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Family businesses: Communication is a key

"Family business communication is an increasingly important business function that family businesses need to manage with a clear vision and strategy," according to top family business expert, Don Schwertler. Many misunderstandings and potential areas for conflict can be avoided if effective communication pathways are in place.

Several years ago, I wrote an article titled, "You cannot 'not' communicate." In a family business, interpersonal communication is inescapable.

The ability of family business members to effectively communicate is critical.

Even when you do not communicate, you are communicating something. And, keep in mind communication is more than speaking and listening. Body language, facial expressions, tone of voice, rate of speech and pitch as well as spatial indicators can all significantly impact the message you send. So, as you might imagine, if all the factors are not in sync, the probability that your message will be misunderstood is high. Or, as the famous Murphy's Law on communication says, "If communication can fail, it will."

Several reasons why poor communication may exist in family businesses:

- Family members assume they know what other family members think, feel or want.
- Family ties inhibit honest opin-

ions from being voiced.

- Personal resentments become business resentments and vice versa, which can create communication issues.
- Positive/constructive feedback is rarely provided.
- Family member in control of business may discourage input.

Whatever the issues may be, an atmosphere that fosters open communication and discussion will go a long way to achieving overall business success. Sam Lane, a family business consultant and co-author of "Working with Family Businesses," suggests three strategies he feels are worth the effort, and can make a tremendous difference in how you communicate with the entire family.

1. Paraphrase the speaker. Most people aren't skilled listeners, so they may hear what is said, but not understand it. That can lead to conflict, especially among family members who, because of their familiarity, think they can read each other's minds. One way to enhance listening is to develop the habit of paraphrasing. After a family member finishes a thought, Lane recommends using one of the following phrases to check your understanding: "So what you are saying is ..." "In other words ..." or "Let me check my understanding of what you're saying ..." If you don't capture the essence of what the person said, he repeats it, and you paraphrase until you understand it.

2. Talk face to face. Directly communicating your feelings isn't always easy. But when Mom talks to Dad about son, John, or John talks to

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one sibling about another, information gets distorted. And, because you are dealing indirectly with problems, they rarely get solved. Confronting each other is hard, but it's the only way to meaningful communication, and straightforward doesn't have to mean brutal. As long as the basic rules of a healthy discussion are observed — respecting each other, maintaining self-control so you don't say things you don't mean and avoiding personal attacks.

3. Make statements, not accusations. When you face off with someone you're in conflict with, often the first word uttered is "You ..." followed by accusations. Lane suggests using a three-step technique to bypass accusations. Start by describing what the other is doing ("The last three times you came into the shop, you started issuing orders to me in front of everyone"), how it makes you feel ("I feel demoralized in front of my department — as if I'm a little kid"), and what you prefer instead ("One thing that might work is if you come into my office to speak to me privately, or call me on the phone and ask me to come to yours").

The ability of family business members to effectively communicate with one another, their employees and customers is a critical ingredient in gaining a competitive advantage, achieving business goals and accomplishing optimal results.

For more information on Dr. White's programs and publications, visit www.successimages.com or call (225) 769-2307. •