

# The importance of family communication: You cannot *not* communicate



Communication is essential to the success of every interaction, whether personal or professional. That said, communicating effectively can be challenging even when the message appears simple.

Layer in family dynamics and communication becomes exponentially more difficult. Yet, it is the foundation for human interactions; relationships are built on the effectiveness of the communication. The reaction of the people we are communicating with becomes the mirror by which we see and judge ourselves. A positive reaction increases our self-esteem and makes us more likely to want to interact with the person in a more detailed and open manner. On the other hand, a negative reaction may lead to less frequent contact and decreased openness.

Success in relationships as a parent, child, teacher, mentor, employee or manager all center on open and direct communication.

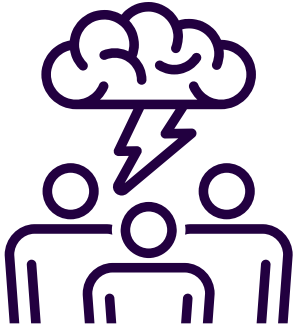
Communication is found to be the most important factor for cohesion in families and sustainability of family wealth. Statistics show that more than 70% of families are unsuccessful at multi-generational wealth transfer and further, that 65% of the time this failure is attributed to lack of communication and trust within the family.\*

The importance of communication cannot be underestimated and the difficulty of communication cannot be overstated. This is especially true in families.

## Family communication

Family communication is complicated by relationships and history. How messages are received is often more about the people involved in the dialogue. Parents, children, siblings and cousins all have a series of interactions transpiring over their lifetime, both positive and negative, which will have an effect on all subsequent interactions. Take, for example, a family meeting where adult siblings were gathered to divide the personal property of their deceased parents. After an hour of discussion about the process, all parties finally agreed on the methodology to be used. As a result, the oldest daughter received the first selection and chose the one item everyone desired. Her younger sister could not contain herself. She screamed about how the older sister always was the favorite, that as the younger sister all she ever received was “hand me down” clothes and toys and finally, that the older sister stole her boyfriend when they were in high school. Of course, the selection of the estate item had little to do with the outburst. It was merely the catalyst that brought back years of pent-up anger and frustration within the relationship.

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“... conflict within families is fundamentally different than conflict between separate parties.” - Kenneth Kaye

The added layer of complexity with family communication also applies to conflict within families. Kenneth Kaye, a clinical psychologist and leading scholar in the field of family business, points out that conflict within families is fundamentally different than conflict between separate parties. Conflicts between parties who lack any long-term relationship tend to be linear; there is no attachment to one another. At the resolution of the dispute, both parties can walk away. By contrast, conflicts within families are circular, creating a chronic pattern of escalation, de-escalation and re-escalation. An example being an issue that arises over shared fears about underlying and unspoken family issues; the conflict ignites and continues to escalate. As it reaches the peak, the anxiety reaches an uncomfortable level within the family. Through intervention from a third party or by mutual agreement, cooler heads prevail, the conflict subsides and peace returns. However, the shared fears still exist and eventually the unresolved issues resurface and the pattern returns.

## Keys to enhancing communication

### **Be conscious**

It does not take any effort or thought to communicate. It is most often something we do unconsciously. However, it is important to recognize that communicating effectively does take effort and requires consciousness.

The premise of communication is based on one person attempting to convey an idea, message or image using words to another person or group of people. One of the challenges is that information is lost at every step in the process. Maybe when you were young, you played some variation of a game called telephone. The game was started when one participant relayed a story to the first member of the group, who told the story to the next person. The process continued until the last person in the group retold the story aloud for all to hear. Inevitably, the story was vastly different from the original version.

Adding to the challenge is that words themselves carry different meanings for each of us. Consider what comes to mind when you say “apple”—do you think of a fruit or computer? Many words trigger emotions that influence the way they are heard. For instance, the word “divorce” can trigger feelings of sadness, loss, and anger for one person and relief and hope for another—depending on personal experience.

The way in which the message is delivered also impacts how it is received. Have you ever heard someone say, “It is not what you said but how you said it?” Tone and emphasis have considerable impact on how a message is heard. For example, if someone is talking loudly and quickly, is the person angry or excited? It would be impossible to tell without understanding the emotion behind the words which is manifested through the tone, points of emphasis and pitch pattern. Understanding the underlying message becomes even more challenging in today’s technological environment, where tone can be so easily misinterpreted through email or text.



## Tone and emphasis have considerable impact on how a message is heard.

The following recommendations sound like common sense but take considerable effort to put into practice:

- Think before you speak
- Be conscious about how your message may be heard by the other party
- If you think your message is being misinterpreted or is not clear, check to confirm what you are saying is what is being heard
- Beware of messages that trigger emotion; they might be surfacing unresolved issues from your own past experiences

This is especially important when communicating electronically. If you feel sensitive about an email or text you are writing, consider verbal communication instead. If you read or hear a message and it impacts you negatively, check out the intention by asking for more clarity. Many times misunderstandings result in incorrect assumptions that lead to more tension and can negatively impact relationships.

### **Remember, you cannot *not* communicate**

We have all heard the saying, “you only get one chance to make a first impression.” Within moments of your first interaction with a new person, an opinion has been formed. In Malcolm Gladwell’s book, *Blink*, he discusses the impact of one’s thinking in the first two seconds of any situation;

the instant conclusions we reach using our intuition. Appearance is a very important component of non-verbal communication. Whether we like to admit it or not, we all make judgments and inferences based on the way people dress, their hygiene, hairstyle, how they accessorize and whether or not they polish their shoes. Those judgments are based on life experiences and can be influenced by culture, geography, social status and individual worldviews. According to Daniel Kahneman, thinking is intuitive and largely unconscious; a product of retained memory and learned patterns. As a result, it is filled with bias and prejudice and tends to jump to conclusions. The old adage is “you cannot judge a book by its cover,” but it seems we are predisposed to do just that.

Communication does not have to be verbal. Many researchers estimate up to 65% of what is communicated between the speaker and listener is non-verbal. And, when people are talking, more weight is placed on the non-verbal cues. Communication experts tell us, if the listener feels there is a contradiction between what is being said and body language, the non-verbal wins. For example, have you ever been involved in a situation where someone enters the room and you can immediately tell by their body language something is wrong, but when you confront them, they deny a problem exists? Do you typically believe what they tell you verbally over what you are experiencing behaviorally?

It is important to recognize the impact of not saying anything because even if you say nothing, you are still

“speaking.” You may be familiar with the saying “silence is deadly.” The reality is that when communication is expected, silence is typically interpreted negatively. Consider how you felt when waiting for a response back from a job interview, an RSVP for a family meeting or an invite for a second date. When there is silence, we tend to assume the worst. These assumptions can result in bad feelings, pain, anger, etc. Keep this in mind when you are working to improve your communication skills.

## Improve your listening skills

Many experts consider listening to be the most important component of effective communication. You may believe this comes naturally and easily, but the ability to actively listen is not a skill with which we are born. It takes practice and is learned over time. One of the keys to becoming a better listener is to remove the barriers to listening. Examples of common barriers include planning your response (which impedes hearing what is being said), judging the speaker, and interrupting to give advice rather than concentrating on what is being said. To be an active listener, it is helpful to:

- Lean forward
- Make eye contact
- Eliminate distractions
- Manage body language
- Convey a positive attitude

Look at each interaction as an opportunity and try to stay in the moment. Check your engagement by asking questions and restating major themes back to the speaker. You want to be able to comprehend the major theme of the conversation, retain the information and intelligently respond to the speaker. A piece of good advice for being an active listener is to stop talking. Seems simple, but it can be very difficult to do, especially in highly charged situations. Staying calm and empathizing with the speaker will go a long way in making sure the result of the interaction is positive.

## Listen empathetically

Empathy is a much talked about value many experts consider essential to quality relationship building, both personally and professionally, as well as critical to effective leadership. Taking your listening skills to the next level by learning how to listen empathetically can go a long way to improve your overall communication success.

Listening empathetically is different from active listening or attentive listening. Active listening is making a conscious effort to hear not only the words but to understand the complete message. Empathetic listening is a more generous form of listening; it involves “listening from the heart.”

Many people are compassionate and sympathetic, especially when someone is experiencing something in their lives the listener has already experienced. Empathetic listening requires the listener be able to put himself in the place of the speaker and feel for his position even when he has not experienced what he is hearing. This requires the listener to put his own needs aside and see and feel the situation through the speaker’s experience. It requires a non-judgmental openness that establishes trust and allows the speaker to open up further and share in a more vulnerable manner, which results in greater transparency and greater understanding on the part of the listener.

Empathetic listening allows the parties to see options not considered at the outset of the communication. While empathy can be an inherent value, it is not always. The good news is empathy can be taught and learned. Like most skills, it requires practice. Parental modeling of empathetic behavior goes a long way towards instilling empathy in the next generation.

To practice empathetic listening, we suggest:

- **Consider the appropriate setting:** Seek a safe environment away from distraction.
- **Ask how you can help:** Does the speaker want you there to listen or is the speaker seeking advice?

- **Ask for clarity whenever necessary:** Use phrases such as, “Please help me to understand” or “I need a little more information.”
- **Prepare for accepting and managing emotional moments:** Embracing the mindset that genuine and open communication can often be emotional. Learning how to remain calm and objective while managing a wide range of emotions can go a long way to better understanding and building trust.
- **Be agenda free:** Put yourself in a listening mode and try to imagine yourself in the speaker’s position.
- **Remain objective:** Don’t judge or personalize. Be open.

## Follow the Platinum Rule

Across all cultures and religions, people have been taught a similar version of the Golden Rule. In general, the Golden Rule encourages individuals to treat others as you would like to be treated. We suggest people should try to live by a higher standard or “Platinum Rule.” Under the Platinum Rule, people would treat others as they would like to be treated. In order to do this, you first have to take the time to get to know the person enough to know their preferences around both behavior and communication. One of our colleagues tells the story of when she was first married and became ill with the flu. In her family, when you were sick, people brought you chicken soup and reading materials, fluffed your pillow and constantly checked in to see how you were feeling. In her husband’s family, when you were ill, they sent you to your room to sleep it off. No one brought you anything or checked in on you. So, what do you think happened when she fell ill? She went off to the bedroom and her husband ignored her. After several hours she came out of her room wondering how the man she had married could be so insensitive and uncaring. The husband was confused because he did not think he had done anything wrong. The problem was the husband was treating her like he wanted to be treated, not how she wanted to be treated.

The same goes for communication. In order to communicate with others on an effective level, we must gain an understanding of both our communication style and theirs. There are many assessments to help you learn

more about the way you naturally communicate. The Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), DiSC Profile and Enneagram are all examples. If you communicate only within your preferred style, you will likely struggle to communicate with more than 75% of the population. Think of it in terms of writing with your non-dominant hand. At first, it may be more difficult and require more energy, but with practice you will get more comfortable and it will become more natural. It is the same with communication styles. The better you understand how your style fits with the other styles and the best way to meld the differences, the more comfortable you will become communicating across styles.

Putting the Platinum Rule into practice takes time and effort. It is likely impossible and truthfully, not necessary to follow with everyone but can be critical in significant relationships. For example, understanding the communication style of the employee at the Starbucks drive-thru is far less important than understanding your family members’ preferences.

## Conclusion

Effective communication requires dedication and practice. Not only should individuals be open to learning about their own communication type and style, they should also explore the different communication styles of important people in their lives and commit to becoming more active, empathetic listeners. As communication is one of the key tenets to happy, healthy and thriving families, it behooves family members to dedicate the effort necessary to become better communicators. This is especially important for families who work together around shared ownership of family assets. As we presented, industry research points to the breakdown of communication as the number one reason for loss of family wealth. If sustaining family wealth is the agreed upon mission of a family, the family members owe it to themselves to develop strong communication skills.

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