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Dealing with Family Conflict

By Clint Bentz

Every summer, we have forest fires here in the West. It is a natural result of a climate that gives us hot, dry summers. Given the right conditions, these fires help maintain the health of our forests. In the wrong conditions they can destroy everything.

Once a forest fire starts, it takes on a life of its own. It doesn't matter how it started, or who or what started it. With enough fuel and the right conditions, it will consume everything in its path. Family conflicts operate in much the same way.

Every relationship has conflict. Whenever two thinking people look at an issue, they will come to different opinions based on their life experiences, training, personality, and outlook on life. When these opinions collide, conflict occurs. Conflict is a necessary part of relationships. The world does not revolve around us! We have to learn to compromise and work with others to accomplish anything valuable in life. Most of us are uncomfortable with conflict, and instead of working together in a respectful and loving way to find a resolution to the issue, we fall back on a "fight or flight" response by either avoiding the conflict or fighting to make sure our idea wins out.

We all carry around baggage from old hurts. When family members disagree with us, it's easy to pile up old fuel from prior conflicts and start a fire going. Instead of doing the hard work of trying to understand each other better and find a common solution that works for everyone, we many times dredge up the memories of old battle scars and go off to war.

I have counseled many family members who have stopped speaking to each other, stopped listening to each other, stopped respecting each other, and shut their hearts to each other for reasons real and imagined. When you are in the bunker and taking incoming fire, the natural response is to either shoot back or hunker down and try to protect yourself. The sad thing is that in most cases each person wants the best for the other person, but just can't seem to find good ways to communicate their care and concern for each other.



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Communication is difficult. Even if we are really paying attention and working hard at it, more often than not what we intended to say does not come across to the other person

In the way we intended. This is true on both sides. While these misunderstandings can be a cause for humor, many times they are the match that lights the fire.

In our **Ties to the Land™** Seminars we talk about real differences between the generations. What is esteemed and valued by one generation is often deemed a weakness or vice by the next generation. This extends to how we view money, debt, relationships, family life, work ethic, and work/life balance issues. These same differences exist between men and women. We use the same words, but mean entirely different things when we say them.

What does this all mean practically? It means that it just might be possible you did not truly understand what was in the heart and mind of the person who hurt you. My mother was the "Chief Emotional Officer" of our family. Whenever any family members were in conflict, she would help us to try to see the world through the other person's eyes and to have compassion for each other in our many weaknesses.

As human beings, we all mess up from time to time. Sometimes we foul up in small ways, other times in big ways. We do bad things to each other and we hurt each other by accident and sometimes even on purpose. Alexander Pope once said: "To err is human, to forgive, divine." In holding grudges against each other over these hurts, we are only harming ourselves by allowing bitterness to poison our lives and rob our happiness.

How do you put out a forest fire? You try to cool it down. You limit access to fuels. You try to keep them from happening in the first place by creating a healthy forest. How do you resolve conflict in families? You try to cool it down by saying "I'm sorry." You limit access to the fuel by saying "Please forgive me." You work hard to understand what is the root cause to the conflict in the first place and try to find ways to resolve it.

Most conflicts arise when we feel our core values are being trampled on. Chances are we are also trampling on the other person's core values. If you can back up and talk about what is really bothering you, and listen intently for what is bothering the other person, the chances of finding a solution that satisfies both of you goes up dramatically. Don't defend your own

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actions, but try to see the conflict through their eyes and understand what they are thinking and feeling.

Does it really matter who or what started it? It takes two to fight. We both share the blame for allowing the relationship to break down. A broken relationship won't start to get better until one of you stops fighting and tries to bind it up with some humility, love, compassion and forgiveness.

Don't assume you know what the other person is thinking or feeling. You won't know unless you ask and then listen intently, continuing to ask until you really understand. Give each other the benefit of the doubt. Don't assume bad motives exist, but if you find they do exist, try to remove fuel from the fire by asking for forgiveness and doing restitution for anything you have done to cause the problem.

One great way to move past conflicts over differing opinions is to begin sharing your hopes and dreams with each other. Talk about your hopes for the future of your family, and for the future of your property. This will help you move from being adversaries over a current issue to being on the same side of the table dreaming up a new future together.

Don't wait for a funeral to sadly discover all of the time you have wasted in bitterness and anger towards a family member. The Golden Rule applies here most of all - treat others the way you wish to be treated. Forgive as you wish to be forgiven. Even if it seems the fire has consumed the entire forest, you can still decide to plant some trees and begin anew. Write that letter or pick up the phone today and get started!

Clint Bentz is a CPA living in Oregon with his wife and six children. His practice is centered on helping family forest landowners 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.