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Successful Family Meetings

By Clint Bentz

Summer is upon us – have you planned to have a family meeting at your next family gathering? For most people, the idea of pulling together a family meeting is only slightly more fun than going to your friendly family dentist. It doesn't have to be that way. Maybe you are trying to get the courage together to have your first family meeting. No matter if you have been doing this for a long time or are just getting started, over the years I have found that there are some basic things you need to do in order to have these meetings be productive and help the family grow closer.

Regular family meetings are at the heart of any successful family business, and are the meat and potatoes of a successful family transition plan. If done badly, they can also create more problems than they solve. If your family is in conflict, a meeting is not a magic wand that will overcome all problems. Putting some thought into the planning, execution and follow-up for the meeting will greatly increase your chances of having a successful meeting.

Here are some practical ideas for to help you prepare for your next family meeting:

1. If you have family members and/or in-laws in conflict and not speaking to each other, invest some time and money to help them resolve their conflict before you have your family meeting. While mom and dad are still alive you have a much greater ability to resolve these conflicts between siblings and spouses than when they are gone. Don't let the sun go down on your anger! Bitterness from unresolved conflicts is one of the leading causes of failure of families working together. There are many family counseling resources available – find one that works for your family!
2. Prepare a written agenda (what topics will be covered at the meeting) and circulate it to everyone prior to the meeting. Ask for their comments and additions. Do not have any surprises or “hidden agendas” at the meeting. Let the participants know up front what will be discussed, and if any decisions will be made as a result of the meeting, what those questions are and how the decisions will be made (advise and consent, majority rules, or consensus – see sidebar).
3. Pick a neutral site for the meeting – someplace that does not have any emotional connections to the family, like a restaurant or a small conference room at a local hotel. This takes away “home court advantage” and will help family members to not regress into old habit patterns should difficult issues come up during the meeting. You may want to consider having your meeting someplace “warm” – like near a friendly beach in

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Hawaii. As long as the majority of your trip is dedicated to your business meeting, it may even be tax deductible! One of our best family meetings was held at Disneyland!

4. Carefully consider who should lead (facilitate) the meeting. It is important that the leader be able to engage everyone in the discussions, listen to everyone and keep discussions on track – stopping the meeting if need be to let individuals work out an issue before beginning again. If there are issues that will be difficult to discuss, or you don't feel comfortable leading the meeting, hire a trained facilitator to lead the meeting. They will be able to make sure that everyone's voice is heard and that the discussion stays on track. Having an outsider present may also help to keep everyone on their best behavior. This may be the best investment you make in your family this year.
5. Decide up front if spouses will be invited to the family meeting. Do not invite some spouses and not others, or leave it up to your children whether to bring their spouse. If spouses are invited, include them the same way as your children in the meeting.
6. Whether or not you invite spouses to the business meeting, consider inviting them to a social event following the meeting. Do something to make them feel good about the investment of time your children have put into this meeting and to help them feel like a necessary part of the process (which they are!)
7. Family members have a history with each other. Often that history keeps us from hearing what the other person has to say, or puts us into boxes that don't fit anymore. Remind everyone to try to put the past behind and to work together as the adults we are now, not the children we once were. In

Decision-Making Models

There are three primary decision making models. Each model is very useful for certain types of decisions. Most conflict comes when meeting participants do not understand or agree on the decision model being used. I encourage families to include the decisions to be made in the meeting agenda, along with the model that will be used to make that decision. The three models are:

Advise and consent: We ask for input at the meeting, but one person will be making the decision – and may disregard the input received. This is the “we let dad know what we think and he does what he wants” model. This is a valuable tool for many types of decisions. The manager on the ground generally has the most knowledge, but wants to “check in” with others who are not as close to the issue to see if there is something they missed in thinking about the issue.

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addition to being family members, we are also now learning to work together as business partners in our Tree Farm. This is a new relationship that needs to be worked on.

8. Remember that even though you grew up as a family, you probably don't know each other very well as individuals and as adults. Create an exercise at the beginning of the meeting to get to know each other better as you are now. At our meetings we have an agenda item called "Accomplishments and Dreams" where each of us shares significant things that have happened in our lives since the last time we were together, and what goals or projects we are currently working towards.
9. Consider paying for travel and childcare so that your children feel the importance you attach to their attendance, and that an undue burden is not placed on them.
10. If you are going to be talking about your succession plan, consider having one or more of your planners (attorney, accountant, etc.) at the meeting to answer questions your children may have.
11. Begin and end the meeting on time. Honoring everyone's investment of time is an important element of a successful meeting.
12. Appoint a recorder for the meeting to take minutes, recording what was discussed, the decisions that were made, what the next steps are, and who is responsible for making it happen. Send out these minutes shortly after the meeting so everyone has a record of what happened at the meeting.

Majority rules: Most families do not take votes on things, preferring instead to ask if someone has a violent objection to a course of action. This is the way you deal with housekeeping issues such as when and where the next meeting will be held, etc.

Consensus: This is the most difficult form of decision making, and should be reserved for highly important but non-urgent decisions, such as vision for the future, management plans, building plans, etc. In consensus, the goal is not to get everyone to agree on a course of action (something that is usually impossible), but rather to gather everyone's ideas and opinions and then work together for a compromise solution that everyone agrees is the best solution that can be achieved. Once we reach consensus, it is vital for everyone in the family to support the decision that is made, regardless of our personal feelings about it.

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13. Include a discussion about the finances of the tree farm as an agenda item at every meeting. This may be difficult if you have not separated the tree farm's financial records from your personal records, but it is important to educate your children on how money flows through the business. If you are like most folks, some years you are supporting the tree farm from outside resources and other years the tree farm pays its own bills and returns something to you besides. Your children need to learn about the business end of the tree farm so that they will be able to successfully manage it when their turn comes.
14. Include a discussion about your management plan. Your children should have detailed knowledge about the plan, the decisions and values that underlie the plan, and how you are progressing on the plan.
15. Include a discussion about why you own the tree farm. I call this agenda item "Passion". Why do you think it is important for the family to continue to own the tree farm? What is important to you about the tree farm? We have a roundtable discussion on this item where each of us shares what is important about the property to us. For one brother, it is the ability to vacation there with his children. For another it is our family heritage. Each one of us has a different area of passion, and it is important that we understand each other's passions so that we can try to build on them.
16. You need to talk about your dreams for the future with your children. I call this agenda item "Vision for the Future." Your dreams are why you are meeting in the first place. Include this discussion in your agenda. Don't assume your children understand your dreams, or that they will be able to figure out how to make them happen without a lot of help from you. Be open to their dreams as well. When our dreams line up, things start to happen!
17. Follow up! Make sure that people do what they said they would do, and give regular progress reports. If things actually happen because of these meetings, your family will be much more motivated to participate in the future.

These are many of the elements of a successful family meeting. If you have additional ideas that have worked for you, I would love to hear about them!

Clint Bentz is a CPA living in Oregon with his wife and six children. His practice is centered on helping family forest land owners deal with intergenerational succession issues. He is the principal author of "Ties to the Land: Your Family Forest Heritage." Clint's family was recognized as the 2002 National Outstanding Tree Farmers of the Year. Clint is the past chairman of the National Operating Committee of the American Tree Farm System, and is a trustee of the American Forest Foundation. He welcomes your comments and questions at cbentz@bcslc.com or (503) 769-2186.