

IN THE  
COMPANY  
*of* FAMILY

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HOW *to*  
THRIVE  
WHEN  
BUSINESS  
*IS* PERSONAL

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# Hurt Versus Harm

*I am thankful for my struggle because without it  
I would not have stumbled across my strength.*

— Alexandra Elle

SOME YEARS BACK, I served on a panel at the Southeastern Family Office Forum in Atlanta. The topic was crisis and conflict. An attendee asked me what one skill I recommend most for families who want to navigate conflict well. My answer, as you might guess, was boundaries. I gave a list of boundary principles as examples. Another attendee, who had taken notes as I talked, raised her hand and asked if I could elaborate some more. I checked the clock. There was only time to explain one principle.

“Let’s talk about hurt versus harm,” I said.

I then started by gauging the audience’s collective knowledge. What did they think was the difference between hurt and harm? Their opinions were diverse. To help make the difference clearer, I suggested we consider an application outside of family relationships — an analogy to help them see the similarities and differences in a new light. The analogy was strength training.

If I feel sore the day after a training session, how do I know

if the pain is a hurt or a harm? If the pain is relatively minor and passes in a day or so, it was only hurt. If, instead, I am unable to get out of bed, the pain lasts for weeks and requires surgery to correct, the intensity would suggest I had done harm.

When we exert a muscle, it causes microscopic tears in the tissue. The tissue has been hurt, and this can cause pain. When done in moderation, the pain is short-lived. The muscle tissue repairs itself and in doing so grows stronger and more resilient. As the saying goes, “No pain, no gain” — so long as the pain is hurt, not harm.

The pain caused from doing harm to a muscle would be much greater in intensity and duration. Instead of being a natural part of the growth process, the damage caused by harm may be permanent or require long-term recovery. The area may remain vulnerable indefinitely, susceptible to reinjury and recurrence of pain.

In summary, hurt is low-intensity pain and damage which does not last long. Hurt may lead to growth and is, in fact, sometimes necessary for growth. There is no growth in the comfort zone. In contrast, the pain of harm is more intense and longer-lasting. The damage caused by harm may even be life-long.

Now, let’s start applying those conclusions back to the context of relationships. There are times when we are careless with our words. We say things we wish we could take back or use a tone we wish we had not. We are unkind and unfair. We cause pain to those we love. Gratefully, most of the time, these are minor wounds — accidental hurt. A sincere apology can help a relationship recover from such exchanges. The relationship may even grow through the experience of overcoming hurt.

However, there are other times when words are brutal.

Lasting damage can be done by a single, “You’ll never amount to anything” or, “We would be better off without you.” Even when the intention was not to harm, words can cause lasting damage. The saying, “Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me,” is not true. Words can hurt. Words can harm. Words can leave wounds which last a lifetime or take significant effort to heal.

SOMETIMES WE CAN be so afraid of causing hurt through our words, we risk causing harm through our choices. The Beckett family holds the common southern values of being nice and not hurting anyone’s feelings. They place a high value on family harmony. G5 owner-operators of the family’s manufacturing business are cousins. Several of their children are involved in the business. Leaders from the next generation need to be selected and prepared. Multiple G6 family members have expressed interest in leading.

Wilson and Tyler are the oldest G6. Both are proficient in their work, but neither have demonstrated skill at leading others. In sharp contrast to most family members, Wilson has a reputation for speaking his mind. He can be harsh and especially critical when he thinks others are not working efficiently. His approach to leading relies more on giving orders than teaching. Tyler is the second oldest. He, too, wants more responsibility, but he admits the idea makes him nervous because he hates confrontation. “Can’t we all just get along?” Tyler wonders, both aloud and to himself.

Cathy is several years younger than her cousins, Wilson and Tyler. Hardly a week goes by when she doesn’t say, “I’ve got an idea.” From suggestions for process improvement to product innovation to sponsoring community youth sports,

Cathy regularly demonstrates initiative to help improve business performance, company culture, and community impact. She also champions the ideas of others.

Jasper is a member of G5. He believes Cathy is ready for additional leadership responsibilities, and Wilson and Tyler are not. He worries about hurting the feelings of the two older G6, but thinks they need to improve their people skills before being given more leadership responsibilities. He feels sick to his stomach when he imagines Wilson's reaction. He has been hurt by Wilson's harsh words before. He also worries Tyler may get discouraged if he's told "not yet." He sees potential in Tyler, he just needs to grow. Jasper worries the critical feedback will leave Tyler feeling defeated even before he tries to expand his skills.

Jasper is also afraid his opinion will anger his cousins, the parents of Wilson and Tyler. He worries they will think he's biased since Cathy is his daughter. Jasper considers just going along with whatever his cousins suggest, which will likely be promotion based on seniority, not merit. But this, too, causes him concern. It could set Wilson and Tyler up for failure. It could negatively impact company culture and performance.

JASPER IS STRUGGLING WITH hurt versus harm. He is trying to be nice and not hurt anyone's feelings by keeping his opinions to himself. In doing so, he is keeping pertinent details from those who need to know it. Intentionally omitting important information is not kind. Concealing meaningful material is a choice to not be honest. Being dishonest is never nice. Being dishonest will hurt, and it may harm. Jasper and his family need a new understanding of what it means to be nice.

Jasper's hesitation to voice critique is understandable. We don't like to hurt the feelings of those we love. But, if shared

constructively, his opinions on each candidate's readiness will cause hurt at the worst, not harm. Instead, if members of G6 are given responsibilities for which they were not prepared, greater hurt or even harm could be done. Navigating differences of opinion can be uncomfortable, but the discomfort of hurt is temporary. The pain of harm is lasting.

Research shows people will do more to avoid short-term pain than they will to seek out short-term pleasure. Avoiding hurt is highly motivating. That makes sense! But often hurt is just delayed, not eliminated. Jasper knows honesty is necessary for succession to be successful. And he wants it to succeed. His family members deserve the truth. They need the truth so they know their opportunities for growth. He is not eliminating hurt by delaying the conversation. Actually, he is multiplying it. The conversation will eventually happen, so the dread he feels while procrastinating is like paying interest on borrowed time.

We do not do others any favors when we deny reality. And the reality is, we all have ways we can improve. If we want to help others enhance their skills, we can do so through honest feedback. Critique need not be critical; it can be constructive. Constructive criticism may temporarily hurt, but it will not cause lasting harm. Like strength training, through which muscles grow by being challenged, the temporary pain of constructive criticism can lead to long-term growth. Often we think we can't simply because we haven't. We learn we are able to do hard things by doing hard things!

JASPER SUGGESTS G5 CREATE A process to guide job promotion decisions and succession planning. His cousins agree. They write out the ideal characteristics for each leadership position — experience, technical skill and knowl-

edge, people skills, and personal characteristics. They assign a weight to each criteria to reflect its relative importance. Knowing the process they create will serve generations to come helps them objectively consider what each position needs, instead of trying to make positions fit the characteristics of G6.

Individually, G5 rates how well each G6 meets the criteria at present. They note examples to support their ratings and discuss the evaluations among themselves. With agreed-upon criteria to guide them, Jasper finally feels he has permission to share his opinions openly, without his cousins accusing him of bias. The process makes it easier for each G5 to give an honest assessment of G6's readiness to lead. It also makes it easier to identify specific ways to help each G6 grow their leadership skills. To Jasper's relief, when they let this process guide them, there is a high level of consensus among G5. The focus on growth and preparation makes critiquing G6 hurt less. Having a consistent process for making advancement decisions will help protect relationships from being harmed by perceived or actual favoritism.

G5 presents to G6 the new leader development and succession process. The criteria for each position are clear. Each candidate will be held to the same expectations. To G6, it feels objective, fair, and predictable.

G5 meets privately with each G6 to share individual evaluations. Some G6 are disappointed by portions of the feedback, but it is clear the critique is criteria-driven and meant to support growth and advancement. It may hurt, but it does not harm.

As the Beckett family embraces the difference between hurt versus harm, they start "being nice" by telling the truth constructively. Seeing they can have more honest conversations allows them to start being more intentional to prepare

G6 for leadership. Cathy is the first G6 to be promoted through the new merit-based system.

Instead of running from difficult conversations — in hopes of avoiding hurt feelings — the Beckett family becomes more proactive. They give timely and formalized feedback. As a result, they discover their relationships are strong enough to handle differences of opinion and critique. Having open conversations about ways to improve also gives them opportunities to celebrate when improvements are made. Sometimes good things are on the other side of constructive hurt.



### Questions to Consider

1. *When have you avoided a difficult conversation out of fear of hurting feelings? What was the outcome of the situation?*

*2. What can help you avoid avoiding in the future?*

*3. When was a time you had a difficult conversation, trusting the discomfort would be worth it?*

*4. What could you do to respond to criticism better?*

## Self and Family Assessment

ON A SCALE OF 1-5, WHERE 1 IS POOR AND 5 IS EXCELLENT:

5a) *How would you rate your skill at differentiating between  
hurt and harm?* 1 2 3 4 5

5b) *Overall, how would you rate this skill level in your family?*  
1 2 3 4 5

[illegible]