



A CONSILIENCE CASE STUDY

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The McDougal family had been involved in home construction for more than 70 years. The company was started by two brothers, John and Tony (Gen 1), in the latter half of the 1940s. Both were looking for a way to be a part of a robust post-war housing boon in New Jersey. By the time their children were starting families of their own, McDougal construction had expanded across the tri-state area. By 1980, John's son, Paul (Gen 2) and Tony's son, Tony Jr (Gen 2) began transitioning into senior management as the natural successors to their fathers. While these two sons worked in the company, John and Paul both had two other children who also had some ownership. Paul and Tony Jr. seemed like natural partners with Paul's affinity for operations and Tony Jr.'s natural proclivity for strategizing and expansion.

In 2015, the family contacted the Aspen Family Business Group looking for help in developing a formal succession plan to help replace Paul and Tony Jr. (both in their 70s) and an aging non-family CEO in her 60s. Conflict in the family had kept them from discussing the process and neither cousin really wanted to retire. As the number of family members dependent on income from the business had expanded over recent decades, two camps had emerged within the family. One aligned with Paul and the other with Tony Jr. When Leslie first met with the McDougal family, their interactions showed all the hallmarks of low trust and high conflict. During the assessment, it was revealed that ownership meetings often devolved into shouting matches followed by threats of attorneys. Even relatively innocuous suggestions were immediately ascribed by other family members to have nefarious intent.

After completing her assessment, Leslie brought the family together to discuss findings. During this session, she helped them to see that, between their shared values and shared goals, they had much more in common than was originally thought. Further, when meeting privately during the assessment, several of the family members had professed admiration for other members and admitted that the "camps" of the two families had been getting in the way of them openly expressing their fondness. Also, during the debrief, the family was taught skills for active listening and strategies for starting difficult discussion to help them bridge the divides between them.

Though the majority of the family was able to coalesce around a shared vision, there remained one member who was particularly destructive. Paul's wife, Vivian, had long been known within the family to be difficult to get along with. She was extremely divisive and family members recollected that you were either "on her side" or "her enemy." As the wife of Paul, she held a lot of power so people couldn't just ignore her. The challenge she presented revolved around how to deal with her destructive behavior so that the family could continue to heal and build trust. In this case, the solution involved finding ways to separate her involvement where she could still be heard, but her power to disrupt relationships and the company were reduced. The key to this was making sure that she didn't feel ignored so that she wouldn't remain on the offensive.

