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Can a Family Business Consultant Really Help? Nine Experts Explain What Families Often Miss

Holly Eddleston (Continuity Family Business Consulting, LLC)
Kimberly Eddleston (Northeastern University)

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Consultants often create their greatest value in ways families do not expect. They help families uncover what is really keeping them stuck, facilitate difficult conversations, coordinate with other advisers, and make decisions that benefit both the family and the business.

Consider this hypothetical but familiar situation: A founder wants to ensure succession is fair. The founder asks an attorney to divide ownership equally among three children, and an accountant structures the transfer to minimize taxes. The documents are impeccable. Yet only one child works in the company, another wants to sell, and the third wants a voice in major decisions but no operating role. What looks like a fair plan on paper may leave the next generation with incompatible expectations, no workable decision process, and years of resentment.

The attorney and accountant have not failed. They did what they were asked. But the family has not yet answered the question on which all the technical work depends: What does a successful transition need to accomplish for the business, its owners, and their relationships with one another?

This is the space in which a family business consultant can create extraordinary value. Most business owners understand why they need attorneys, accountants, and management specialists. A family business consultant occupies a different and often less visible role. The consultant looks across the family, ownership, and business systems; brings unspoken concerns and conflicting assumptions to the surface; creates a fair process for making consequential decisions; and helps the family define what success should mean before building the structures to support it.

A family business consultant does not replace those other advisers. The consultant can help a family use them more effectively by clarifying what the family wants and coordinating the people needed to carry it out. The work may include diagnosing problems, designing solutions, and developing plans. But families may overlook a consultant's broader value if they view those deliverables as the entire engagement.

Family business consulting is still unfamiliar to many business-owning families. Research on family business advising has only recently begun to explain how outside advisers earn trust, influence decisions, and help families act (de Groote & Bertschi-Michel, 2021; Strike et al., 2018). That limited visibility may help explain why families are often unsure what a family business consultant does or how to recognize an effective engagement.

To demystify this work, we interviewed nine leading family business consultants: Dr. Dennis Jaffe of BanyanGlobal Family Business Advisors (https://banyan.global/) , Dr. John Davis and Dr. Maria Sinanis of Cambridge Family Enterprise Group (https://cfeg.com/) , David Karofsky of The Family Business Consulting Group(https://www.thefbcg.com/) (FBCG), Dr. Claudia Binz-Astrachan, Dr. Joe Astrachan, and Greg McCann of Generation6 (https://www.generation6.com/) , and Dr. Shay Harris-

Pierre and Doug Baumoel of Continuity Family Business Consulting(https://continuityfbc.com/) . Their observations reveal five counterintuitive truths about how effective consulting works and how it can strengthen both a family and their business.

Paradox #1: The Best Consultant May Not Give You the Answer

Families are accustomed to hiring professionals for answers. An attorney interprets the law. An accountant explains the tax consequences. A valuation specialist estimates what the company is worth. It is understandable, then, that a family might expect a consultant to diagnose the problem and prescribe the right solution. However, effective family business consulting often begins somewhere else: with a process that allows the family to understand what is happening, hear perspectives that have not been heard, and determine what it is prepared to do.

Dennis Jaffe, who has consulted with family businesses for four decades, regularly encounters this dynamic. *"I talk to a lot of families who say, 'I want you to interview everybody.'"* But, he explains, *"We need to come together as a family and do that. Then they say, 'I thought I was hiring you to do it.' No, you're hiring me to guide you so we can do it together."*

"Anything I produce for you that you haven't had input into will just be a useless piece of paper," Jaffe adds. "Families don't see that they still have to do the work even after they hire somebody."

John Davis frames the consultant's role this way: *"A good consultant is an objective listener, a group facilitator, and an individual and group coach, helping the family reach its own decisions rather than imposing outside ones."* The consultant provides expertise and perspective. The family provides decision-making authority, commitment, and willingness to change.

Claudia Binz-Astrachan articulates why this distinction matters: *"Sustainable progress comes from shared commitment, not external expertise alone."* Shared commitment requires the family to do the work, not simply to pay for it.

Recent research reinforces this process-oriented view. Family business advisers do more than transmit expertise: they build trust by listening, asking questions, communicating openly, and helping family members develop solutions themselves (de Groote & Bertschi-Michel, 2021). In family businesses, where the people making decisions must often continue to live, work, and own assets together, that process is particularly consequential.

David Karofsky emphasizes the systems a consultant must connect: *"They recognize that several systems are always in play - family, management, ownership, and governance - and help everyone see how those pieces need to align around strategy. When they're not aligned, a strong consultant knows how to bring people together and get them on the same page through facilitated conversations."*

Greg McCann distinguishes between an expert adviser, whose specialized knowledge drives the service, and a family business process consultant, whose primary contribution is designing and facilitating the problem-solving process. The distinction does not diminish expert advice. It helps families understand why they may need both kinds of professionals and why their roles should reinforce rather than compete with one another.

How Family Business Consultants and Expert Advisers Work Together

What the family needs	Expert adviser	Family business consultant	Result
Define the goal	Tests technical implications	Helps the family define success	Everyone solves the right problem
Develop options	Provides legal, financial or operational expertise	Examines effects across the family, ownership and business	Solutions are sound and workable
Make the decision	Explains risks and tradeoffs	Surfaces concerns and facilitates discussion	The family understands and supports the choice
Put it into action	Creates the necessary technical structures	Builds commitment and follow-through	The plan actually gets implemented

Note. Framework inspired by McCann (2008; n.d.) and the consultant interviews conducted for this article.

Dennis Jaffe captures the distinction: *"As a family business consultant, you don't get points for knowing what's wrong. It takes five minutes to know what's wrong with the family. You get the big bucks for getting the family to do something about it. That's how you really earn your money."*

The real product is therefore not merely a diagnosis or document. It is movement: better conversations, clearer choices, stronger commitment, and a family better equipped to address consequential issues together.

Paradox #2: A Technically Excellent

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Solution Can Still Solve the Wrong Problem

Families often seek help for something concrete: a family constitution, compensation policy, ownership agreement, governance system, succession plan, or clearer job descriptions. These structures can be essential. But before building one, a consultant must determine whether the presenting problem is actually structural, or whether the requested structure is being asked to contain a relational issue that the family has avoided addressing.

Joe Astrachan articulates this clearly: *"Structural problems need structural solutions, while emotional and relational issues need emotional and relational responses. Many families shy away from the latter because it seems daunting, and instead opt for structural solutions, for example, a policy to address an emotional challenge. That never works."*

This does not mean policies and governance structures are unimportant. It means they cannot do work for which they were never designed. A compensation formula cannot repair a sibling's longstanding belief that her contributions are invisible. A family employment policy cannot resolve a parent's inability to evaluate an adult child objectively. An ownership agreement cannot create trust where family members do not believe the decision process is fair.

Maria Sinanis points to how this manifests when families work with generalist consultants: *"Generalist consultants tend to overlook those who are not active in day-to-day operations, and they often freeze when emotional issues or tensions surface. Their instinct is to say emotion should be removed from the business entirely."*

Family business specialists operate from a different framework. Sinanis explains: *"Family business consultants take a different view. Alongside best practices like educating family owners and building strong governance, we recognize that emotion is a driver of value creation, not an obstacle to it. Left unmanaged, it can become disruptive, but properly understood, emotion is data. It's fuel that, well-channeled, strengthens rather than undermines the family enterprise."*

Karofsky captures this balance well: *"I have a Master's Degree in Counseling Psychology and an MBA. I always joke with my clients that I use my Psychology degree 10:1 compared to my MBA!"*

In family business work, emotion is information. It reveals what people value, what they fear, and where real tensions exist.

A consultant who can interpret that information may help the family see why a seemingly straightforward business decision has become so difficult. Research on highly trusted family business advisers emphasizes attunement to family members and the ability to help them collaborate, develop their own capabilities, and consider the wider consequences of decisions (Strike, 2013). Building on this insight, more recent research shows that advisers build trusting, emotional connections that shape the relational dynamics through which families conduct strategic work (Quarchioni et al., 2022).

John Davis also addresses a lesser-known yet critical function of consulting: helping owners clarify their strategic priorities before engaging management. *"Some of the lesser-known but more important reasons families engage consultants have to do with helping owners understand their strategic options regarding their assets. Before owners can guide their boards and management teams, they first need a clear point of view on their vision and expectations regarding what they own."*

Shay Harris-Pierre reinforces this: *"Family business consultants understand the nuance that exists at the intersection of family and business. General business consultants may not have the insight necessary to be sensitive to the needs of family members working together in a business or sharing wealth. Family business consultants are not only experts in their fields, such as business, family dynamics, and psychology, but they also often possess relevant life experiences that enhance their work."*

The value lies in seeing the whole picture. A decision must work economically, legally, and operationally, and also be acceptable to the owners and family members expected to support it. When those dimensions are examined together, the family's other advisers can often perform their own work with much greater clarity.

Paradox #3: Moving Slowly Can Be the Fastest Way Forward

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Families usually call a consultant because they want movement. A decision has stalled; a transition is approaching; or conflict is beginning to affect the company. Once the family commits time and money, it naturally wants visible progress. But speed and progress are not always the same thing.

Joe Astrachan explains the dynamic: *"Families that push for progress before the family is emotionally ready make engagements difficult. Family work is typically slow, and rarely linear. Pushing for swift resolution typically backfires because we end up putting band-aids on festering wounds, which means the conflict will continue to pop up elsewhere until it's addressed properly."*

A family may appear to be moving quickly when it approves a document or announces a decision. If important concerns remain unresolved, however, implementation may stall, or the same conflict may surface in a new form. Time spent building understanding at the beginning can prevent far greater delay later.

Dennis Jaffe identifies the recurring consequence: *"Families routinely go 80% of the way and then stop at the last step. They never execute the plan, sign the documents, share them, or put them into practice."*

"The ambivalence shows up at the end, not at the beginning," Jaffe adds. *"It's easy to say, 'I want to get my next generation involved. I want to engage them.' But when that means you have to change your behavior, things go south."*

Transitions make this tension especially visible because they force families to reconsider roles, authority, identity, and expectations simultaneously.

Shay Harris-Pierre and Doug Baumoel both emphasize the importance of transitions. Harris-Pierre notes: *"Transitions are often a time when family businesses are most vulnerable."* Baumoel adds: *"Planned transitions present opportunities for outside professionals to offer perspective and guidance to help take stock of what got the family to the current point and what is needed for their next chapter. Unplanned transitions may require more problem-solving and conflict management skills in the consulting team, as there is, by definition, more urgency in these situations."*

The consultant's contribution is not a delay for its own sake. It is pacing the process so that technical decisions, family understanding, and the willingness to implement them develop together.

Paradox #4: The Most Impressive Expert May Still Be the Wrong Consultant

There is no single route into family business consulting. That diversity can be an advantage because family enterprises face problems involving law, governance, strategy, finance, psychology, communication, leadership, and conflict. It also complicates consultant selection. A family is not merely choosing the person with the strongest credentials; it is choosing someone they can trust with sensitive information and difficult conversations.

Doug Baumoel addresses the complexity of consulting across different professional backgrounds: *"Family business consultancy is something that professionals generally come to from an existing profession of origin. Some come from Law, Accounting, Management Consulting, Wealth Management, Academia, Psychology, Mediation, and more. My belief is that the most effective consultants don't stay siloed in their original discipline. They develop a range of skills across multiple domains. This is why families are well served by consultants—and teams—with diverse expertise. Especially when families are in conflict, problems rarely fit neatly into one professional category."*

Relevant expertise is essential, particularly when the family faces active conflict or a specialized governance, ownership, or leadership issue. But expertise alone does not determine whether family members will speak candidly, believe the process is fair, and remain engaged when the work becomes uncomfortable.

Claudia Binz-Astrachan addresses this directly: *"Much like a therapist, you may have to go through discovery to fully understand if working with this individual or team jibes with the family culture and personalities. Technical expertise matters, but fit might be even more important."*

Fit does not mean choosing someone who makes everyone comfortable or agrees with the person who initiated the engagement. It means finding a consultant

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who can earn trust across the system, remain sufficiently neutral, challenge the family constructively, and adapt the process to the family's actual circumstances.

Shay Harris-Pierre offers practical guidance on selection: *"Often, families believe that if they have a checklist of items that other successful family enterprises have—an independent board, a family charter, etc—that they, too, will be successful. However, families looking to engage a consultant would be wise to choose a consultant that seeks to identify the specific needs of their family based on their context and circumstances."*

The engagement itself also needs clarity. Doug Baumoel recommends: *"The engagement should be based on a contract with a clear statement of the problems to be solved, the deliverables promised, and the time frame and budget proposed. Open-ended contracts, or contracts with vague deliverables, lead to low accountability with consultants."*

Professional standards from the Family Firm Institute similarly emphasize defining whose interests the consultant represents, explaining fees, and establishing realistic expectations for the engagement's benefits and results (Family Firm Institute, n.d.). Families should therefore evaluate both the advisor and the proposed process: the consultant's background, experience with the particular problem, ability to work across different perspectives, definition of the client, approach to confidentiality, deliverables, timing, and fees.

Paradox #5: Signing the Contract Does Not Mean the Family Is Ready

Hiring a consultant is a decision. Readiness to engage is a capacity—and the two do not always arrive together. A family may sincerely want change while remaining ambivalent about the conversations, compromises, and behavioral adjustments that change will require.

David Karofsky makes the required commitment concrete: *"When I first meet with a prospective family, I always tell them that it is an investment on multiple levels: time, energy, emotional, and financial. For this to be successful, they have to be invested in all of them."*

That investment can shape the entire engagement. Even families seeking similar outcomes can experience sharply different results depending on whether family members commit to the process, remain willing to be vulnerable when the work becomes difficult, and follow through on agreed changes (Karofsky, 2022a, 2022b). This helps explain why changing consultants does not always change the outcome.

Joe Astrachan identifies a pattern he calls *"consultant fatigue."* Families engage successive consultants over years, repeatedly narrating their circumstances. *"Sometimes they reject findings that are uncomfortable. Sometimes they're simply not ready to execute the recommendations. And sometimes, hiring a new consultant becomes a way to demonstrate that 'we're doing something' without creating meaningful change."*

When this happens, a family may conclude that several consultants have failed. Sometimes the consultant was truly a poor fit, or the engagement was badly designed. At other times, the family is seeking a different recommendation because it is not prepared to act on the one it has already received.

Astrachan brings the issue back to readiness: *"The limiting factor is not the consultant, but the family's readiness to engage with difficult conversations and follow through."*

This is not about blaming families for complicated situations. Readiness is rarely uniform. One generation may be eager to proceed while another is fearful; one sibling may want open discussion while another worries that speaking candidly will damage relationships. Part of a consultant's value is recognizing those differences and determining what can productively happen next.

Shay Harris-Pierre describes what families may observe when their existing ways of working are no longer serving them: *"Red flags that signal it may be time to engage a family business consultant might include stagnation in decision making (or conversely, decisions are rushed or made hastily), conversations about things that had little to no emotional weight begin to feel like emotional landmines, family members begin to disengage or express feelings of being silenced, or there is overt active conflict."*

Doug Baumoel elaborates on what readiness looks like: *"When families get stuck, unable to make decisions together in a timely manner; when relationships among family members seem to be degrading due to*

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differences in business or approaches to wealth; when interest in the family enterprise is fading and when there is active conflict. These are examples of where family business consulting can help."

The operative question shifts from *"Which consultant will solve our problems?"* to *"Are we genuinely ready to undertake the work this requires?"*

What Effective Consulting Can Make Possible

Family business consulting is fundamentally collaborative work. This is not something that happens to the family; it happens *with* the family.

The consultant contributes technical expertise, an external perspective, and structured frameworks to address complexity. The family contributes commitment, willingness to engage in difficult conversations, and the authority to implement behavioral and operational changes.

When that partnership works, the value can extend well beyond the immediate problem. A consultant can help owners articulate what they want from their assets, make meetings more productive, bring excluded voices into the conversation, distinguish relational issues from structural ones, coordinate the family's other advisers, and translate broad intentions into decisions with clear responsibility and follow-through.

The aim is not to make a family dependent on outside help. It is to help family members develop the clarity, processes, and capabilities to address future challenges more effectively together. McCann (2008) argues that a consultant should bring out the wisdom already present in the family system and help the family build its own problem-solving capacity.

The families that realize sustained value from consulting engagements are not those with the most sophisticated strategies or the most clearly defined problems. They are those who understand how consulting actually functions and arrive ready to engage as full participants.

A family business consultant cannot guarantee agreement, harmony, or success. But the right consultant can help a family see what it cannot see on its own, discuss what it has been unable to discuss productively, and make decisions that work for both the enterprise and the people whose lives are tied to it. That is not simply advice. It is the foundation for more effective ownership, stronger relationships, and a more resilient family business.

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