

The “Ins” and “Outs” of Family Meetings

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At an international seminar presented by the Family Business Consulting Group in Bilbao, Spain, participants in a small session were asked: What are your greatest family meeting challenges?

The attendees were a diverse group of family business owners from Italy, Mexico, the US and Spain, ranging in age from their 20s to 60s. Unexpectedly, they discovered that their challenges were nearly identical:

1. Getting family members to attend family meetings;
2. Getting those that attend to actively participate.

In family businesses across the globe, there appears to be an “IN GROUP” and an “OUT GROUP”. The IN group is more likely to attend family meetings, and when they attend, to participate. The OUT group is reluctant to attend family meetings and when they do attend, they tend to be quiet and barely participate in discussions, decisions and assignments.

Different family business situations may have different definitions of IN and OUT, but the similarities are striking. The IN group likely includes those working in the business. The IN group may live relatively close to the business and is composed of family members who live in close proximity to each other. They are family members who socialize informally together, celebrating birthdays, holidays and anniversaries on a regular basis.

The spouses of those who work in the business are more likely to be IN.

What about the OUT group? They tend to live far away and have largely established their lives separately from the family and the business. They may have a very different lifestyle or set of values or a history of distance from or conflict with family members stemming from early childhood years. They may be family members who worked in the business for a time but, for whatever reason, are no longer working there. Any or all of these factors can make it awkward and difficult for these family members to attend family meetings.

Ironically, the OUT family members are the most important in the family meeting process. The ultimate purpose of family meetings cannot be realized without the involvement of those who may be thought of, or think of themselves, as, OUT. If the purpose of family meetings is to provide a forum for communication and relationship building among family members, those family members who see each other often in the daily course of their lives, at the business, in their community and at philanthropic events, are the ones who least need the family meeting venue. The family meeting process must be aimed at erasing the distinction between IN and OUT family members. This makes it even more essential for family meetings to be inclusive of EVERYONE.

So, what can you do to get ALL family members attending and participating in family meetings? Here are some areas to address:

Logistics

Who plans the family meeting? Establishes dates?
Selects locations and activities?

Suggestion: Involve more family members in the logistics of the family meeting. Reach out to those who are more distant and include them in the planning. This will increase the likelihood that the meeting logistics reflect the needs of the wider family, and not just a small group.

Agenda

Who sets the agenda? What level of input is sought before agenda items are established? How do we know the items are of interest to family members?

Suggestion: Involve more distant family members in agenda planning. Conduct a survey of all family members to determine what topics and activities are of greatest interest. Gain agreement and enthusiasm from family members before finalizing the agenda.

Preparation

Who prepares materials for the meeting? Who works on issues in between meetings? How can more people be drawn in to this process?

Suggestion: Have family members work in pairs or small committees between meetings. Assign modest tasks to a wider number of people, rather than heavy tasks to a small number of people. Have people work together. Pair those more distant from the business with those more "IN." Use the preparation process as a chance to build relationships and understanding between family members.

Participation

Who speaks during meetings? Does the agenda identify a variety of people making presentations and leading discussions, rather than the same people over and over again? Does the meeting process pay attention to drawing everyone in, and getting everyone to speak?

Suggestion: Don't just plan for presentations or discussions with the large group. Large groups are often intimidating to shyer family members. Make plans to work in pairs, trios or small groups. Create reasons to get up from the table and move around the room. Make occasions to go around the table, hearing from everyone.

An experienced facilitator who is knowledgeable about family business can be an important factor for a successful family meeting. Facilitators offer techniques for creating excitement and involvement. A good facilitator will help the family balance its discussions, drawing out those who are quieter and keeping those who are more verbal in check. For families with a history of conflict or emotional outbursts, a facilitator can help structure approaches that address and successfully resolve longstanding issues.

Don't let your family meeting be a vehicle for perpetuating the dynamics of IN and OUT family members. With careful analysis and planning, you can achieve greater attendance and participation of family members in family meetings. Without this concerted effort, you are in danger of having the family meeting reinforce the very dynamics you are trying to eliminate.



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