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## Ancient Wisdom

Keep these time-honored and modern rules in mind when working with family members.

*So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.*  
—Matthew 7:12

The Golden Rule comes from Jesus's Sermon on the Mount, instructing us to treat others the way we would like to be treated. A more modern variation, often called the "Platinum Rule," is to treat others the way the other person would want to be treated. But, when it comes to how family members treat one another in the family business, it seems both rules quickly fall by the wayside.

I'm often struck by how rude, accusatory or just downright cruel family members can be to each other. Why is it so easy to treat your brother, sister or parents differently than how you might treat a non-family business partner or coworker? Why does the anger and frustration emerge so easily with family when we are more cautious, and even respectful, in communicating our concerns to non-family members?

It is said that "familiarity breeds contempt," meaning that our emotional proximity to another often allows us to treat

that person with less respect. Being family implies that people are bound together, regardless of how they treat one another. Family connotes a safe space for people to let down their guard and say what they are really thinking. But, negative and harmful communication takes its toll on family relationships, fraying the very bonds that offer a distinct advantage when in business together.

Despite a history of harmful interaction, there are several principles that enhance the future quality of our family communication. Four are especially important: **PRIVATELY CONFRONT.** Matthew 18:15 says, "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone ... ." When an accusation happens in a group setting, the accused must simultaneously answer to the accuser and the group. She must both position to the group and respond to the accuser, leaving little room to really explore the issues at the source of the conflict.

**SUMMARIZE THEIR CONCERNS.** Before responding, demonstrate that you understand what the other person has said. This slows down the process and confirms your comprehension of the complaint, allowing you to see the other person's assumptions (which are sometimes inaccurate), all while setting the stage for an appropriate reaction. It also helps the other person feel heard, which is often a significant part of the problem.

**DESCRIBE YOUR FEELINGS.** When two people are in conflict, the root is often a misunderstanding, poor communication, inappropriate behavior or a difference in goals or styles. People do not generally intend to harm the other person; they are trying to express their own goals or frustrations. Letting someone know how they made you feel can clarify the other person's intent. When one party says, "I want you to know how you caused me pain," it causes the other party to better explain or revisit their motive or goal.

**IDENTIFY YOUR FUTURE NEEDS.** Recovery from difficult and painful communication can only occur in the future. What you say tomorrow, how you interact during the coming months and the way you demonstrate trust and commitment during the next year are keys to reconciliation. Spend time talking about what you need to see and hear from the other person in order to feel good about your future working relationship.

Family businesses can offer nurturing and supportive environments, but they can be equally explosive and demeaning if communication isn't handled well. Good communication skills can both prevent and help manage conflict by reminding us to privately address our conflicts, listen well, express our feelings and describe what we need to see from others going forward. ●



**LANCE  
WOODBURY**

Write Lance Woodbury at Family Business Matters, 2204 Lakeshore Dr., Suite 415, Birmingham, AL 35209, or email [lance@agprogress.com](mailto:lance@agprogress.com).