



How To Deal With A Leader's Health Decline

When family business chiefs suffer age-related problems, it can take a toll on the entire enterprise

by Brian Nagle and Claudia Fine, MPH, LCSW

Brian Nagle is with BNY Mellon Wealth Management in Boston. Claudia Fine is with SeniorBridge in New York City.

Shakespeare's *King Lear* is an iconic example of the once powerful leader whose decline in old age wreaks havoc on those around them. The very qualities of strength that make for a successful leader – managerial control, persistence, and confidence become liabilities in coping with the challenges posed by the aging process. Due to medical and technological advances, more and more Americans have to cope with these challenges. Recently, the National Center for Health Statistics reported that life expectancy in the U.S. now exceeds 78 years. Recent medical advances have fostered a sense that functional decline can be avoided. A longer life expectancy has increased the number of people living with chronic conditions such as hypertension, heart disease, diabetes, stroke, cancer, arthritis and various forms of dementia. 52% of those over the age of 65 have some physical disability and 37% of those over the age of 65 have a severe disability. 50% of those over 85 require some personal care to get through their day. * Alzheimer's Disease, the most common form of dementia, strikes 20% of those over 65 and 50% of those over the age of 85. **

To minimize the negative impact of personal health care crises, families need to frankly discuss the inevitability of these changes and anticipate a variety of issues and contingencies, ranging from healthcare decision-making to business succession planning. It is crucial that at a minimum core legal instruments like Wills, Trusts, Durable Powers of Attorney, Health Care Proxies, and Living Wills be in place before problems begin.

The case of Murray Golden highlights some of the challenges that family businesses can face as a business leader ages. At 70, Murray, the President, still managed the company with his oldest son, his daughter and his son-in-law; nonactive family members and local charities also depended on the company's success. As a close-knit family, the Golden's had planned for Murray's eventual death by executing trusts and succession

plans; they, however, had never discussed what to do if Murray's capacity was diminished.

Facing and planning for a parent's frailty is difficult for most adult children. Instinctively, we continue to experience our parents as powerful and protective. Children who have grown up with a capable and successful parent may be especially blinded to their parent's weaknesses or are unwilling to confront them. Moreover, in a family businesses, the continued competence of an aging business leader can be crucial not only to the continued financial success of a the enterprise but also to its identity. If denial sets in, it can compromise the emotional health of the family and the existence of the business.

With the Golden family, no one recognized that Murray had not coped well with his wife's illness and subsequent death, nor did they address his impulsive purchase of a luxury car and subsequent "fender-benders." Subtle changes in his mood and hygiene, were not discussed. Murray had become more controlling and irritable; once stylish and immaculately dressed, he had started wearing stained and mismatched clothing. It was only when his son-in-law learned that Murray had negotiated a bank loan to the business to pay off a large personal debt that the family realize there were serious problems. The family learned that Murray's poor judgment and financial mismanagement were related to depression and a decline in his cognitive functioning – eventually diagnosed as Alzheimer's disease.

In the face of functional loss, a senior may try to regain control – over him or herself, over others, and over the situation. This may lead to difficult behavior patterns – which are themselves a mode of communication. It is important to take note and to try to understand the meaning of the behaviors.

Trying to get an objective assessment of the older person's capacity from a medical professional is an appropriate starting point. It may be challenging to convince the older person to see a professional. Fear and anger are a normal response to lost capacity. In some instances, the aging senior will not acknowledge the loss of capacity. Acknowledging and empathizing with the painful feelings associated with their circumstances can help mitigate their frustration. Further, reflecting on their past accomplishments and strengths can help mitigate their mindset.

Attempting to share rather than take control of decision making can also be beneficial to the transition process of caring for them. If at all possible, the older person should feel that their ideas and decisions are being incorporated into the decision making process occurring in their lives.

It is important to remember, however, that the overriding goal in addressing these challenging situations is to reduce risks and liabilities, while managing conflicts and preserving the older person's dignity and quality of life. The best way to do this is for families to educate themselves, communicate openly, and plan for contingencies – well in advance of any crisis.

*U.S. Census Bureau, Older Americans Update 2006: Key Indicators of Well-Being, 2006.

** JAMA, 1989