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FEELING HEARD. This level of listening is considered “active” listening, in which you demonstrate you’re listening with certain verbal and non-verbal behaviors such as making eye contact, nodding in agreement and summarizing or restating what the other person is saying. Those behaviors tell that person you’re following their line of thinking, that you comprehend what they are telling you.

FEELING FELT. This second level of listening is one in which you can identify with the emotion underlying the other person’s communication. Based on how they are sharing, what are they feeling? Are they excited? Frustrated? Scared? Joyful? The key at this level is to actually name the emotion to the other

person: “You sound frustrated [or insert other emotion]. Tell me more. ...” In naming the emotion, you’re effectively adding another layer to the feeling of being heard, and the speaker will appreciate your efforts.

FEELING VALUED. This third level of listening goes beyond what I consider to be reactions—responding only to what is said or naming what is felt—to make a positive statement about why their opinions matter and why they are important.

Consider an elderly farm couple watching their children and grandchildren taking over the family business. Grandfather may not have much to say about current tractor technology or big data, or grandmother may not be in touch with current developments in financial software, but they both possess wisdom gleaned from years of experiencing the ups and downs of farming. That’s why they are valued—for their good judgment and broad knowledge. Telling them why they are important makes a world of difference to them. You may or may not always agree with what they say, but communicating that they are important makes them feel esteemed, beyond “listened to,” and ultimately, appreciated and revered.

In family businesses, we are often overcoming decades of poor communication patterns. Learning new methods of listening offers a means to change family relationships for the better. And sometimes it takes a family member pointing out that we are not listening, as with my daughter. How well are you listening to your family business partners? ●

Can You Hear Me Now?

Connect and communicate better with family business partners by using these three levels of listening.



LANCE WOODBURY

My 8-year-old daughter recently accused me of not listening to her. She says that sometimes I interrupt her, or other times I’m not paying attention while she’s talking, or that I’m on my computer, working, when I should be focused on what she has to say. She humbles me, of course, in a way that only a

child can humble an adult; it’s also difficult criticism for a professional mediator trained in communication skills to take!

When it comes to participating in a closely held business, we often take communication in general, and listening in particular, for granted. That’s due in part because we’ve grown up with our business partners, or because we interact with them at family events outside of work, and because we know them well enough that more formal communication processes are seen as unnecessary. As a result, effective listening often gets shortchanged in our interaction with those closest to us. And they notice.

In his book “Just Listen: Discover the Secret to Getting Through to Absolutely Anyone,” Mark Goulston suggests there are three levels to effective listening, resulting in different feelings by those being listened to. I found his descriptions useful in considering how well family members in business together listen to one another. Consider how well you connect with others on the following three levels:

“The most important thing in communication is hearing what isn’t said.”

— PETER DRUCKER

Write Lance Woodbury at Family Business Matters, 2204 Lakeshore Dr., Suite 415, Birmingham, AL 35209, or email lance@lancewoodbury.com