

## Marketing

# Ready or not, communicate now



## Family Business

By LANCE WOODBURY

**W**E often use this column to write about the importance of communication. Whether the subject is succession, business planning, goal setting, marketing or tax decisions, or just the ongoing nature of working together in a family business, communication is oil that makes the engine run smoothly. When communication suffers, all aspects of the family and the business suffer, too.

Every now and then we run into a situation where one family member recognizes the need to talk about important business topics, but other family members don't see the need for such discussion. In this case, how does the "communication process" begin?

### Set the tone

First, create a break in the normal routine and attempt to explain why improving communication is important. Intentionally stopping for a few minutes to say, "I think we need to have some meetings about the direction of the business" — and not just jumping into the topics — creates a focus on the process

of communicating. Many people erroneously try to bring up the actual topics for discussion at times when people are least expecting the conversation and thus are not well prepared.

The goal is to create awareness that there needs to be a formal time to discuss business direction, a time for which everyone can get ready to talk. (In international negotiations, this is sometimes called "talks about talking.")

### Think about the consequences

We all know families in which siblings no longer talk to each other or their parents; some even take each other to court when they can't communicate but have differences over decisions. Conflict is one consequence of not communicating. Another is hurt feelings. Another is missed business opportunities. High turnover among employees, decreased productivity, a lack of psychological ownership of the business, awkward and tense family gatherings ... you get the picture.

Think about — and even ask or mention — what some of the consequences might be if your family business doesn't spend time getting on the same page about future decisions and direction.

### Find positive examples

Most people know a local family or two that seem to "have it together" when



it comes to working as a family; the agriculture media also has examples. Show family members these examples of others who have worked on or improved their communication so a connection is made between improved communication and success.

Business literature is replete with

examples of the positive impact of communication on a business, and many businesses — of all sizes — spend money training employees on how to better communicate. Many winter farm conferences also have this topic on the agenda.

### Choose a mediator

Finally, be willing to enlist a friend or a confidant of family members with whom people feel comfortable communicating. Perhaps a minister, a business adviser such as a banker or accountant, or a peer of a family member could fill the role.

While this person may not be able to actually facilitate discussion, he or she might be able to nudge other family members to the table. Most professional advisers see the value of such family communication and are willing to encourage such talk, in part because it helps that business plan for future relationships with your business.

Getting everyone to sit at the table and talk is often the biggest hurdle to overcome. However, this is a positive first step at a unique opportunity to redefine the future of the family and the business. Don't be afraid to talk about the need to talk!

Woodbury works at the Garden City office of Kennedy and Coe LLC. For more information, visit [www.kcoe.com](http://www.kcoe.com).



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