

# Stop Saying Your Company Is Like A Family

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If you think about or treat your employees like family, you're probably doing more harm than good. Sure, it sounds nice. And some aspects of a family-like culture are important to cultivate – caring, belonging, respecting others even if you don't like them. But leading an organization as if it were your family is an inappropriate and antiquated leadership practice. Instead, you should consider your organization as a sports team.



Trying to run your organization as a family will hold you back, and may even backfire.

Getty

Saying your company is like a family might have been appropriate in the past. Back when family models were more positive and universal, the association might have sounded appealing, even inspiring. And in an era when employees felt more loyalty to their employers and employers expected more as well, a family-like organization might have been attractive and productive.

Today, trying to run your organization as a family – or even merely saying that you do — will hold you back, and may even backfire. Your company is not like a family because:

- **You have to let people go.** There will inevitably come a time when, whether through firing or layoffs, you'll have to terminate some employees' employment. If you tell people they're your family and then you let them go, they will consider you a hypocrite – and they'll be right.
- **You must set and use performance standards.** To compensate, motivate, and develop employees, you must objectively assess employees' performance relative to clearly established metrics and to other employees'. These are leadership, not parental, behaviors.
- **Your organization should aim to fulfill a higher purpose.** Like parents, business leaders are responsible for people development; but you're also responsible for much more. You should also be driven to create value for customers, communities, and perhaps even the world at large — and you should be focused on leading your employees to a goal.
- **Your employees don't want or expect your company to be a family.** They understand jobs aren't permanent and most don't want them to be. They expect a fair exchange of value with their employers as long as there is a fit for both parties.
- **You can end up with unhealthy attitudes toward your employees.** Thinking of your company as a family often leads to treating your employees as children. Today's employees don't want a paternalistic leader telling them what to do or making decisions for them. They want to be trusted, empowered, and involved.

You must realize there is a new social contract between you and your employees. Back in 2016, Deloitte introduced this contract in its [Global Human Capital Report](#). It observed, "Young people anticipate working for many employers and demand an enriching experience at every stage. This leads to expectations for rapid career growth, a compelling and flexible workplace, and a sense of mission and purpose at work." More recently, the employer-employee social contract has developed even further, as evidenced by [the emergence of employee activism](#) and the continued growth of the gig economy workforce.

These developments make it clear your organization isn't like a family and it shouldn't be. It's also not a tribe, which [Seth Godin explains](#) is merely a group of people connected to each other, a leader, and an idea. And it's not a collection of friends, especially in this day and age when thanks to social media, the term "friend" has multiple meanings and you can easily un-friend people.

A more useful, fitting, and progressive metaphor is to think of your company as a professional sports team, or any other team created for professional-level performance like a show, movie, or even military action. With a pro sports team, you have:

- **A clear goal and clear opponents or obstacles to achieving it.** This helps achieve focus, alignment, and motivation throughout the organization.
- **Clear roles and expectations.** People know what they're expected to do and how they contribute to the goal.
- **Diversity.** Different people contribute in valuable ways. And because everyone understands that differences between individuals aren't a detraction from but a condition for success, they are celebrated.
- **Fit for purpose.** People are a part of the team as long as their participation is needed/wanted and as long as they need/want to be a part of it.
- **A unique culture.** A team has a specific way of doing things that reflects the leader, the team members, and the desired outcome.

Of course, not every pro sports team operates well and teams have their own drawbacks such as the risk of becoming too insular. But generally speaking, considering your organization as a pro sports team and your role as its coach leads to leadership perspectives and behaviors that serve you and your employees well. You are able to balance the somewhat temporary and transactional nature of the employer/employee relationship with a shared purpose, greater meaning, and mutual trust. You engage people in ways that respect the new social contract and ensure you are creating value for all parties.

Today's business environment requires agility, flexibility, and creativity. You don't want family ties that bind. You need to unleash the potential of people's performance.

Check out my [website](#) or some of my other work [here](#).