



Enterprising Rural Families™

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TIP OF THE MONTH

The definition of the rural family business includes:

- The principles of the business are related by marriage or kinship.
- Family members include the principles and do the work.
- The family lives and works in the same location.
- The principles own and manage the business.
- Business ownership and managerial control are transferred between generations with the passage of time.

A critical distinction between the family system and business system is in the management of key issues. Family and business consultants tell business owners to keep family life and work life separate. However, this is not possible for members of a family business. The two systems are dynamically intertwined.

The basic motive of the family is to seek harmony, while that of the business is to seek profit.

Difficult Conversations- Tackling the Tough Ones (Part 1)

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Communication is at the heart of any organization and family enterprise. Difficult conversations are anything that someone does not want to talk about. Yet an honest robust conversation with our self and others is the most effective means of change. It is fear, of the emotional consequences of the conversation, which most often delays people from entering into a difficult conversation. And unfortunately when the long dreaded conversation finally occurs, typically we think and feel a lot more about the topic than what we actually got to say.

- *Who is the opponent? What are they thinking about the situation? Are they even thinking about the situation?*



The reason why a conversation is difficult is that there are feelings involved. Strong emotions can be brought up in a difficult conversation and strong emotions can create difficult conversations. It's not just the expressing of strong emotions that is the obstacle, experiencing strong emotions can be very disarming in a conversation. Knowing that the conversation is going to trigger someone's anger or tears is unsettling. Discomfort with the emotions is the reason why many try to strategize an approach to the conversation by addressing just the facts. Focusing on facts can be an unsuccessful strategy for many reasons.

Assumptions and Intentions

It is very easy to assume that we know what the other person's intentions are, however, our beliefs about another's intentions are often wrong. We base our assumptions on our own feelings. I feel slighted, so you meant to slight me. Unraveling the role of intentionality requires honesty, realizing that we tend to think the worst of others and the best of ourselves.

Another problem we create is that we think if we explain that we intended no harm, the other party has no reason or right to feel hurt. To avoid the mistake of assuming that what I'm looking at is fact, and that my view of the matter is correct, I must avoid the leap from impact to intent. Simply ask the other part what is their intent. Remain open-minded about your own interpretation of their intent.



If we are serious about discussing what matters most, moving from blame to personal contribution is an important journey to embark upon. Become mindful of your role in the situation and how you have contributed to the problem. Know your mistakes. Stone, Patton and Heen in their book, *Difficult Conversations* advise “*The more easily you can admit to your own mistakes, your own mixed intentions, and your own contributions to the problem, the more balanced you will feel during the conversation and the higher the chances it will go well.*” Honestly looking at our intentions will help us recognize that we may have contributed to the problem. As a mediator I’ve learned that there are usually as many “truths” in a conflict as there are parties.

Emotions

In most difficult conversations, it’s not just the expression of the strong emotion, it’s the reality that the emotion is being experienced internally, which interferes with our ability to listen. If I’m hurt and caught up with that feeling, it’s hard for me to listen, think about or formulate a response in the conversation. Sticking to the facts can’t work because the emotion is the issue. If we stick to just the facts, we’ve missed the whole point of the difficulty.



In a conflict, we tend to judge emotions. Labeling emotions as “good” and “bad” isn’t helpful. For example, happy and content are “good” emotions, mad and unfriendly are “bad” emotions. These judgments can interfere with our ability to hear. Emotions are a source of information. My emotional response gives me information about what’s working or isn’t working for me. If I’m in a situation where I’m feeling angry it may be that one of my values is being violated.

A strong emotion can bring a distinction between how a person feels and what they do. People can take anger and turn it into something positive. Attempting to frame difficult conversations in ways that ignore the emotional context is denying that emotions are important components of who we are. The way we bring emotions into the conversation rather than acting them out is a skill which aids us through difficult conversations.

Managing our own responses and managing our responses to the other person’s emotions are components of the discussion strategy. How do I manage my responses? Coming to an understanding of my emotional triggers will prepare me for these conversations. Unexpressed feelings will most likely leak back into the conversation.

Feelings can become the trigger in a difficult conversation. There are things that people can say to us that don’t trigger us emotionally. People’s sense of themselves varies. I may be very attached to my creative ability and totally unattached to my prowess with computer programming. Someone else may see computer programming as a core piece of their identity and not care at all that someone implies that they aren’t very focused on their kids’ needs.

If you are not sure of what the feelings are that are driving you on this issue: Go to a quiet place, think about the situation, and begin to journal. Write what you are feeling and thinking.

Core values

Some conversations are difficult because they threaten or challenge a person’s sense of who they are: their identity or core values. If you haven’t assessed your core values, make a list of the things that describe you. This list will help you identify what is a core value to you. Compare the feelings that you have identified in your journal exercise with your core value list. This exercise will help to identify triggers which are driving the situation you face.



Continued next month...

COMMUNICATION: the heart of a successful organization and family enterprise.

Dealing with difficult conversations:

- ▶ Identify the opponent
- ▶ Avoid assumptions and implied intentions
- ▶ Control your emotions
- ▶ Identify your core values or who you are and what you stand for - before you begin



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