

Key Ingredients in Resolving Family Conflict

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To settle family and business disputes, professional mediators first find a neutral setting and validate each party's feelings. (Photo by quinn.anya, CC BY-SA 2.0)

In a recent article, I offered four distinct steps that can be helpful in managing family business conflict: Admit the conflict exists, consider your individual role in the dispute, commit to communication with the other party, and focus on your future together, instead of the past.

Here I want to offer several more ingredients in the process of successfully managing conflict. These elements are part of the mediation process and are usually undertaken by a mediator, but they may be helpful even if you don't use a neutral third party to work on the conflict in your family or business.

FIND A NEUTRAL PLACE

When people are in dispute, there is often an underlying power struggle. Each side is attempting to establish a stronger justification for their behavior. This power struggle is seen in the language people use, in their attempts to control the dialogue, or even in the way people frame the issues.

But the power struggle can also be "felt," and one way to level the playing field is to find someplace neutral to meet. For example, if you are struggling with your parents, meeting in your dad's office, or at your parent's house, can create a small but subtle imbalance. But meeting at a neutral site, such as a hotel or community center meeting room, puts both parties on equal footing in one element of the process. Furthermore, if you use a conference room in a professional office (such as a bank meeting room, or your accountant's conference room), it helps reinforce a professional tone in the discussion.

GIVE EACH SIDE STORY TELLING TIME

Another mediation technique is to let each side tell their version of events. Each person taking "equal" time (e.g. 10 minutes each) to provide their view of how things got to this point also helps to balance the power in the room, and it suggests both narratives have value and that hearing each one is important to the process. In short, it offers each side a chance to explain, and it legitimizes how they see things. (This chance to explain is sometimes what people want when they reference their "day in court.") If just one side does all the talking, the chances of the other side feeling like they want to compromise later will be slim at best.

ACKNOWLEDGE AND VALIDATE THE OTHER PERSON'S FEELINGS

We talk in mediation about getting people to see a situation from the other party's viewpoint. This can be difficult, as parties get "locked in" to their view and sometimes can't believe or imagine how the other side sees it.

Feelings, however, are another matter. Without agreeing with the other side's version of events, you can plainly see that the other side is hurt or angry. People usually don't intend to hurt the other person; it's how events and actions are interpreted that creates resentment.

Regardless of whether you agree, sincerely acknowledging the other party's feelings, at a very basic level, shows you understand the pain that has occurred. Such acknowledgement is a signal that your relationship matters, and it paves the way for some healing to occur.

BRAINSTORM POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

After each party has a chance to say how they see the situation, do some brainstorming about ways the conflict could be solved. Some, perhaps even many, of the solutions that surface may not be feasible, but by turning toward solutions you begin to move from the past to the future. Moving into the future is important because the past, and people's feelings about the past, are usually not changeable. The future -- with intentionality, different behavior and hard work -- can be shaped to achieve a better outcome if both parties have the desire. For example, they can commit to behaving differently, to communicating more, and to bringing up tough issues sooner.

Someone recently told me that "there are no silver bullets, just silver BB's." His point was that it took trying a lot of smaller strategies to change the big picture, and I thought the idea applied well to mediation. There is seldom a meeting in which everyone ends up fully getting or hearing what they want. In fact, I often suggest that a good mediation session is one in which everyone leaves equally unhappy with the outcome.

But if you can take small steps to help each party feel that they have some power, that their story is important, that their feelings are real, and that the future can be different, we are well on our way to better management of family business conflict.

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Editor's Note: Lance Woodbury is a Garden City, Kansas, author, consultant and professional mediator with more than 20 years' experience specializing in agriculture and closely-held businesses. Email questions for this column to Lance@agprogress.com. For more on this topic, see DTN's Minding Ag's Business blog.