

## **Call me anything except Junior** **Thursday 30th October 2008**

At INSEAD Europe and Asia, Randel S Carlock is the first Berghmans Lhoist chaired professor in entrepreneurial leadership and directs the Wendel International Centre for Family Enterprise

The new Oliver Stone film *W* explores an important concern for business and wealthy families – how parent-child relationships shape a child's personality development and, specifically, individual drives and motivations. The coming of age drama could be many family businesses where a feckless son struggles to redeem himself by overtaking his preferred younger sibling to succeed his father as head of the family dynasty. The Oedipal conflict between father and son, an ever present mother-father-son triangle, an oldest son's birth order expectations and a dose of sibling rivalry allows the film to explore a full range of family dynamics and their influence on W's behaviour.



There is a powerful scene in the film that captures the emotional challenges that next generation family members, especially eldest sons, face under the shadow of their powerful and successful parents. When the young George W Bush is introduced by a friend to his future spouse Laura as George Bush Junior he replies, "call me anything 'cept junior." The future president's response is simple and telling about his relationship with a powerful father who dominates his emotional life and his need to demonstrate his autonomy.

We also see his father's frustrations in another scene when the elder Bush confronts W about his son's alcohol driven lifestyle by characterising him as "acting like a Kennedy." Probably the most as powerful putdown a patrician conservative could offer. As the plot develops it is clear that much of George W's behaviour is motivated by his lack of self esteem and the need to prove that he is the rightful successor in his "family's business". The film even suggests that George W's motivation for pursuing the war in Iraq was to prove himself as a stronger and more capable leader than his forbidding father.

*W* teaches business families about the powerful influence of parenting practices on a child's personality development. Being from a successful family can create psychological problems because as Mathew Freud, great-grandson of the famous psychologist, stated so aptly, "You grow up feeling slightly special, but at the same time it was all reflected glory. I am a firm believer that everyone's parents f\*\*\* them up, but if you have famous parents, they have more ammunition." There are no magic bullets for effective parenting but there are behaviours that support positive parent-

child relationships; that support a child's development, first, as a responsible and satisfied adult, and second, as potential stewards of the family's legacy.

Understanding and accepting the child as an individual and celebrating his or her uniqueness is the foundation for the child's building of self-esteem. This is a challenge for successful parents who often have a clear view of how the world works based on their success and want to imprint their experiences on their children. To some degree we all live vicariously through our offspring but we need to ensure our expectations and actions are based on their needs and not ours. Other parenting behaviours to consider include:

- *Demonstrating your love and concern.* Children measure love by face time. Don't skip your child's school performance or event for a business meeting and then tell him or her that they are your highest priority.
- *Encouraging your child's personal development based on his or her talents and interests.* Any activity that creates a new experience for a child is a benefit.
- *Teaching your children the value of service to others.* Working with your child in a homeless shelter or an environmental clean up program builds their sense of self worth and practicing stewardship strengthens service to others as a value.
- *Coaching not caretaking.* As your child grows up your parenting role must evolve from a caregiver to coach. Use your life experiences, both good and bad, to help them experience failure and struggle so they grow up with a more realistic picture of themselves.
- *Practicing "fair process" in your decision-making and relationship with your children and the larger family* (as seen in **Fair Process Striving for Justice and Fairness in the Family Firm**, *Families in Business*, April/May 2003). Your children's first experience in communication, conflict, planning and decision-making is with their siblings and parents.

Young people in successful families often experience a sense of powerlessness and unworthiness that comes from being valued for their family's success. Reflected success is a powerful force that makes it difficult for young people to see themselves as autonomous adults, able to function away from their family. This forces them to compensate for feelings of inadequacy with behaviours that are not healthy or effective. Engaging with your children to help them learn who they are and who they are not is an important step in supporting their psychological development.

Parenting matters – if the first President Bush had better understood George W's uniqueness and helped his son differentiate from his famous family, perhaps the world would be a very different place today.