

Exploring family issues

IN 1998, SHEILA SIGEL had worked her way up to vice president of operations at Travel One, her father's Bloomington, Minn., travel agency. Then she learned that her father, Bob Neuman, now 70, had decided to buy out his non-family partner and bring in a new president: Sheila's brother Bill Neuman, now 38, who was then working as an insurance salesman for MassMutual.

This was a surprise to Sheila, who



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had spent 15 years at the agency. "I didn't know that the buyout was happening, or that they went to my brother about bringing him in as president," she recalls. Sheila, now 44, admits she may not have taken the position if it had been offered, as her daughter was just an infant at the time. "But I guess I would like to have been talked to about it prior," she says. "There were hard feelings about it, but I've overcome them."

The family's business relationship has survived, she says, because of her solid relationship with her brother, and the great job he's doing growing the company, particularly strengthening the staff, which now numbers 55, and enhancing community involvement. Her other brother, Steve Neuman, 42, joined the company three years ago and is now vice president, sales and services.

Today their father is vice president and CFO. Ownership is divided equally among the three siblings. "There are always issues and personality conflicts, but we are all on the same page to grow the company," says Sheila.

The siblings brought in an outside consultant two years ago to help iron out those issues and conflicts. To choose the consultant, first Bill and Bob interviewed three candidates. "Then I got to choose the one I felt most comfortable with," says Sheila.

One issue they tackled involved the closeness between Bill and Steve. "That was interfering with our working relationship. And it was causing friction," explains Sheila, who says she felt left out.

They also needed to understand each other's personality types: Bill and Sheila both have "type A" personalities, while Steve is more laid-back, Sheila says. She says she resented everyone's assumption that because Bill is the president, he's the busiest. "The schedule always ran around him," Sheila says. "[The consultant] made everyone realize I'm as busy as Bill, and my role is just as important."

The family is still working with the adviser, who is helping them build trust and improve communications, Sheila says. "[The consultant] opened everyone's eyes that we have an issue communicating," she notes. "Because we're family, we don't want to hurt each other's feelings. She's teaching us to separate family and business, to take criticism and know it won't personally affect our family relationship."

Have the sessions helped? "I think we've come a long way," Sheila says. "We can now speak about things easier than we could before."

The siblings now make decisions together, she points out. If an issue arises, "We all give our opinions and concerns. But if we don't decide 100%, Bill has the final word." And then the family puts on a united front and supports that decision, she says.

Their father, Bob, still comes in every day to oversee finances. "He doesn't like his children disagreeing," Sheila observes. "He's a good sounding board, so he can be a good middleman. But it's easier now that he's no longer the main decision-maker."