

# 'SOBs': The Real Power in Family Businesses

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**KEYWORDS:** family business advice, Help with a family business, family business conflict.

"Saviors Of the Boss" have the trust of company leaders and often serve as their gatekeepers. Here's how to understand them and work with them.

Family businesses are driven by a blend of deep-rooted traditions, loyalty, formal and informal power structures. Within this intricate world exists a unique group often referred to as "SOBs"— Saviors of the Boss, whose power is often largely informal in some family-driven organizations. These individuals, usually long-time trusted associates, act as critical advisers and gatekeepers for the family, in both business and personal matters.

Despite holding little formal authority, SOBs wield immense influence. They are close to key power centers; their bosses may depend on them; their soft power may act as invisible strings orchestrating political drama. Hence, it's necessary to understand them, especially in organizations in which the family is still engaged as active and critical decision-makers.

This article is an attempt to help readers read identify their firms' SOBs; and to understand their position, motivation, sources of power, strengths, weaknesses and risks. We also explore how SOBs can keep themselves relevant and how outsiders can manage this power play.

## SOBs: Who Are They?

In family businesses, SOBs come in various forms: long-serving employees, trusted advisors, friends, relatives, executive assistants, or non-family confidantes who have earned the family's unwavering trust. Their loyalty often overshadows technical expertise. Often, they are like their master's voice.

The British Empire, the most prominent family-run

institution, once relied on Tommy Lascelles. (Watch "The Crown" series on Netflix to learn more.) Despite him not being part of the royal family or holding public office, he influenced the governance of Britain. His role during the abdication of King Edward VIII and the succession of King George VI and Queen Elizabeth II, events that shaped Britain, displays the complex web of influence of an SOB so well.

## Key Characteristics of SOBs

It can be challenging to know who the SOBs are in your organization, but identifying them and understanding their strengths and weaknesses may be critical in helping you accomplish your own goals. SOBs have these key characteristics:

**Long-standing relationships** – SOBs often start in one role and evolve into trusted personal advisors over time. They may offer a vital connection to the family, and deeply understand both the business and the family's inner workings. SOBs can become pivotal figures, and different parties may try to influence them in order to subtly communicate their message to the boss.

**Personal trust** – These individuals are relied upon not only for business matters but also for their discretion in personal issues. Their value often lies in their ability to manage both spheres, making them confidantes for the family's most sensitive matters. They know what their bosses want and what's going to work for them. For example, a couple at a family firm wanted to announce their divorce, but that could have created unnecessary stress on investors. The SOB suggested that both parties continue to live as separated and announce the divorce only after the court grants it to them legally. This would keep the press and the investors at bay until the quarter's fundraising activity is completed.

**Influence through proximity** – SOBs operate in close quarters with the key decision-makers, enabling them to shape decisions, sometimes even subtly, across both business and personal affairs.

**Institutional Memory** – With their deep roots in the organization, SOBs possess a long-standing memory of past decisions and their rationale, giving them the ability to advise wisely based on historical patterns. For example, a professional manager wanted to replace butter with oil as an ingredient to save costs. The SOB reminded him that the product stood above its competitors because of its great taste, and that other attempts to tamper with the ingredients failed to take off in the market.

## Strengths and Weaknesses

SOBs key strengths are that they understand what's acceptable and appropriate, and therefore the most acceptable course of action to the boss and across the board. Their understanding of internal dynamics helps them serve as informal guides. They also have an eye for identifying people, actions, or decisions that do not align with the management and/or the organization. They can nudge appropriately.

But they have weaknesses, too. Number one is blind loyalty. Prioritizing loyalty over the hard truths can lead to complacency. SOBs sometimes shy away from difficult conversations, which stifles the potential for necessary growth or change. This can lead to a resistance to change: SOBs can embody a "play it safe" mentality, particularly when generational shifts bring new ideas. They may inadvertently undercut the next generation's innovation by clinging too tightly to old ways. For example, one SOB resisted plans for a new software system that would have streamlined the company's operations, and pressured the Chairman's office to resist it too.

SOBs can also overstep boundaries. Proximity to power can go to their heads, and tempt some SOBs to exert influence disproportionate to their role. Their informal authority can sometimes disrupt or discourage innovation within the team. For example, at one company that was trying to innovate, the SOB had no role to play yet meddled so much that it caused unnecessary friction between project leaders and some senior executives.

## Navigating SOBs Influence

To work effectively with or within a family business, recognizing and managing the influence of SOBs is crucial. Here are some strategies:

**Identify key players** – Understand that formal titles

may not reflect actual power dynamics. Spotting who the real influencers are—including SOBs—is essential for successful collaboration.

**Build strategic relationships** – Gaining the trust of SOBs can open doors to understanding the deeper workings of the business and family. Establish rapport while maintaining your own professional distance.

**Respect the role but maintain independence** – While SOBs hold valuable insights, aligning too closely with them can be risky. Family dynamics are fluid, and being too reliant on one individual can backfire if relationships shift. Never let them become indispensable.

**Encourage Honest Dialogue** – Cultivate a culture where open, honest communication is valued over blind loyalty. SOBs can be gatekeepers; it's important to promote transparency to avoid decisions being made based on unquestioned influence. Hold on to objectivity.

## Advice For SOBs

Are you an SOB? Understand that your role carries immense responsibility. To stay effective and ethical, you should keep the following in mind:

**Combine Loyalty and Integrity** – Loyalty is essential, but so is honesty. Don't avoid tough conversations just to keep favor. Offering principled advice, even when it's hard to hear, is crucial for the long-term health of both the family and the business. Appreciate when shown the mirror and offered honest feedback.

**Embrace Change** – Family businesses evolve, and SOBs must evolve with them. Embrace new ideas, especially from the next generation. Don't become a roadblock to innovation—be a facilitator of smooth transitions. Upskill yourself.

**Set Boundaries** – Stay mindful of where your influence ends. It's easy to overstep when you're close to the family, but this can blur lines and create dysfunction. Recognize when to step back to avoid creating power imbalances.

**Have the Courage to Speak Up** – The most effective SOBs don't just say "yes" to everything. If a decision seems detrimental, it's your duty to speak up—thoughtfully and respectfully. Challenge the boss when needed, so you're remembered as an honest advisor, not just a "yes-man."

## Conclusion

SOBs can often be the unseen forces shaping the success or failure of family-owned businesses. Their loyalty, wisdom, and experience make them valuable assets, but these same qualities can become dangerous if not tempered by integrity and adaptability. SOBs may not just be limited to executive assistants, family members, or longtime employees. They are represented in different posts and responsibilities – even among professionals like lawyers, accountants, and vendors. They may appear to be unbiased, data-driven advisors, but relying blindly on them can be disastrous.

For those working with family businesses, understanding the balance of power SOBs hold is critical. And for SOBs themselves, the challenge lies in navigating their influence with humility, honesty, and an openness to change.

In the ever-changing landscape of family businesses, thriving requires a delicate blend of traditions, process, and innovation—something both owners and SOBs must actively cultivate.