

Who do you think you are?!

Personal and Role Identity in the Family Business

By Philip O'Donnell

“Happiness is when what you think, what you say, and what you do are in harmony.”

Claiming Mahatma Gandhi to be wrong requires a boldness and a philosophical surefootedness that we'd be somewhat deluded to lay claim to, so we won't go that far. But we will attempt some critical scrutiny, and explore how – particularly in the role-shifting setting of a family business – there is no one perfect alignment of thought, being, and action.

In all walks of life, people are many different things. We're siblings, colleagues, mentors, citizens, rule-makers, rule-breakers, tourists, concert-goers, match-goers, parents, volunteers, and so much more. These are our roles in society, and one of the most interesting exercises in amateur [anthropology](#) is to observe how we subtly change our identities as we move across these roles. If you've ever poked fun at a friend or family member whose accent changes once they answer a work-related phone call at home, then you'll be familiar with the concept.

Self-examination can be an even greater eye-opener (I, for one, can say that I'm a lot less inclined to quoting Gandhi to support my arguments in conversation with my family than I am with academic colleagues). These are our [role identities](#), and they help to determine the behaviour that we consider to be appropriate in particular settings – professional at work, pious in church, silent in the library, and so on.

Notwithstanding the invasive, come-back-and-bite-you qualities of social media, our lives are compartmentalised in such a way that we can act out many different role identities within the boundaries of our world. Behaving one way at home and another at work is normal, because in most cases nobody is present in both settings, and therefore nobody can see how our manner of speaking, our demeanour, and even our

thought processes change as we swap the dinner table for the boardroom table, or the kitchen for the canteen.

Family businesses, as we're reminded every time we meet practitioners at workshops, don't have these boundaries.

Maintaining a separation between the roles of 'mother' and 'managing director', or 'son' and 'sales exec', is a lot simpler when these worlds don't collide. But [collision](#), [intersection](#), and [spill-over](#) are the realities of family business. In this context, it can sometimes feel as if our identities are being policed; if my wife is in the same office as I am, can I really step out of my role as husband and into my role as accountant when we come into work? Familiarity is widely recognised as promoting effective [communication](#) in family businesses, but it ought to also be recognised as a barrier, and understanding identities – what they are and what they do – is a useful place to start.



We often think of our identities as being a stable proxy of ‘who we are’, but this is only partly true. Although our values and moral outlook can be thought of as largely durable, the issue of ‘who we are’ goes far beyond our personal identity. It encompasses the role identities that we adopt depending on where we are, who we’re with, and what we’re trying to achieve at any given point in time. Identities provide us with a frame of reference for how to think and behave, and whether we’re aware of it or not, we all have multiple identities within our human repertoire.

Usually, problems do not arise because we move from one identity to another. Instead they arise when we are [prevented](#) from doing so. Being able to distinguish between the identity of ‘father’ and that of ‘MD’ is important for many reasons, not least as a means to signal to non-family staff that your decisions are grounded in a concern for the welfare of the business rather than in the narrower, short-term interests of the family. As well as being able to distinguish between these identities, it is essential that family members have [the freedom to move](#) between them, and for many family businesses that freedom needs to be won through conscious thought and collaboration.

The identities of ‘father’ or ‘daughter’ can’t simply be parked outside the office, but within the office dual identities must be allowed to co-exist. The man across the hall may be my father, but in this space he’s wearing his CFO hat, and that has an impact on how he will think, speak, and behave. Likewise, she may be my daughter but she’s also an MBA-graduate, and that is the dominant identity that she brings to work. Allowing people to move across these identities is liberating: it gives their decisions a much more rational base, enabling better communication – particularly with non-family employees – and ultimately cultivates a more harmonious workplace.

The goal of aligning thought, being, and action within a singular framework of ‘who we are’ is, no doubt, a thing of philosophical beauty. The more practical challenge, however, may be to understand that we are not one thing, but many. ‘Who we are’ is versatile and pluralistic, and what we think, say, and do, is situation-dependent, which is exactly how it needs to be. Maybe Gandhi would have seen things a little differently if he’d worked in a family business.