

Family matters

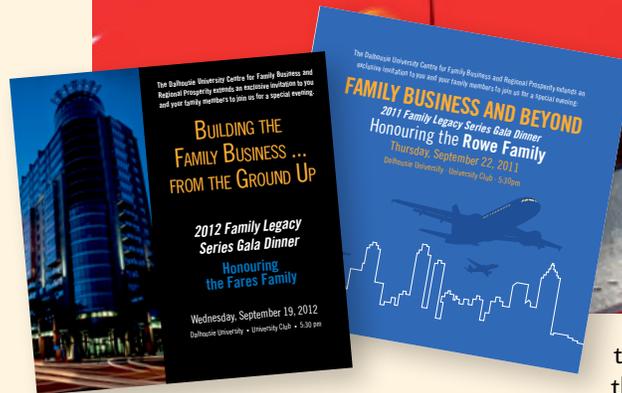
The Centre for
Family Business and
Regional Prosperity

Bob Blunden spent much of his childhood working with his father in the family's Halifax-based building materials business. But when it came to choosing a career, he set his sights further afield. "I said I'd never work for my father again – he was too tough," Blunden remembers.

But things changed after Blunden completed his university education. His dad asked him to come home and run the building materials business. "That part of the business was struggling and this was a chance to assess it and decide if it could be turned around," he remembers. "It was an opportunity I couldn't refuse." Within a few years, Blunden had reached his goal of revamping the business and putting it back in the black. And while this was no easy task, Blunden's business education had helped prepare him for the challenges of working in the company his father and grandfather co-founded two decades earlier.

"There wasn't much understanding of the issues affecting family businesses back then," says Blunden, who went on to obtain his PhD in business strategy and design one of Canada's first university-level courses specifically focusing on family business.

Today, he co-leads the Business Family Fundamentals Course at Dalhousie's Centre for Family Business and Regional Prosperity. The course offers training in succession planning, management, communication and conflict resolution specifically tailored to family businesses, through a combination of video-based online modules and a full-day workshop.



The course is open to owners, employees and advisors connected to family businesses of all sizes.

The Centre for Family Business and Regional Prosperity opened in 2008, one of six across Canada initiated by Montreal's de Gaspé Beaubien family, founders of Telemedia Inc. and the Business Families Foundation, the organization that created the Business Family Fundamentals course. "The family identified a real gap in the educational marketplace in terms of how to help family-owned businesses navigate the delicate balance between family relationships, business decisions and shareholder considerations," says the Centre's Director, Leslie Crowell.

Generous support by founding partner BMO Financial Group provides the necessary resources to fund the Centre's education, research and outreach initiatives. Through events such as its annual Family Legacy Series Gala Dinner, as well as course offerings, the Centre's goal is to give people involved with family business an opportunity to network, share their experiences and develop new skills.

"The fabric of the Atlantic Canadian economy is family-based," observes Crowell. "By equipping

these family businesses with the best peer- and expert-led learning opportunities, our goal is to improve the long-term economic prosperity of our region."

Brian Easson completed the Family Business Fundamentals course in 2012. A third-generation successor of Berwick, N.S.-based Eassons Transport Ltd., he says the course not only gave him a chance to learn new ways of handling the tricky dynamics of family business, but also highlighted ways in which his family's company is doing things *right*. "It was great to hear other people's experiences and share what has worked for us," he says.

Accompanying Brian Easson was the firm's Director of Human Resources, Trevor Bent. "Succession is a hugely important HR concern," Bent says. "The course gave me an even stronger understanding of the succession challenges and best practices in family business, which will help me provide the best guidance I can."

Bob Blunden says the course helps participants cope with the sometimes isolating nature of family business. "The biggest impact I see is the relief participants feel when they learn they're not alone in the challenges they face."



Brian Easson