



For families-in-business and families of wealth . . . Today and Tomorrow

Fostering Healthy Communication

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On March 24, 2010 I will be leading a workshop for the Wisconsin Family Business Forum at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh on the topic of *healthy* communication. Registration is still open and if you are interested in attending go to:

http://wfbf.uwosh.edu/Assets/programs_registration.php

What do healthy families do right?

As I thought about the many successful families-in-business that I have worked with over the past 27, three common elements characterized their healthy and positive communication patterns:

1. Who – Healthy families address issues directly and in a timely fashion rather than avoiding conflict and letting issue fester until they explode.

For most of us, when we are having conflict or tension with another person, we often talk about the problem with some third party, rather than addressing the issues directly with the person with whom we are in conflict. This is called “triangulation”. In healthy communication, the role of the third party – the triangulated person – should be to help direct the persons with the conflict to discuss the issues openly and directly. For example, in a four brother sibling team there has historically (since childhood) been tension between a middle son and his father. Now in their business relationship, the father often discusses his frustrations with this middle son with the eldest son rather than dealing directly with the middle son. The dynamics were transformed positively, when the eldest son worked effectively to get his brother and father to sit down directly and work out their differences.

2. How – Healthy families practice “active listening, “ or as Steven Covey states it – “ Seek first to Understand, then to be Understood.”

I am reminded of an interview I once conducted with the daughter of a very successful entrepreneur. As our conversation unfolded, I asked her about the communication dynamics with her father. She replied, “Oh, that’s a matter of “A” or “O”. I was curious, and so I asked, “Tell me more about “A” or “O”. “

And she explained: “ “A” stands for acceptance. Sometimes I don’t want anything more from my father than to have him listen and understand my current situation, struggles, or emotional issues. But other times, I really need his expert help. “O” stands for opinion. I want his advice. So I had to take the initiative and train my father to listen more effectively by saying in advance whether the upcoming conversation was an “A” or an “O.” “

An important lesson learned from this example is that the younger generation needs to take the responsibility to change the communication dynamics with their parents.

3. What – Healthy families talk about what really matters. They get to the heart of the matter rather than dealing with the immediate symptoms.

Several years ago while working with a sibling team who had just purchased the voting control from their parents, I asked them the following question: “Now that you own the business and are in control, what will you continue doing that worked well? , what will you stop doing?, and finally, what should we start doing differently? This process of having discussions around three critical questions – continue, stop, and start – we now term “The Amazing Life.”

As family members you should actively listen to one another to learn what should continue, stop and start, in your own lives and in your relationships with one another. Don’t limit these discussions to just one topic. Instead explore the “continue, stop, and start” in all aspects of your life – in your personal life, your relationships as a family, your business practices, and the dynamics of your shareholder relations.

To foster healthy communication talk about what really matters, and listen for understanding, so that you are able to deal directly with one another, rather than avoiding the most critical issues you face.