

# Alcoholism's Stinking Thinking: "Just Wine at Dinner"

**Alcohol abuse can be devastating to any family, especially to business families.**

By Tom Hubler

## Key Takeaways:

- Alcohol abuse can be devastating to families, even more so when a family runs a business together.
- “Stinking thinking” is the crazed, distorted, delusional mindset that an addict can have.
- All too often family businesses lack formal agreements between first- and second-generation executives—an unfortunate situation that’s only compounded when alcohol or other chemical addiction is a part of the family dynamic.

I’m sitting at my desk pondering a client report I need to write. But I’m having difficulty because the report is about an upcoming Family Planning meeting, and the dynamics of the situation are highly complex because there is chemical abuse in the family. This is the elephant in the room that the family will not address, yet it will influence—in fact, drive—the tone of the Family Planning session itself.

And that brings me to the reason for this article. When alcohol or other chemical addiction is a part of the dynamic in a family, virtually any attempt to resolve family and business issues is infinitely more difficult. Unfortunately, addiction is such a powerful influence that many, if not most, families (and individuals) would rather deny it exists than deal with the problem.

Addiction can make people overly defensive, confrontational, and even bullying and irrational. Harry Swift, one of the early staff members of the now-famous Hazelden Addiction Treatment Center in Minnesota, referred to this behavior as “stinking thinking.” It’s the crazy, distorted, delusional mindset an addict can have. I have dealt with this often in my practice. Here is an example that demonstrates how dysfunctional it can be.

## Real-life scenario

I had arrived to begin the second day of the Riley clan’s two-day family business planning meeting at the Riley family cabin located on a picturesque lake in upstate New York. On the first day we focused on identifying issues and challenges facing the Riley family and the business they owned. On the second day the plan was to create a Riley Common Family Vision designed to unite them. I had also planned on introducing them to my **Collaborative Team Skills** process as a way to strengthen the family’s communication skills and help them better manage their differences.

**READER NOTE:** Contact the author at (612) 375-0640 or [tomh@thehublergroup.com](mailto:tomh@thehublergroup.com) for more about **Collaborative Team Skills**.

I arrived first, before the adult children. As I walked into the cabin, the patriarch, Gary, who was standing in the kitchen, tweaked his index finger, summoning me to follow him. We entered a bedroom aglow with sunshine streaming through glass patio doors that overlooked the lake. And then Gary turned and proceeded to chew me out.

“I hired you to fix Alex and Bob,” (his sons) he said. “Not to focus on me.” This was how he began what became a half-hour rant. The experience reminded me of when I was a little boy and my father (who was an alcoholic) took me “to the woodshed” in my parents’ bedroom.

As a result of my participation in Adult Children of Alcoholics Al-Anon and my professional training, I saw Gary’s behavior for what it was—a cry for help. I understood why it surfaced—because some of this addiction-driven behavior had come up during discussions on the first day.

### **A little background ...**

Gary and his wife, Marg, were semiretired and lived on their boat in Florida during the winters. Their sons, Alex and Bob, were tapped to run the company. Gary had expressed concerns about their leadership capabilities and said he had lost confidence in them. I recognized those concerns as typical in a family business when there is no formal agreement between first- and second-generation executives—in this case between the father and his adult children. The lack of formality often hinders financial performance for the company and strains parent-adult child relationships.

Also during that first day, the two sons had talked about Gary and Marg’s heavy use of alcohol. This was what got Gary steaming. When they were on their boat in Florida, Gary and Marg would have a bottle or two of wine with dinner. Then they would call their sons in New York to talk to the grandchildren. Alex and Bob and their wives would not let Gary and Marg talk to the kids when they were slurring their words and “under the influence.”

At that point, I suggested that since the family shared a concern about the parents’ alcohol use, the simple solution was for Gary and Marg to have an assessment to determine if there was a problem, and then take it from there. Gary’s half-hour “discussion” with me the second morning of the retreat was his rationalization for why he and Marg were backing away from the commitment they had made the previous day to have the assessment done.

The time he spent telling me why I should focus on the sons and not on him put everything behind schedule for the second day. The meeting ended on a positive note, but the question about whether Gary and Marg would have an alcohol assessment was left unanswered.

In telephone calls with Alex and Bob later, I learned that the parents did not address it, nor did the rest of the family. If they did not address their concerns about alcohol abuse, it would certainly have a damaging effect on their lives.

Alcohol misuse blurs boundaries, and it undermines the family and its effectiveness when it comes to running a business. It reduces the ability to problem solve and magnifies differences while diminishing the ability to communicate and manage them. What’s more, for the Riley family, alcohol misuse seriously diminished their capacity for emotional intimacy.

Our two-day session exposed the drinking problem, and all the adult family members agreed that a simple assessment would provide a starting point for resolving it. But the very nature of alcoholism’s “stinking thinking” kept the family from doing what was rational and put the addiction ahead of the family, the business and the future.

## Conclusion

The lesson here is that if you suspect someone in your family is abusing a substance, the first step is to encourage—aggressively encourage—that person to have a professional evaluation. That’s when healing can begin.

In a future article, we’ll explore another family’s circumstances concerning chemical abuse and how they made a turnaround.

## About the Author

**Tom Hubler** ([tomh@thehublergroup.com](mailto:tomh@thehublergroup.com)) is president of Hubler for Business Families ([hublerfamilybusiness.com](http://hublerfamilybusiness.com)) and an adjunct professor at the University of St. Thomas. He can be contacted at (612) 375-0640. This paper is ©2016 Tom Hubler; All Rights Reserved.