

The Business of Family Meetings

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If your childhood memories are even remotely like mine, when my parents would convene a family “meeting” it usually meant that there was bad news to share or a huge change on the way. I recall three such meetings (though I know there were more) – one to share that my brother’s draft number had been picked to serve in Vietnam, another to learn that my great grandmother had died, and then the news, when I was thirteen, that we were moving to New Zealand for a year. I was conditioned early-on to take a deep breath when I was told, “We need to talk as a family this evening,” and a shadow of angst would follow me around for the remainder of the day.

For the parents I coach, family meetings have developed a very different tone and function from what I, and they, experienced growing up. These parents often wish for more time to create shared memories with their children and recognize how infrequently they have time for extended conversations about important family issues. They are finding it both necessary and beneficial to bring family members together; recognizing that much of the time they feel more like “independent housemates” than a family. This is often followed by, “And you know, my teen makes a horrible housemate!”

Some successful areas of interaction that I see in my clients’ family meetings include spending time during each meeting giving attention to what is already working within the family system and recognizing good changes by identifying how they have made a positive impact on the overall family system. These families are also creating family traditions around family meeting time – a Make Your Own Sundae Dessert Bar,

passing around a family object and learning about its significance in the family's history, re-telling a family memory, looking at a family photo album or family video that hasn't been off the shelf in a decade, planning a family activity for later in the month and so on. One family got particularly busy and they were shocked when their daughter actually reminded them that they still needed to have their family meeting. Another client shared that she overheard her daughter talking to a friend on the phone as her daughter said, "Oh no, I can't go then, because we have this tradition of having a family meeting." In both instances it is clear that the family meeting was viewed as enjoyable and productive, because if anyone is going to tell you what a waste of time something is, it will be your pre-college or college-aged child.

Another area of success for my clients has been the integration of employee performance management strategies as they interact with their pre-college and college-aged children during family meeting time. One father recently said, "I can handle this situation with my son better if I interact with him like I would relate to one of my good employees who also happened to make a mistake." I said, "Exactly – your son remains successful and competent in all the areas that he is – those competencies and positive qualities don't disappear just because he made a poor decision in one area of his life." These families, who are using performance management tools, some intentionally and some intuitively, are bringing out the best in family members, while also cultivating a sense of ownership and accountability for both positive and negative actions. Another client had a problem with a family member leaving the garage door open at night after arriving home from his restaurant job. This became very aggravating for the parents, constantly reminding the child that he had left the door open yet again. The conversations got angrier and the volume got louder, but still the door would be left open. Then they decided to take a different approach and during family meeting

time they said, “Okay, so we have a problem concerning family safety and we need to hear your possible solutions to the problem.” The son was surprised not to get yelled at – he came up with a couple of ideas, the parents suggested a couple of options too, and they then asked him, “So which solution are you going to use.” He chose one, implemented it, and the garage door was successfully closed all the remaining nights of the summer. At the next family meeting the parents were also sure to reinforce how great it was that the solution worked – that it was easier to sleep knowing the door was closed and how they appreciated that they could trust their son to do so. This was a huge shift from the escalated nagging and angry interactions that had occurred, and it clearly gave ownership to the son to solve the problem, pick a solution, and feel the internal reward and satisfaction that he had successfully figured it out.

College is full of opportunities to make both good and poor decisions and to consider both positive and negative options. When less than desirable outcomes occur, it is often more than just “bad luck,” but rather the result of a poor decision or poor choice of action. A parent said, “I can see how approaching my son about the problem that needs to be solved and focusing our conversation on developing solutions is going to be more effective than my being so darn angry about it. He is expecting me to be angry.” This is not to say that emotions shouldn’t be expressed at all, because that is neither realistic nor beneficial, but our teens will often change their behaviors or actions when they become aware that:

- there are other choices and options for how they might do something;
- they have caused someone pain or stirred up anger;
- the situation didn't work out quite like they had imagined;
- they wanted a particular privilege or reward and now lost it;

- they have a chance to apply a new approach in the future;
- they are being counted on to come up with a different reaction or approach that will work for them;
- they experienced a consequence that has since caused them to re-think their action.

As we shape our family meetings and the outcomes we desire, we want to create more of what is already working and engage our family in solving the challenges that exist. It is through this dual approach that we can both address needed change in productive ways and enjoy that which is functioning smoothly. It is important for families to view themselves as competent in handling challenges and solving problems. While we glance at the past, and use what we know, more of our time should be spent on shaping the future – as that is the only place that holds possibility for change.

The great gift of family life is to be intimately acquainted with people you might never even introduce yourself to, had life not done it for you.

~Kendall Hailey