

8 Simple Rules for Living with Corporate Siblings

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Corporate family life has its share of sitcom moments--and can only benefit from some rules of order.

Several years ago at one well-known American company, the head of a division would talk about his meetings and discussions with "Dad," his moniker for the chairman. The headquarters security people picked up on this and, when the chairman arrived for work, would radio that "Dad is in the building."

Intentionally or not, the division head and security staff were voicing what everyone in the American workplace knows: on some levels, the dynamics among co-workers are a lot like those among families. Relationships range from those found on Walton Mountain to those exhibited in Archie Bunker's living room.

There are eight simple rules for living with corporate siblings, for establishing bonds and boundaries, for avoiding group failure and achieving group success. As an HR leader, you can influence and encourage the adoption of these rules.

Rule One: Discover and play to everyone's strengths. No matter how much you want your family, real or work, to have walked out of a Norman Rockwell painting, the reality is that your world is more likely populated by a cast straight from *Everybody Loves Raymond*, not *Ozzie and Harriet*. Successful families learn how to identify and minimize members' weaknesses and how to recognize and play to their strengths.

Rule Two: Focus informal time on relationship building. Make time to have lunch or grab a beer with each of your coworkers, and talk about anything but work. Plan non-work group events away from the office. Include spouses whenever possible.

Rule Three: Take formal steps to build relationships. Sometimes you have to tune into C-SPAN instead of Entertainment Tonight. Work with management to use programs like DISC, a personality profile assessment tool, which helps work families understand how each individual behaves, how members can learn about each other, and, most important, how they can work together.

Rule Four: Find a confessor and advisor or coach. Everyone needs someone to play Wilson to their Tim Taylor--preferably face-to-face--to provide insights into their own behavior as well as that of their family members. Find someone who is not in the thick of your fray who can help departments make objective assessments.

Rule Five: Listen to the thunder and the silence. Virtually every work family has its Oscar and its Felix, its loud and aggressive member and its quiet and determined one, its odd couple. Search under the thunder and above the quiet and listen to what they have to say.

Rule Six: Learn to live with Archie Bunker and company. *MASH* had its Frank Burns, *Drew Carey* had Mimi Bobeck, *Archie Bunker* and *Meathead* had each other. Most families have them: difficult members who are always "pushing it" while at the same time contributing. We bought into the TV characters because, like real people, they were multidimensional. There are lots of workplace siblings like them. Learn to harness their talents and ignore their flaws.

Rule Seven: No family is static, so don't get too comfortable. John Ritter's sudden death turned his real and TV families into single-parent households. The creators of *Eight Simple Rules for Dating My Teenage Daughter* wrote a grandfather into the series to replace Ritter's father role in the story and, in the process, changed the dynamics of the Hennessy family. Like fictional and biological families, work families are constantly changing for various reasons including retirements, promotions, and resignations. As family members come and go and those who remain grow in new directions, everyone has to constantly manage and adjust relationships.

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Rule Eight: The boss needs help. Whether your leader's behind-the-back moniker is "Dad" or "Mom" or something else, the boss needs help, and knows it. Whether as bumbling as WKRP's Mr. Carlson or as firmly paternal as MASH's Colonel Potter, the boss wants and expects the cadre of employees to coalesce as a unit. In either case, individual employees need to be instruments for creating an integrated, productive work family. "Effective partner," "self-starter," and "team player" are not just interview questions. They are job requirements.

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