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## THE FEUD FIXER

Robert Gavin, Boston Globe Staff

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**HOPKINTON** - There's business and there's family. And when the two get so tangled up that the business strains family ties and family conflicts threaten the business, there's Gary Furst.

Furst is a seasoned executive who practices a specialty that many would view as dangerous, if not plain crazy. He gets between feuding relatives, makes peace, and puts their family business back on track. Part chief executive, part therapist, part teacher, and part honest broker, Furst's approach boils down to this: Remove the hot-running emotions of family relationships from the cold calculations of business, develop a plan that all agree on, and make it happen. His latest project: Weston Nurseries of Hopkinton. Here, Wayne and Roger Mezitt, brothers, equal partners, and the third generation to run the family farm, knocked heads for a decade over how far and how fast to grow, with their failure to agree on small details or big pictures producing only a stagnating business and a strained relationship. At its worst, with sales flat over the past three years and the business losing money, frustrations mounted to the point that, in the heat of argument, they raised the possibility, albeit briefly, of selling their 960 acres of rolling hills, woods, and fields to developers.

But since Furst took over as chief executive in November, the long-running stalemate has been broken, and improvements that were on the drawing board for years are getting done, including a \$1.25 million renovation of the nursery's aging garden center, where employees hand out damp scented facecloths to cool customers on hot days.

Sales are on the upswing, running 25 percent ahead of last year since May, and the nursery last week received its first ever "Best of Boston" award from Boston magazine. The strains between the brothers seem to be easing, too: They recently appeared together at a company luau, clad in grass skirts and coconut bras.

"He and I are very much alike," Wayne Mezitt, two years older than his brother Roger, recently conceded. "Of course, we don't like to admit it."

In many ways, Furst's experiences at Weston Nurseries provide a case study of the conflicting pressures that coexist within family businesses; the challenges of professionalizing their management; and the benefits of outside perspectives.

Too often, said Paul Karofsky, executive director of the Center for Family Business at Northeastern University, closely held family enterprises fail to recognize the need for help, with grave results: Fewer than one in three survive to the second generation, and fewer than one in 10 make it to the third.

Still, even with outside expertise, making the transition from a family to a corporate structure is not easy, Karofsky added, because "you are dealing at the core with two totally disparate value systems."

"In business, it's what you do and how well you do it, but a family accepts its members unconditionally for who they are," Karofsky said. "A family business is dealing with something beyond money - it's about history, culture, and emotional attachment."

Furst, 52, of Newton, perhaps understands these issues and pressures better than most. He cut his management teeth as the fourth generation to run his own family's business, American Brush Co. of Boston and later Claremont, N.H., leading it through much of the 1980s, and culminating with the paintbrush maker's sale in 1992 to Stanley Works of New Britain, Conn.

There, he relished the chance to work closely and spend time with his father, Melvin, who preceded him as the company's chief executive, but also learned of the frustrations and tensions one can only feel with a relative.

At American Brush, Furst also learned the need to cut through emotional attachment to focus on business realities and the value of outside perspectives. In the early 1980s, with the competition from low-cost foreign manufacturers threatening the company's survival, Furst wanted to contract some production with overseas plants. But his father, who had built the company's manufacturing capacity and feared losing control of such operations, opposed the move.

Father and son battled for a couple years, with the elder Furst eventually seeing the necessity of overseas production - thanks in part to an outside consultant, hired by Melvin Furst to advise and train Gary, who, before joining the business, had been an elementary school teacher.

"My father was good at what he did, but he was resistant to change, and it was very emotional for both of us," recalled Furst. "But having that third person, who took a lot of the emotion out of the equation, was crucial."

Furst put these lessons to work at Kryptonite Corp., the Canton lock maker, where the two brothers who owned the company were battling over what new products to introduce, what new markets to enter, how best to break into the mass market, and how much of their manufacturing to move overseas. Michael Zane, who founded the company after developing its groundbreaking U-shaped lock, said he and his brother, Peter, both believed the company was not growing to its potential, but family emotions clouded their focus and contributed to the stalemate.

Furst, who joined the company as chief executive in 1995, got the two brothers to outline their goals, and made them see that they both wanted the same thing: to grow the company, build its value, and ultimately cash out. Furst then developed a strategy that both brothers bought into, one that promoted the well-regarded Kryptonite brand name to introduce new products and new markets, including a lock for laptop computers. By the time the company was sold to Ingersoll-Rand Ltd., the Bermuda-based conglomerate, in 2001, Kryptonite sales had nearly tripled under Furst.

"Gary was the right guy, at the right time," said Michael Zane. "Brothers, sisters have these emotional problems that go way back, and to work through it is very, very difficult. What you can gain [from outside management] is a lot more than what you lose in control."

As the Zane brothers were prospering in the 1990s, the Mezitt brothers were struggling at Weston Nurseries. Trained by their father and grandfather primarily as farmers and

horticulturists, the Mezitts found themselves ill-prepared to deal with an industry becoming increasingly competitive, with big players, such as Home Depot and Wal-Mart, operating their own garden and landscaping centers.

But differences between the brothers made it hard to respond to the challenges. Wayne Mezitt, 60, brimming with ideas, wanted to try them all, believing that the best approach was to put them in place and then deal with problems as they came up. Roger Mezitt, 58, far more conservative, insisted that proposals be carefully studied, plans for all contingencies developed, and money to pay for it set aside before moving ahead.

Needless to say, not very much got done. For example, both agreed that the tired old garden center needed to be renovated, but could only move in circles, with Wayne proposing idea after idea, Roger insisting on careful study, and the plan being set aside. Meanwhile, they missed obvious and easy opportunities to increase revenues, such as selling cut flowers, which the nursery began to do only after Furst's arrival.

"They got a million calls a day. 'Do you sell flowers?' 'No,'" said Furst.

Sales stagnated, the business lost money, and tensions between the brothers grew. Wayne Mezitt said that he sometimes came home swearing he would never talk with his brother again. During particularly heated arguments, the idea of selling out would even be raised, said Wayne Mezitt, but ultimately they "stopped short of the point where you can't go back."

The brothers decided they needed help to break the stalemate, and after bringing on an outside board of directors about two years ago, they signed on Furst as chief executive last year. As he had done at Kryptonite, Furst had the Mezitts outline their goals, and once again, showed them that they essentially wanted the same thing: in this case to keep the nursery operating and preserve the open land. Again he developed a plan that both bought into, one that promoted the nursery's long-established reputation as a leader in the industry, focused on customer service, and aimed to make the nursery a destination for people to come back to again and again.

The long-needed renovations to the garden center got done. Business is picking up, and despite a dismal April - typically the nursery's best month - that was wiped out by a late winter and cold, rainy weather, sales are running ahead of a year ago. Furst is also training the fourth generation, Wayne's son, Peter, 36, to assume the leadership over the next few years.

Meanwhile, Wayne Mezitt says he's enjoying the freedom from his "compulsion to make every decision" and is focusing on ways to grow the business. Roger Mezitt, who admits he's not completely comfortable with Furst's expansion of the business, nonetheless says he's looking forward to stepping back from day-to-day operations and eventually retiring.

As for Furst, he plans to turn over a thriving business to Peter Mezitt within the next few years. After that, he says, "I think there's one more family left in me."