



FOCUS Keeps Business Moving Forward

If you're frustrated because the conversation is going nowhere, answer this question to create momentum.

Working together in a family business is no easy task. Multiple roles, complex relationships and conflicting histories merge to form what meteorologists call a perfect storm—a difficult state of affairs arising from unpredictable causes—in your family's interaction. The concepts of fairness and equality become so muddy that any attempt at principled decision making goes awry. And finding the time to work on succession and estate planning, when even the daily business decisions seem overwhelming, is as elusive as rain in the drought-stricken west.

When you seem stuck and are trying to arrive at some consensus with your business partners or family members, I propose you ask yourself and then your partners the following question to focus the conversation:

What do you need to see and hear from your business partner or family member to feel better about your future working relationship?

I like this question for several reasons.

IT PROVIDES A FOCUS ON THE FUTURE. How many times have you been in a family meeting and can't get past an event or decision that occurred years ago?

I recall a conversation with a family where the decision to sell a combine 20 years ago was still being discussed. It was symbolic of the broader issue about who could make decisions, but they couldn't let it go, and it kept rearing its head at our meetings.

The key question focuses on what you need to move forward. It doesn't negate what happened in the past, and it isn't asking you to bring up or critique old events. It's looking out the windshield at the horizon, not the rearview mirror. In the case of the combine, the question would target the future decision-making structure, not the past. **IT ENCOURAGES A FOCUS ON ACTION.** The question asks you to name what you need to hear or see from the other person. It calls for action, for something to be said and done. The request for action is clear, and action helps get you unstuck.

In many instances, the requests of others are manageable. It may be a request of a family member to acknowledge something they said or did. It may be a request for a business partner to include others in certain decisions. It may be a request to handle employee situations differently. Whatever the request, it makes the parties say "yes" or "no," and achieves some level of commitment.

Now, if your family members decline your request, if they fail to do what you need to feel good about working with them in the future, or if they tell you things you don't want to hear, at least you know where you stand. Then you can take action. A family member I know recently told his parents he needed to hear whether they intended to have him manage the ranch. Their answer was no. As hard as it was for that conversation to occur, it kept him from investing more energy in wondering whether he would run things and allowed him to plan his future.

IT EMPHASIZES A FOCUS ON WORKING RELATIONSHIPS. A third reason I like the key question is it assumes an ongoing partnership. It supposes you will feel better about working with your family members if you act on the question. It frames the discussion as one focused on moving forward together.

That doesn't guarantee the family business will stay together. Yet starting from a point of hopefulness is important because the odds of keeping the family business together are generally more challenging as time goes on. In family business, we need all the momentum possible around keeping relationships, goals and capital aligned.

The next time you find yourself feeling frustrated or stuck, try using the question with your business partners. You will likely change the conversation and create positive movement for your business.



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