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C O N S C I O U S E N T E R P R I S E C E N T E R

W H I T E P A P E R

The Business Family

How Every Company Can Create the Bonds

That Make People Whole

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Executive Summary

This paper introduces the concept of the business family—the proposition that every company, regardless of industry or size, can extend to its people the same fundamental care, respect, and unconditional positive regard that characterize a healthy, loving family. Drawing on the pioneering work of Bob Chapman at Barry-Wehmiller, where more than 150 acquired companies have been transformed by the conviction that every employee is “someone’s precious child,” we present six foundational practices: seeing each person as precious, coaching rather than commanding, building to greatness, practicing courageous patience, helping people grow and then letting them go, and being authentically human.

#	Practice	Essence
1	See Each Person as Someone’s Precious Child	Recognize the infinite worth of every individual, regardless of role or rank.
2	Be a Coach, Not a Boss	Guide, teach, and develop people with honest, caring feedback rooted in trust.
3	Build Each Other to Greatness	Invest in strengths-based development; help every person become exceptional at what they are naturally gifted to do.
4	Practice Courageous Patience	Extend grace to the wounded and skeptical; consistent care is the cure for distrust.
5	Help Them Grow, Then Let Them Go	Prioritize each person’s growth, even when it means losing your best people.
6	Be Authentically Human	Bring the fullness of shared humanity into the workplace: celebrate, mourn, and be messy together.

We then deepen the argument with three powerful perspectives that illuminate the healing potential of the business family. First, we examine Danny Meyer’s Union Square Hospitality Group, where a leader shaped by a turbulent childhood consciously built the family he never had—creating a culture of “enlightened hospitality” that has produced twenty-eight James Beard Awards and a 90 percent success rate in New York’s notoriously unforgiving restaurant market. Second, we explore Power Home Remodeling Group, a “dream realization” company that takes young people the world has written off as mediocre and creates the conditions for them to discover their own extraordinary gifts—measuring and tracking employee happiness as rigorously as most companies track revenue. Third, and perhaps most poignantly, we present the testimony of people for whom the workplace was the first place they ever experienced basic dignity, respect, and safety—healing wounds inflicted by dysfunctional families of origin.

Together, these stories make the case that the business family is not merely a more humane way to run an organization; it is a healing force. For millions of people who grew up in homes

marked by neglect, abuse, or emotional poverty, a conscious business can provide something that was never available at home: a place where they are seen, valued, and loved for who they are. The evidence across industries—from manufacturing to hospitality to home remodeling—demonstrates that this healing orientation produces not only extraordinary human outcomes but extraordinary business performance. The business family is morally right and economically powerful. Not every company is a family business, but every company can be a business family—and when it becomes one, everybody matters and everybody wins.

Introduction: A Different Kind of Family

“Every one of the people who work for us is somebody’s precious child.” – Bob Chapman, CEO of Barry-Wehmiller

Bob Chapman was standing at a friend’s daughter’s wedding when it hit him. He watched the father of the bride looking at his daughter with such tenderness, such fierce and unconditional love, that something broke open inside him. He thought: Every one of the people who work for me is someone’s precious child. Someone once looked at them the way that father is looking at his daughter. What am I doing, as a leader, to honor that trust?

That question—simple, searing, impossible to forget once you have truly heard it—became the foundation of a philosophy of leadership that has since transformed Barry-Wehmiller from a struggling manufacturing conglomerate into one of the most admired companies in the world, with revenues now exceeding \$3.6 billion and a culture that has become a beacon for leaders everywhere.

But this article is not about Barry-Wehmiller alone. It is about an idea that belongs to every organization willing to receive it: the idea of the business family. Not every company is a family business, but every company can be a business family—a place where people are seen, valued, and developed with the same care and commitment that the best families provide. A place where people do not merely work; they belong.

People at Barry-Wehmiller do not say the company is “like a family.” They say it *is* a family. That distinction matters more than any metric ever could. A simile maintains distance; an identity creates belonging. And belonging—the deep, cellular knowledge that you matter, that you are cared for, that your growth is someone’s genuine concern—is the most powerful force in human development.



The Wound That Work Inflicts

We live in an era of epidemic loneliness, skyrocketing anxiety, and a pervasive crisis of meaning. Much of the research on human suffering points to the same root cause: disconnection. People feel disconnected from one another, from their communities, from any sense of larger purpose—and, most devastatingly, from themselves.

Most workplaces are not designed to make people feel like they belong. They are designed to extract labor in exchange for compensation. The employment relationship, at its core, remains transactional: you give your time and skill; we give you money. Everything else—your dreams, your fears, your need for dignity and meaning—is extraneous. Check it at the door.

In many family businesses, there is an inner circle and an outer circle. The family that owns the business is the inner circle—protected, nurtured, cared for through good times and bad. Everyone else is the outer circle—tolerated, utilized, and ultimately expendable. The result is a “caste system” disguised as a company, and it is corrosive to the human spirit.

But the failure is not unique to family businesses. In most organizations of every kind, people go to work feeling that their deepest humanity is not welcome there. They leave the fullness of who they are in the parking lot and bring only a narrow, sanitized version of themselves through the door. They learn to mask vulnerability, suppress emotion, and perform a role rather than live a vocation.

This is the wound that work inflicts. And it does not have to be this way.



The Business Family: A New Vision

The business family is not a metaphor. It is a commitment. It is the decision to extend to every person who works in an organization the same fundamental care, respect, and unconditional positive regard that characterize a healthy, loving family. It is the recognition that every employee arrives with a full human story—wounds and gifts, hopes and fears, brilliance and brokenness—and that a truly great organization honors all of it.

Not every company is a family business, but every company can be a business family—with unconditional love, forgiveness, and nurturing.

This is what Bob Chapman understood at that wedding. When parents look at their newborn child, they do not see a future employee. They see a miracle—a being of infinite worth and potential. They commit, in that moment, to doing everything in their power to help that child become the fullest version of themselves.

What if business leaders made the same commitment? What if every person who walked through the door of your organization was received not as a resource to be utilized but as someone’s precious child—someone with unrealized potential, unhealed wounds, and an unquenchable need to matter?



Six Practices of the Business Family

The business family is not built by proclamation. It is built by practice—by daily acts of leadership that, over time, create a culture where people feel as safe, as valued, and as supported as they would in the best kind of family.

1. See Each Person as Someone’s Precious Child

This is the foundational practice, and it is more radical than it sounds. To truly see each employee as someone’s precious child (yes, a grown-up, but still someone’s precious child) is to make an ontological claim about human dignity that overrides every other consideration—efficiency, cost, convenience. It means that no decision about people can be made without first asking: would I be comfortable telling their mother what I just did?

At Barry-Wehmiller, this is not an abstraction. When Bob Chapman acquires a company—and he has acquired more than 150 over the years—his first act is not to examine the balance sheet or restructure the workforce. His first act is to walk the floor, look people in the eye, and let them know that they are safe. He tells them: we measure success by the way we touch the lives of people.

The practice requires a specific discipline of perception. Before making any decision that affects people—a restructuring, a policy change, a difficult conversation—the leader asks: “How would I feel if this were being done to my precious grown up child? Would I be proud of how we handled this?”

2. Be a Coach, Not a Boss

No human being deserves to be “bossed” around. Consider the word itself. Boss enters English from the Dutch word *baas*, which meant “master.” It was adopted into American English in the seventeenth century, when Dutch colonies in New York and New Jersey were absorbed into

British North America. Its popularity grew precisely because Americans wanted to avoid saying “master”—a word that had become inextricable from the institution of slavery. But the substitution was cosmetic, not substantive. The word changed; the relationship of domination it encoded did not. In South Africa, *baas* remained the explicit term of racial subordination for centuries—the word that every Black person was expected to use when addressing a white person in authority.

We have taken this corrosive word and the corrosive idea behind it and made both routine in the world of work. We speak casually of “the boss” as though it were a neutral term, forgetting that it carries within it the assumption that some people exist to command and others to obey. The business family rejects this assumption entirely. No one in a loving family is the “boss.” There are elders, guides, mentors, coaches—but not masters.

In a family, the role of the parent is not to command and control but to guide, teach, and develop. The best parents are coaches—they set high expectations, provide the tools and support needed to meet them, and celebrate progress rather than punishing imperfection. They earn respect through care, not through the exercise of power.

The same is true of leadership in the business family. The leader’s primary role is not to direct work but to develop people. This means investing deeply in understanding each person’s strengths, aspirations, and challenges, and then creating the conditions for them to flourish. It means replacing the master–servant dynamic with a relationship of mutual respect, shared purpose, and genuine stewardship.

At Barry-Wehmiller, this philosophy gave rise to a formal program called the Leadership Fundamentals course—a multi-day experience that teaches leaders to listen empathetically, to communicate with clarity and compassion, and to create environments where people feel safe to take risks and grow. The course is grounded in the belief that every leader’s primary responsibility is stewardship of the lives entrusted to them. Not mastery over them—stewardship of them. The distinction is everything.

3. Build Each Other to Greatness

Good families do not force their children into predetermined molds. They watch, they listen, they pay attention to what lights each child up—and then they do everything in their power to fan that flame. They build to greatness by honoring uniqueness.

In the business family, this translates into a commitment to strengths-based development. Rather than obsessing over weaknesses and “areas for improvement”—the default mode of most corporate performance systems—the business family invests its energy in discovering and amplifying what each person does best. The question is not “How can we fix you?” but “How can we free you?”

This is not just good leadership; it is an act of love. When you help someone discover and develop their gifts, you are doing one of the most meaningful things one human being can do for another. You are saying: I see who you really are, and who you really are is extraordinary.

4. Practice Courageous Patience

Not everyone will “get it” immediately. Some people arrive in the business family carrying deep wounds from previous workplaces. They have been abused by other leaders—manipulated, discarded, treated as interchangeable parts. They are, understandably, skeptical. They have learned to protect themselves by keeping their distance, withholding trust, expecting the worst.

The business family responds to this not with frustration but with what might be called courageous patience. It takes courage because the temptation is enormous to write off the skeptics, to dismiss the wounded as “not a fit.” Patience is required because trust, once broken, takes time to rebuild. But the reward is immense: when a person who has never been truly seen finally allows themselves to be seen, something miraculous happens. They come alive.

This does not mean tolerating destructive behavior indefinitely. It means understanding its source. It means recognizing that most of what looks like resistance is actually self-protection, and that the remedy for self-protection is not punishment but safety.

5. Help Them Grow, Then Let Them Go

One of the hardest things a parent ever does is let go. The child you raised, nurtured, and poured yourself into eventually needs to leave—to find their own path, build their own life, become fully themselves. A parent who cannot let go becomes a prison warden, not a nurturer.

The same is true in the business family. Leaders must let people grow beyond their current team if that is what is best for them. This requires a fundamental shift in how leaders think about talent. In most organizations, the unspoken message is: your purpose is to serve this team, this department, this manager. Leaving is disloyalty.

In the business family, the message is the opposite: your growth is the point. If the best next step for you is in another department, another division, or even another company, then that is what we will support. Your flourishing matters more than our convenience.

Companies that practice this kind of selflessness paradoxically become magnetic. Word spreads. People want to work at a place that genuinely invests in them, even if it means eventually losing them. The talent pipeline never dries up because the reputation for genuine care becomes the most powerful recruiting tool imaginable. People who leave become loyal and grateful “alumni” of the company, recommending it to their friends and family as a great place to work and referring business to it. Many even return to the company after acquiring useful expertise elsewhere.

6. Be Authentically Human

Families celebrate together. They talk things over together. They mourn together. They laugh at the dinner table and cry at funerals and argue about politics and show up with casseroles when someone is sick. They are messy, emotional, imperfect—and real.

In most workplaces, we have been trained to suppress all of this. We have been taught to be “professional,” which in practice means being emotionally sanitized. Don’t bring your grief to work. Don’t cry in a meeting. Don’t admit you’re struggling. Keep your mask on. This is not professionalism; it is dehumanization.

The business family rejects this. It is proudly “unprofessional” in the best sense of the word. It celebrates together when there is good news—not with manufactured corporate events but with the spontaneous joy that arises when people genuinely care about each other’s happiness. It mourns together when there is loss. It creates space for vulnerability, for authenticity, for the full range of human experience.

At Barry-Wehmiller, when a team member’s family faces a crisis—a sick child, a house fire, a death—the response is not a sympathy card from HR. It is the full weight of a family rallying around one of its own: meals delivered, shifts covered, funds raised, tears shared. The message is unmistakable: you are not alone. You are one of us.



Enlightened Hospitality: How Danny Meyer Built the Family He Never Had

Danny Meyer, founder of Union Square Hospitality Group, offers one of the most compelling examples of a leader who consciously set out to create a business family—because he longed for the one he never had.

Growing up in St. Louis during the Vietnam War, the Watts riots, and Watergate, Danny was the middle child of three in a home defined by conflict. Every night at the family dinner table, arguments erupted between his liberal Democrat mother and his conservative Republican father. His siblings joined in, exacerbating the discord. But in the midst of this turmoil, Danny learned something invaluable: how to listen, how to empathize with all sides, and how to find common ground. One thing everyone in the Meyer family agreed on was the importance of art, culture, and great food—a shared passion that planted the seeds of Danny’s future vocation.

Danny’s father, an entrepreneur with exquisite taste but limited business acumen, pioneered the concept of culinary tours to boutique European country inns. Unfortunately, passion was not

enough; his father eventually went bankrupt, and then his parents divorced. When Danny became a restaurateur at twenty-seven, he later reflected on what was really driving him.

“When I became a restaurateur, I actually mistook work for family. I think I was trying to create the family I wish I had in terms of respect, support, and belonging.” — Danny Meyer

That longing—to create a place of respect, support, and belonging—became the animating force behind everything Danny built. Starting with Union Square Cafe in 1985, he resolved to create a positive, highly functional, healing family environment for all of his stakeholders. The results have been extraordinary: the Zagat Survey has ranked Union Square Cafe New York’s most popular restaurant an unprecedented nine times. His company has won twenty-eight James Beard Awards. Nearly 90 percent of his restaurants have succeeded in a market where 75 percent of new restaurants fail.

Danny’s desire to create a healing family atmosphere evolved into what he calls **enlightened hospitality**—an approach built on several key principles that mirror the practices of the business family.

He starts by hiring people with a high “HQ”—hospitality quotient—people who naturally enjoy looking after others’ needs. He looks for agents, not gatekeepers: people who make things happen for others rather than setting up barriers. He inspires employees with a higher purpose beyond tips, treating them as volunteers motivated by meaning rather than as transactional workers. He promotes what he calls “sibling revelry”—healthy internal competition that lifts everyone rather than the destructive sibling rivalry that characterized his childhood dinner table.

Perhaps most revealing is how Danny handles the hardest moments. When he was forced to close his elegant restaurant Tabla after years of subsidizing it with personal funds, he realized something profound: although the restaurant had to close, he could find new roles for the people who worked there. Tabla veterans went on to play key roles in other successful Meyer ventures. As he told the press, the measure of a company should be not just how it opens but how it closes—with the same dignity and care for its people.

Danny’s philosophy can be summed up in his own words: “In the end, what’s most meaningful is creating positive, uplifting outcomes for human experiences and human relationships. Business, like life, is all about how you make people feel. It’s that simple, and it’s that hard.”



The Dream Realization Company: Power Home Remodeling Group

If Danny Meyer built a business family to heal the wounds of his own childhood, Power Home Remodeling Group co-CEO Asher Raphael built one to heal the wounds carried by nearly every person who walks through his door.

The home remodeling industry is one of the most distrusted in America—an industry notorious for contractors who take money and disappear, mislead customers, and treat employees as disposable. When Asher first entered the industry as an entry-level sales representative, he was embarrassed to tell people what he did. But as he rose in the company, he realized that the industry’s terrible reputation was actually a profound opportunity for a company with a diametrically different approach to stand out.

Power set out to be a different kind of company, one driven by a simple but radical principle: “Our number one goal is to create positive change in the lives of our customers, our employees, and the planet.” The company has been recognized as one of Fortune’s best workplaces for millennials and one of Glassdoor’s best places to work. But the recognition is secondary to the transformation happening inside.

What makes Power truly extraordinary is who it hires and what it does for them. More than most industries, home remodeling attracts people who have run out of other options—people who have been repeatedly told that they are mediocre, that they don’t have any special talents, that they should stay in their lane. Asher describes the open wound these people carry:

“The vast majority of people we hire are suffering from something very specific. They are coming to me 24 years old, 27 years old, and for their entire life, they have been told that they are not exceptional, they are not destined to do anything great, and they should stay in their lane of mediocrity.”

Power’s response to this wound is the essence of the business family: it refuses to accept the verdict the world has rendered on its people. The company says to every new hire: “You have been told you are below average. You are not. Every one of you has specific gifts. If you put in hard, focused work over a long period of time, you can be great and do something really great with your life.” This is not a motivational speech—it is the operating principle of the entire organization.

And it works. Asher has watched thousands of people arrive believing they are mediocre and leave believing they are extraordinary—because Power created the conditions for them to

discover it for themselves. The company offers growth and development opportunities to all employees, not just managers or a select few. It has created a culture of true inclusivity and psychological safety, where people feel free to be who they are.

The results can be deeply moving. At Power's first Diversity and Inclusion Summit, a young man stood up in front of the entire company and came out as gay for the first time in his life—not to his friends first, not to his family first, but to his coworkers. Through tears, he said:

“It’s the first time I have ever been open and the first time I have been truly happy in my life. I never thought I could be this happy as a human being before working here.”

He received a standing ovation. Another employee, a woman, shared that she had come out to her coworkers before her friends and family, because Power was the first place she felt safe enough to be herself.

Asher reflects on what all of this means: “We are a company that sells windows and siding and roofing and solar panels. People are able to now not only make a living and have a skill set that allows them to function in the world, but experience a culture that allows them to be happy, which is unlocking their true talents and enabling them to thrive.”

Since the company's number one goal is human happiness, it measures it—rigorously and repeatedly. The company polls employees anonymously several times a year, breaking results down by territory, department, gender, and tenure. It asks not only about current happiness but about what people want for their future, recognizing that the onus is on the organization to create new opportunities for growth.

As Asher puts it: “People don't feel guilty about investing in marketing. They think that is what drives sales. People do feel guilty about spending on things that make people happy and heal them. They shouldn't. Healing and happiness are followed by devotion, retention, and finally, profit.”



The Healing Power of the Business Family

There is a dimension of the business family that is rarely spoken about but may be the most important of all: for many people, the workplace is the first place they have ever been treated with dignity, respect, and genuine care. Not as an exception to their experience—as the first experience of it.

Far too many businesses are dysfunctional and toxic—and could transform to become more caring and loving. But even without extraordinary conscious effort, the basic dignity, respect, and safety afforded to people in a good workplace can be an enormous source of healing from a dysfunctional family of origin. Not many business leaders realize the therapeutic power of simply providing a non-toxic environment where people feel safe and respected.

A woman in a leadership program described how her entire life, she had been treated like dirt by her family—emotionally abused by her parents, told she was an embarrassment by her father, bullied in school for being overweight. The first place she ever felt like a valuable human being was at her workplace in Dallas, where she worked as the executive assistant to the CEO. She spoke with tears in her eyes about feeling safe, respected, and cared about for the first time in her life—and it was also the first place where anyone ever believed in and invested in cultivating her potential.

Her workplace was truly transformational in her life. And it was probably not that extraordinary a workplace—it just didn't have the dysfunction and abuse associated with her actual family. That was enough to begin healing.

At a small firm in Dallas, another woman articulated this power with breathtaking clarity:

“Every day I come to work is another day my family trauma is healed.”

She talked about the respect and dignity she received at work that stood in stark contrast with how her family had treated her. She said her teammates were the ones who restored her sense of worth and self-esteem to a degree where she finally felt confident leaving an abusive spouse, knowing she deserved something better.

This is the power of a business family: the power to heal and restore. When Danny Meyer created a restaurant culture built on belonging and mutual respect, he was healing the wounds of his own fractured family—and creating the same possibility for every person who joined his team. When Asher Raphael tells a twenty-four-year-old that she is not mediocre, that she has valuable gifts, that she is allowed to dream bigger than the world has told her she is capable of, he is healing an open wound that may have festered for her entire life. When Bob Chapman looks a factory worker in the eye and says “You are someone’s precious child,” he is offering a form of recognition that some people have waited their whole lives to receive.

The business family does not replace the biological family. But for millions of people—people who grew up in homes marked by neglect, abuse, addiction, or simple emotional poverty—the business family can provide something that was never available at home: a place where they are seen, valued, and loved for who they are. A place where their wounds do not define them. A place where healing begins.



Why This Matters: The Ripple Effect

The impact of the business family extends far beyond the walls of the organization. When people are treated with genuine care at work, they carry that care home. They are better spouses, better parents, better friends, better neighbors, better citizens. The healing they receive at work radiates outward in concentric circles, touching every person and community they are connected to.

Bob Chapman often says that the most important metric of a company's success is not its stock price or its revenue growth but the way its people go home at the end of the day. Do they go home feeling energized, valued, and fulfilled? Or do they go home depleted, diminished, and drained? The answer to that question determines not only the health of the company but the health of families, communities, and ultimately the world.

The converse is equally true. When people are abused, ignored, or treated as disposable at work, they bring that damage home. Marriages suffer. Children feel the absence of a parent who is physically present but emotionally destroyed. Communities fray. The toxicity of a bad workplace is a social contagion, spreading suffering far beyond the office walls.

The business family is not a feel-good idea. It is a healing idea. It recognizes that businesses are the most powerful institutions in the modern world—more powerful in their daily impact on people's lives than governments, churches, or schools—and that with that power comes an extraordinary responsibility and an extraordinary opportunity. As Asher Raphael says, “Ensuring the health and happiness of people—healing them—is absolutely the best way to create a thriving business.”



Conclusion: Everybody Matters

The six practices of the business family—seeing each person as precious, coaching rather than commanding, building to greatness, practicing courageous patience, growing and releasing, and being authentically human—are not a program. They are a way of being. They require not a new org chart but a new consciousness—a willingness to see every person as worthy of the same love and investment that we would give to our own children.

This transformation is not easy. It demands vulnerability from leaders who have been trained to project strength. It demands patience from organizations that have been built on urgency. It

demands courage from cultures that have been steeped in cynicism. But the evidence is overwhelming: from Barry-Wehmiller’s sustained performance across more than 150 acquired companies, to Danny Meyer’s astonishing 90 percent success rate in the toughest restaurant market in the world, to Power Home Remodeling’s transformation of an entire generation of young people who had been written off—the business family is not just morally right but economically powerful.

The fundamental insight is this: we do not have to choose between caring for people and building a successful business. In fact, the two are inseparable. The companies that thrive most durably are the ones that care most deeply. Purpose and profit are not in tension; they are in partnership. The business family is the proof.

Not every company is a family business. But every company can be a business family. And when it becomes one, everybody matters—and everybody wins.