

Helping Family Businesses Prosper Across Generations



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Women, Communication, and Leadership

By
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The right to be heard does not automatically include the right to be taken seriously.

--Hubert Humphrey
Former Vice President Of the
United States

It has often been suggested in recent years that women have different styles of communication and leadership than men do. We would add that women in family businesses face communications and leadership challenges that are specific to them or that are confronted by members of both sexes but perhaps experienced more intensely by women.

Communications Challenges

In many cases, the family and the business, as systems, can do much not to merely minimize communication problems but to enhance communication and make it an effective tool that benefits all family members as well as the business itself. For the sake of our discussion, we are considering two basic forms of communication: (1) human interaction (getting one's message across, listening, etc.) and

(2) sharing information. Compared to the first form, sharing information is pretty simple, and we offer ideas for doing it later in this chapter.

As for the first challenge, human interaction, we often find that women in business-owning families have a harder time being heard. One reason is that dads communicate with sons about the business more readily, especially if the sons work in the business and daughters don't. Even when daughters do work in the business, fathers, perhaps instinctively, often feel they need to protect their daughters more than their sons. Such feelings might prompt them to share less information with daughters. It's also often a father's perception that daughters are more emotional, leading a father to think the less his daughters know, the better. "If I don't tell them," he reasons, "they can't get upset." He might also have the same attitude toward his wife and sisters.

In addition, we find that there are feminine speech patterns and masculine speech patterns. Feminine styles tend to be less assertive and less intense, and women often modify what they say. They'll make a statement and include a phrase that weakens it, such as "sort of," "give or

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take," or "kind of." As a result, they come across as less confident and perhaps even less believable than their male counterparts. Yet, if they adopt a more masculine style, they are often criticized as being too direct or aggressive. It's a tricky balance.

As we have pointed out in earlier chapters, there certainly are excellent family businesses where women do have a voice and hold CEO and other top leadership positions. Emily Heisley Stoeckel of Chicago Metallic says, however, that being heard can take a very long time—especially when you're dealing with non-family colleagues. "It took years of their experience working with me and my learning to express my opinion before people could hear me," she says. Being a woman may have played a part in the time it took, but the fact that she was the founder's daughter and heir apparent and a shareholder to boot made things more difficult. Receptiveness to her ideas varied. Sometimes colleagues were very receptive. Other times they said, "That was a great idea," and gave credit to someone else.

But Heisley Stoeckel tells herself, "What is my ultimate objective here? Is my ultimate objective to get the credit or is it to be a leader in an organization that is making the correct decisions and making successful decisions?" She opts for the latter. She believes being heard, at least by non-family employees, would also be difficult for a male family member in her position.

"In a family-owned business with professional management, you have to be better and you have to work harder than anybody else to earn the respect of those people, because they think that you're there only because you're family," she explains. "And so, it takes time. You can get a seat at the table but you don't necessar-

ily get the respect. Without trust and respect, you don't get very far."

Many companies are still stuck in the notion that males are best suited for top leadership roles and only sons should run the business. It is in these companies that women are least listened to, perhaps to the detriment of the business.

The surest way for a woman to gain a voice and be taken seriously in a more open business is the same as it would be for anybody, male or female, family member or not: Equip yourself to fulfill your responsibilities. Put yourself in a position to earn the credibility and the respect that you need in order to encourage people to want to communicate with you. Daughters will be taken more seriously in family firms when the perception is that they are as credible as the sons.

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