simply don't get the opportunity to see their business from the outside and seriously challenge 'the ways things are'.

Regular coaching sessions introduce a sense of objectivity and perspective to the situation, allowing the business owners to make

strategic and tactical decisions instead of simply fire-fighting day in, day out.

All that's needed is the ability to see the wood for the trees, a key element of what coaching brings to their situation.

## 2. Neutrality

Like it or not, every decision within a family business has the potential to be heavily loaded with emotion which – to be fair – sometimes has little to do with the commercial needs of the business. While internal disputes in corporate businesses are often political in nature, these same debates in family businesses can be more personal and a whole lot more complex for that.

In this situation, the professional business coach can find him- or herself as a lightning rod for these emotions, and can often be seen as the referee or umpire. While there is a danger in that for the Coach, for the family members there is enormous benefit to be gained from having a strong mediator involved who can strip the emotion from the logic, and guide them to a more rational and productive conclusion.

## 3. Focus

One side effect of the lack of perspective and emotional loading that exists in some family businesses is frequent drift away from the main goals of the organization. Indeed, in many family businesses, there are often no agreed goals or current business plan in place, mainly because family members would rather avoid potential disagreement among themselves by avoiding the question altogether !

Commercial 'Drift' is rarely a recipe for profitable growth, and this is why many family businesses struggle to really prosper like they should.

At the cornerstone of any professional business coaching programme are clear business goals and an agreed business plan. The focus this gives the business is often enough for it to catapult to the next level by itself,; but when combined with the professional coach keeping the business owners and leaders on track throughout the programme, then the result is renewed purpose, greater motivation and sustained growth.

## 4. Consensus

It's one of those perennial bugbears in any family business – who calls the shots? Whose opinion sways most decisions? Is there ever any room for anyone else to influence direction, management, communication?

These issues become even more acute when thoughts turn to

succession planning, and in particular balancing the needs and aspirations of the generation coming through with the need for the more senior family members to protect what they have built.

As a coach working with family businesses, it is important to recognize signs of frustration among family members and create the right opportunity and a suitable environment (i.e. controlled and well facilitated) for all voices to be heard and for a true and fair consensus to be reached.

While this might appear difficult or awkward at first, with careful and knowledgeable handling through the neutral coach, it soon becomes a natural part of working together as a family business – and results in a more coherent, united and hopefully harmonious place to work.

## 5. Goal Alignment

As a coach I strongly believe that your business is there to support your life, not the other way around. If you are an entrepreneur, or are the sole owner of your business then as long as you are clear on what you want from life – that you have clear and specific personal goals – then making the connection back to what your business needs to deliver for you to achieve those is relatively straightforward.

However, once you involve other family members, the picture can become a lot more muddled and the roadmap for the business a lot more complex. Between spouses this can be complicated enough; between siblings and with the added spice of their partners and children, there's a whole other minefield to cross ; chuck in a generation gap or two and you have potential warfare on your hands !

OK, that's a little over-dramatic, but the fact is that many family businesses struggle to stay together over time because the business is not designed to 'feed' everybody's needs and aspirations – whether financially, motivationally, intellectually or in terms of lifestyle.

A vital part of a coaching programme is the alignment of the personal goals of all the main family members involved, and the design of a business plan which is best able to deliver what is wanted. Critical here is a knowledge base from the coach which can provide a reality check for family members – is what they want feasible from the business vehicle they have, and if so, what do they really need to commit to do in order for that to be realized.

Without the neutrality, objectivity, knowledge and experience a professional coach can provide, achieving Alignment is a very difficult – some might say, impossible – task.

## 6. Open & Honest Communication

At the core of just about every business challenge or problem (in my opinion) is a challenge or problem in communication. Within a family business and amid all the emotional loading that goes on between family members, open and honest communication is arguably the most valuable resource within the company – and often the most scarce. Regardless how much conversation goes on, there is often much more left unsaid than is ever actually spoken.

The Coach is there to hold family members accountable not only for their actions, but also for their communication. By asking the questions that otherwise would be left unasked, the coach ensures that the business continues to function, stays on track with the plan, celebrates its successes and addresses its shortcomings, keeps the family business growing and keeps the family together along the way.

Graeme Crosbie  
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