

Tips For Effective Family Meetings

Think of family meetings as time-out in a game that give a family an opportunity to pause to look at what's happening in the business and determine what plays to call next to adjust or continue to move in the right direction.

In family businesses, stakeholder meetings connect family members to each other and to the goals of their businesses. That connection is important whether everyone is enjoying a smooth ride down the same track, or someone has diverted the train to another track altogether. Getting and keeping everyone aligned is the primary function of family meetings.

I divide family meeting topics into two categories:

1. Business of the Day (current business status)
2. Big Business Picture (where the business is going)

In the first category are updates about what's happening in the business. Topics include daily operations, current financial position, current profitability, and ideas to improve the internal operations and profitability of the business.

When I first started running family meetings, I devoted the entire agenda to current issues. As I grew more comfortable in the role of general manager, however, I learned to carve out time, at least once each year, to discuss big-picture questions such as “Why did—and do—we choose to operate a family business?” and “Where do we want to be in one, five, and ten years?” By focusing on both accomplishments and goals, we were better able to gauge where we were as a business and family and where we wanted to go.

The agenda of the family meeting is, of course, set by the GM, but here are a few tips that have make family meetings more productive.

Family Meeting Logistics

1. Schedule family meetings for an evening or day before a workday.

To minimize the time individuals can spend brooding about issues raised or comments made during family meetings, I recommend holding meetings during the evenings or days just

before everyone sees one another again at work. If that's not possible, meeting is better than not meeting at all.

2. At least quarterly, hold meetings at someone's home—not at the office.

A home setting enables family members to focus without work-related interruptions and outside of the view of nonfamily employees who typically speculate about what the family is discussing. Meeting away from the office can make some people more willing to express honest opinions because they are better able to see themselves as family members rather than employees.

3. Dress code is very casual or nonexistent.

Family members should be themselves and feel comfortable.

4. Serve a meal that doesn't take too long to eat.

Spaghetti or takeout food works well for my family.

5. Eat before talking business.

Shop talk will likely happen during the meal, so be prepared to take notes should any important statements or promises be made. Issues discussed while eating tend to be forgotten.

6. Don't plan to do anything else on Family Meeting Night.

I don't set a meeting length. Meetings last as long as the contributions people make are valuable.

7. Don't do all the talking.

In a family like mine, I never—and shouldn't—do all the talking. My role is to guide the discussion from one topic to another (rather than allow a free-for-all) and make sure everyone is heard.

8. Give everyone—including spouses—time to speak and your full attention.

Spouses hear about the business every day. Family meetings are opportunities for them to be heard by all family members. If they don't share their thoughts naturally, ask for their input.

9. Try to end on a high note.

At the end of the meeting, highlight an accomplishment, or mention something you are especially proud of.

Typically, the GM calls family meetings, but occasionally, other family members may do so when they feel that an issue (usually one related to communication) affects more than two people.

Generally, I pick up the cues that indicate that family members have issues that they'd like to get off their chests. I'll do what I can to resolve issues before bringing them to a family meeting, but *the option to call a meeting is always available to family members*. Ultimately, my goal is to resolve issues, and if a family meeting will do that, we hold one.

Meeting Agendas

Annual Meetings

For annual family meetings, I suggest that your agenda include:

- Prior Year
 - Accomplishments
 - Areas that require immediate improvement
- Upcoming Year
 - Goals/accomplishments to date
 - Major purchases
 - Major changes
 - Opportunities
 - Potential threats
- Five-Year Outlook
- Personnel Issues
 - Is current staffing level optimal? If not, what adjustments should be made?
 - Is the current organizational structure functioning properly or is a redesign necessary?
 - Any other personnel-related issues.
- Topics that family members not involved in the daily operations of the business want to discuss.

As appropriate and when everything is running smoothly, I'll inject an opportunity for everyone to look back to a time when things were not. Once a problem that we resolved is in the past and tempers are cool(er), I explain what I learned from the experience. There's value in reminding everyone that the family has successfully solved issues and will continue to do so in the future.

Ad Hoc Meetings

For meetings related to a specific issue or concern, I follow an agenda that includes:

- A summary/history of the issue
 - The summary gives me the opportunity to frame the problem and present it to spouses and family members who are not directly involved.
- Time for the parties involved to share their perspectives.
- Time for everyone to ask questions and discuss the issue.
- Adjournment only once we have a plan/strategy to improve or address the issue.