



Failure to communicate can seriously damage a family business' chances of survival. Often communication is only prioritised when conflict breaks out. This reactive attitude can allow the conflict to escalate out of control, and may endanger the family's chances of restoring the trust on which effective communication depends. **Ian Marsh was a lawyer for more than 35 years. In 2006, he set up his own company, now trading as familydr, dedicated to helping families,** particularly families in business, to have the conversations that matter most to them. Arguing that trust, communication and mediation need to be emphasised before conflict develops, Ian Marsh gives a compelling explanation on how our brains, and our ability to be mindful, are at the core of a working family business.



GETTING YOUR BRAIN IN GEAR

Communication in Family Businesses

The importance of communication in the family business

Only a very small percentage of family businesses make it beyond the second generation. Globally, reports agree that families generally fail to prioritise communication, a behaviour which often lies at the root of family business failure. Perhaps that is because, at least for the first generation, the primary focus is typically on building the family's wealth. Their second priority (at first sight, logically) is structuring and protecting that wealth, and shielding it from economic downturn and conflict. While families take great care to protect themselves against external forces, they often overlook that one of the greatest threats lies within: failing to maintain trust and communication between family members can lead to the sort of failure that not only impacts their finances but can shake the family to its core. Finding a healthy balance between protecting the family from outside threats and focusing on communication internally is an important exercise for a family business and one that might very well determine its success. In reality, when conflict is dealt with constructively through effective communication, it can become a powerful agent for change and innovation.

Why communication fails

If we know that a lack of communication lies at the root of business failure, why not pay it more attention? We have all experienced breakdowns in communication, but we are often unable to say what caused them. It turns out that part of the explanation is physiological: Our brains are primarily programmed for survival but, in many ways, our physiological evolution has not kept pace with our fast social development; it moves much more slowly. The oldest part of our brain senses danger and responds by preparing us to fight, run away or freeze. It is an involuntary response, allowing no time for reflection, which rarely leads to the best result in terms of communication. Another part of the brain prioritises what we should pay attention to, drawing us toward things that we sense will make us feel better, and driving us away from things that we sense will make

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us feel worse, often causing us to avoid potentially painful conversations (usually the ones that really matter).

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One way of doing that is to draw on our past experience, something we usually do without being aware of it. Unfortunately, the way the brain processes memory means that experience too often leads to our making inappropriate assumptions, to pre-judgment and to prejudice. This can be particularly challenging for families who both live and work together, who will often overestimate how well they know each other, and may assume that they know how everyone is going to react in any given situation. When someone does the unexpected, especially if it's contrary to our interests (as we see them), it can create a sense of anger and betrayal, perhaps even of shame that the family has been betrayed. In these situations controlling our own reactions, and choosing to reflect before responding, can make all the difference to whether what unfolds is meaningful dialogue or just a series of monologues, with each constantly reiterating their own point of view.



Fortunately, the middle pre-frontal cortex of the brain can inhibit our reactive responses, help us to balance our emotions and soothe our fears, and allow us to respond in a more measured, reflective, way - but it requires practice. “Mindful awareness” is the most common expression for this. By paying attention to the sensations, images, thoughts and feelings we experience, we can physically develop this part of our brain in a way that enables us to step back from those experiences, not to react to them and to reflect before responding.

Building communication in the family

Conflict is inevitable, but the best way to harness its positive power is to continuously pay attention to how family members interact and not to wait for a moment of crisis.

Families should (re)learn to nurture their stories, their myths and legends. We are a storytelling species. Sharing our stories is how we learn where we come from, what we stand for, and where we are going. Done well, it not only binds us together but gives us a rich source of metaphor which we need for our most difficult conversations.

Curiosity is key to this – and to effective communication generally. Wondering why we experience the world differently than our kin increases our understanding of one another. We also need to encourage an unconditional acceptance of whoever we, and our kin, are, having compassion for, and empathy with, those around us. Deep, empathic listening is the most powerful tool in communication. If we give someone the experience of being heard, it changes them (it physically rewires their brains) and it makes them much more open to listening to others in turn. Without practice, empathy can decline both with distance (as we spread around the world) and with affluence (we tend to become less dependent on others, and so less trusting of them, the more we own).

We also need to deal with the things that trouble us, rather than pretending they do not and “stewing in our own juices”.

How best to do that varies from culture to culture. Some may have a direct, face to face, conversation. Others may meet but rely heavily on metaphor, and here well developed storytelling/listening skills are crucial. Others will involve family elders or community leaders (or even an outside intervenor) to act as go-between. There is no right or wrong approach, only what works for those involved.

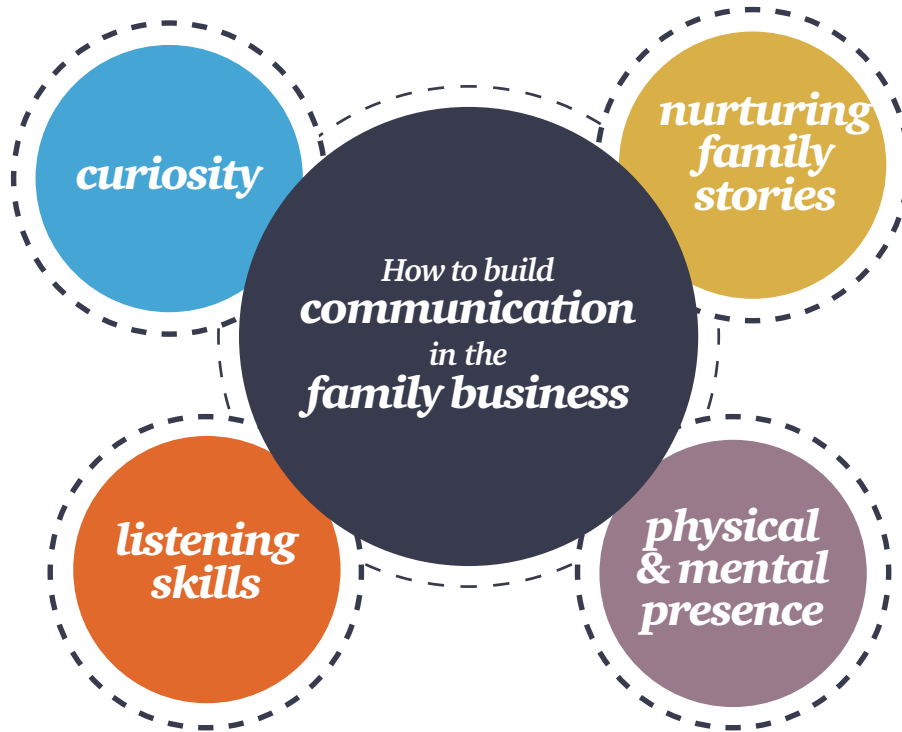
Mindful awareness of ourselves and those around us reduces the chances of miscommunication, and the loss of trust and toxic conflict it can lead to. In a family business, it should be encouraged as a skill that requires ongoing training.



Individually, miscommunication would be minimised if we could learn how to be physically and mentally present, both for ourselves and for each other; if we come to realise that our thoughts and emotions come and go and do not define who we are; and that no situation lasts forever. Healthy communication needs an acceptance of the shifting nature of our moods, and of the moods of others. That in turn requires a degree of self-awareness and mindfulness. Mindful awareness of ourselves and those around us reduces the chances of miscommunication, and the loss of trust and toxic conflict it can lead to. In a family business, it should be encouraged as a skill that requires ongoing training.

Breaking out of miscommunication

Most families only become aware of a lack of communication when its effects are felt in relations between family members, and that realisation itself often makes the miscommunication worse. There are several steps that families can take to break out of that cycle:

FIG 1: What builds communication in the family business

A family member might take on the role of mediator. Some families will never be comfortable having an outsider involved, so the family members must manage the situation themselves. Anyone willing to do this clearly needs to learn the appropriate skills. It is very important to know when to step out of a situation to collect ourselves; to “count to ten”. Being mindful can help us take a step back at the critical moment.

It can also be helpful to find a confidant; someone in whom we can confide, and who has no vested interest in our decisions. Just talking freely about our concerns to someone who really knows how to listen is an inherently reflective process. Men used to confide in their barbers, women in their hairdressers. As the sense of community lessens in modern society, so these relationships of confidence are harder to come by in our daily lives. Perhaps it is time for a revival of our listening skills.

Advisors may be able to help families through difficult times, but most professionals now are technical experts in their specialist fields. The best contribution they can make may be to use their relationship with the family to help them to engage with someone who is expert in conflict and communication, someone who can provide a process that will enable the family to find solutions that work for it.

Communication will always remain a challenge, particularly for families in businesses. However, it is much more about our brains than people think. Purposefully learning to listen, to respond after reflection and to be mindful in our dealings with others may just prevent the family story having a premature ending. ♦

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