I. COURSE OBJECTIVES AND OVERVIEW

Mixing family dynamics and ownership of shared assets is a potent combination. Working together, families have produced some of the world’s greatest business success stories. Others have generated headlines of a very different kind, finding themselves in conflicts that have destroyed assets, relationships, or both. This course is about why those tragic outcomes occur, as well as how they can be mitigated and – ideally – prevented. It’s also about the dangers of avoiding conflict, which can bring down a family enterprise just as disastrously as excessive fighting. These conflicts could be about a family business, a family office, a foundation, or a shared family property. Or all of the above.

In this course, students will explore where conflict comes from in family enterprises, and how they are different from non-family enterprises. We will talk about why too little conflict can be as much of a problem as too much. We will discuss concrete strategies for managing conflict. And we will focus on crises, which reflect families sitting on the brink of a breakdown: what causes them, how to get out of them, and how to avoid them.
Students who complete the course will gain both a conceptual understanding of conflict as well as learn practical tools for how to deal with it. It will be useful for students whose families have any kind of shared assets, or for those who are interested in investing, advising, or just better understanding how to manage conflict within family enterprises. It will also be relevant for students who own, work in, invest in, or advise enterprises that are often “family-like”, such as partnerships and start-ups.

The course has the following objectives:

- Increase awareness of how common conflict is, even in families who are close
- Normalize conflict by showing how it can be the result of “system dynamics”, rather than greed or personality clashes
- Learn how conflict can be productive and essential to the success of a family enterprise
- Develop the tools required to assess the “state of the union” in a family enterprise and determine when the level of conflict has reached an unhealthy point
- Build experience in identifying pathways out of a crisis, whether that means reinvigorating the family enterprise or ending it
- Discover methods for managing conflict to avoid a crisis in a family enterprise

**Required Prerequisites and Connection to the Core**

There are no required prerequisites for this course

**Add/Drop Restriction**

Attendance at the first class session is required. Essential concepts are covered that are required throughout the rest of the course. If you cannot attend the first session and want to take the course, contact the instructor by email.

**II. TEACHING METHODS AND COURSE MATERIALS**

The course is taught by an experienced professional who has advised family enterprises for over a decade. The lectures will draw from that experience, bringing a practical and solution-oriented perspective to the classroom dialogue. They will also be informed by the instructor’s study of conflict as a Ph.D. in Columbia’s Political Science department. Some of the core insights of the international relations field, such as conflict spirals, system dynamics, crisis management, and power transitions, will be used to bring a conceptual understanding of conflict in family enterprises.

Each session will incorporate one core case study. It will be a classic business school case, which students will read and prepare in advance. For some sessions, there will be a “live” case based on an actual, though disguised, client experience of the instructor. For most sessions there will also be a guest speaker. Please note, guest speakers are subject to change/cancellation based on their schedules.

In addition to participating in class discussions, students will have a group assignment and a term paper.
All readings will be provided in the course packet and/or on Canvas. The following books are suggested, but not required:


**III. COURSE REQUIREMENTS AND ASSIGNMENTS**

Students are expected to contribute to the learning of classmates. A good contribution is defined as:

- Being on time and present in each class
- Actively participating in class discussions and exercises, pulling in insights from assigned readings, guest speakers, personal experiences, etc.
- When guests are in the room, being respectful and prepared with thoughtful questions
- Avoiding device usage for purposes that are not conducive to a productive learning environment

Students will have one group project (Type A). Each group will sign up to collectively analyze one of the cases assigned to a session. It is expected that students will meet as a group to discuss the case. They will then submit a write-up of the case using tools discussed in class. More detail on this assignment will be provided in the first session.

Students will also be responsible for writing a term paper (Type C). In their term papers, students will be asked to apply the concepts learned during the course to a family enterprise. Students may choose to write about any family enterprise (including their own), so long as it is not one of the cases in the course. Students must obtain approval about the family enterprise they wish to choose by the third session of the course. The term paper should be 10-15 pages, typed in 11 or 12 pt. font, double-spaced, with normal margins and footnotes or end notes. Papers must include a bibliography as well as any supporting exhibits (Note: these are not included in the 10-15 page length).

Grading will be weighted as follows:

- Class participation: 30%
- Group exercise: 30%
- Term paper: 40%

**IV. COURSE SYLLABUS**

**Session 1: The Causes of Conflict in Family Enterprises**

Core topics and questions:

- How is conflict different in a family enterprise than a non-family one?
- What are the different approaches to understanding conflict?
What are the causes of conflict in a family enterprise?
What are the core strategies for managing conflict?

Required readings:
- Students are highly encouraged to watch the movie *We the People: The Market Basket Effect*

Optional readings:

Case assignment: J. M. Huber: A Family of Solutions

Session 2: Getting Conflict “Just Right”

Core topics and questions:
- What are the consequences of having too much conflict in a family enterprise?
- What are the consequences of having too little conflict in a family enterprise?
- What are the characteristics of a family enterprise that has found the right balance?

Required readings:

Optional readings:
Case assignment: Herschend Enterprises

Note: Groups to sign-up for their case topic and date

**Session 3: The Cycle of Conflict in Family Enterprises**

Core topics and questions:
- What is the common pattern of conflict within family enterprises?
- How do family enterprises reach a point of stability?
- What are the typical “shocks” that disrupt the stability within a family enterprise?
- Why does conflict spiral out of control in some family enterprises?
- What are the options for dealing with a conflict that has spiraled?

Required readings:

Optional readings:

Case assignment: J Perez Foods (A)

**Session 4: Strategies for Managing Conflict (I)**

Core topics and questions:
- How do families define a common purpose if they want to stay together?
- What are the different models of decision-making authority?
- How can the culture of a family evolve to meet changing circumstances?

Required readings:
Case assignment: The Wen Group

Note: Students to seek approval for their term paper topic

**Session 5: Strategies for Managing Conflict (II)**

Core topics and questions:
- How can governance structures be used to proactively manage conflict?
- How can families use partitioning to create space for each person?
- How do you put together a “grand bargain”?

Required readings:

Optional readings:

Case assignment: Hamilton Energy

**Session 6: How to Escape or Avoid a Family Feud**

Core topics and questions:
- What is the best way to get the change process started, especially if the generation currently in power is not interested in change?
- How can trust be regained once it is lost? How do family members reestablish productive working relationships?
- What triggers for conflict should family enterprises be watching out for?
- How do family enterprises avoid unproductive levels of conflict in the first place?

Required readings:


Optional readings:

- *Beyond Reason: Using Emotions as You Negotiate*, Roger Fisher and Daniel Shapiro, Chapters 1 and 2.

Case assignment: Scholtes Waterservices