

Walk the Talk: Building Next-Gen Communication Skills

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We often hear comments from the Next Generation members of an enterprising family that indicate they don't see opportunities to engage: "no one cares what we think, no one listens to me, they don't think I know enough to contribute." Leading Generation members of those same families may say: "the Next Gens just aren't stepping up like we hoped." Creating space for Next Gens to communicate in a variety of contexts is a significantly untapped opportunity for their growth and development. These contexts include discussions within groups and in one-on-one interactions with other family members and family enterprise stakeholders.

To help members of the Next Gen recognize and take full advantage of these opportunities for engagement, we propose three distinct areas of focus: Preparation, Practice and Place.

Preparation

No one is born an excellent communicator. Instead, effective communication is a skill that must be developed, learned and honed. Communication skills that serve family business leaders are learned in a classroom *and* during real-life experiences (see Practice, below). To build these foundational skills, there are excellent online or university-based resources (Exec MBA programs or focused seminars) that help develop self-awareness, conflict management styles, active listening, giving and receiving feedback, and being present with others. Additionally, an executive coach who understands the dynamics of family business can be a worthwhile investment in preparing Next Gens to step up to a future leadership role. Also consider that no matter what the learning setting, learning together can give a group of Next Gens common language, a shared experience and

mutual support and accountability in application of the learned skills.

Practice

Skills developed are skills practiced. It is important for the Next Gen to have actual, real-time and real-life opportunities to put into practice the skills they are developing and get some coaching and feedback as they go. Consider the acronym LISTEN, based on one of the most fundamental but often overlooked communication skills. LISTEN provides a set of specific communication techniques and a learning mindset the Leading Gen can model and the Next Gen can develop and practice.

L - Learning

A common misperception of leaders is they must know all the answers. This isn't good leadership, and as businesses and families grow in complexity, this belief is particularly unrealistic and harmful. Instead, good leaders listen, ask thoughtful questions, and continuously learn about their organization's challenges and opportunities. Learning to listen well – to hear what is being said and notice what is not being talked about – requires a mindset of humility and is an effective communication practice. If listening isn't a strong trait in the Leading Gen, it probably won't be a skill easily developed by those in the Next Gen. Developing better listening skills can be an inter-generational goal that will benefit everyone concerned.

I - Intentional

Both Next and Leading Gens must be intentional in planning and practicing communication skills. Being intentional means approaching each day with a

thoughtful plan that flows into and out of a larger plan for family and for business. No matter what process you're engaging in — succession/continuity planning, mergers and acquisitions, a family meeting, reorganization, or simply walking around your business and connecting with people — do it for a reason that relates to intended outcomes and be intentional about it. And, let others know what you are doing and why. Intentionality supports accountability and being accountable depends upon accurate two-way communication.

S - Savor

Do you focus on the negative or the positive? Neuroscience research tells us that the brain holds on to negativity at a much greater rate than it does positive events. For the positive to be appreciated, it must be savored. There are many positive events in the life of a family or enterprise, and there is a risk that they will get lost in the challenges and negativity. Leaders model the discipline of savoring by celebrating positive, affirming actions and events, and the people involved in making them happen. Leaders can also model the cultural value and practice of savoring events and activities that reinforce the values of the family, the values of the enterprise, successes, and even important insights and learnings from disappointment and failure.

The key to savoring a moment, just like savoring one's favorite food, is to slow down a bit and be very present in the moment. Leaders at all levels can model slowing down to revel in an accomplishment in the life of the enterprise or the family. Taking time to focus and enjoy a moment of accomplishment reinforces the behaviors that you want to see in others. Publicly savoring the accomplishments of others reinforces their confidence and teaches the important communication skill of giving credit. Take time to pause and model the celebration of the positive.

T - Teaching

A wise mentor has observed that leadership is 50% teaching and 50% learning. How will the next generation understand certain core concepts such as history and values unless they are taught? And how can the Leading Gen understand the application of some of those concepts in the current context unless they are learning from the Next Gen? Teaching and learning

go hand in hand and are an ongoing opportunity for leadership development. The communication practice opportunity here is for both generations to frequently listen to each other and create space for the necessary two-way teaching and learning.

E - Engage

Much has been written in the last 10 years about employee engagement; less about leader engagement. Yet how can the Next Gen be motivated to be fully engaged if the Leading Gen is not demonstrating that engagement has value? Those currently in charge can easily fall into the practice of just getting the job done rather than being engaged with others regarding the reasons to do a job well. Functioning "like a well-oiled machine" can sacrifice engagement for speed. Be strategically engaged with important moments in the life of the organization and the family. Be fully present at family meetings.

N - Natural

Be who you are. The Next Gen doesn't have to be the same type of leader as the Leading Gen. Next Gens often are charged with leading a company that has experienced significant change from the company that the Leading Gen inherited. As each generation develops their leadership identity, skills and behaviors it is important they be allowed — even encouraged — to develop their own leadership voice. Embrace the sound of "that's not the way we have always done it" as a signal of progress. Allowing for new leadership creates an opportunity for the Next Gen to authentically engage the organization that "is" — right now.

Place

Thoughtfully creating space to allow Next Gens to practice their emerging communication skills is one of the greatest gifts Leading Gens can offer. Creating a "safe" space to fail is critical in building the confidence of the Next Gens. Below are some ideas that allow a "place" to practice — for families and businesses large and small. One thing to remember: if you're giving Next Gens a decision to make, be sure you're able to be comfortable with whatever they choose. Trumping or overturning a Next Gen decision sets their development and commitment back faster than nearly any other action.

- Ask young Next Gens (even at age 10 or 12) to serve on family education committees or planning groups.
- Start a book or movie club that illuminates core family values and gives the Next Gens opportunities to facilitate broader family discussion.
- In a nuclear family, let Next Gen siblings choose the next vacation spot — within a range and budget, with a presentation of the idea to the family to build consensus and agreement.
- Ask older Next Gens to present key learnings from a conference they attended to the family council or family assembly. Bonus points for asking a pair or team to collaborate and then share their joint insights.
- Pair two Next Gens up, provide them with introductions to other family businesses and ask them to research and report on a family business choice, e.g., what has been the outcome of requiring Next Gens to work outside the family business before returning?
- Identify opportunities for Next Gens to serve on boards of organizations that support issues or activities consistent with family values.

Conclusion

It is our strong belief, based on the rich experience of working with a large number of Next Gens, that many have significant plans, motivation, skills, and hopes for their future contribution in the family business. This simple framework for both the Next and Leading Generations can allow for intentional, practical, focused communication skills development - one of the most foundational skills to achieve family harmony and enterprise continuity. When Next Gens are supported in engaging in meaningful communication within their family and enterprise, they learn in real time how to lead in ways that will sustain family and business well into the future

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