

POINTS OF Possibility

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Ending Family Feuds, Once and for All

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The biggest threat to family unity is not the upsets or disputes that occur between family members. Instead, the biggest threat to family unity is the inability to diminish or resolve the upsets or disputes that occur.

In a twenty-year study Williams & Preisser found that seventy percent of inherited wealth is lost in the generation that immediately follows the generation that created it. Sixty percent of these failures were attributed to a breakdown of trust and communication within the family. In other words, the inability to resolve conflicts. Consider these very real examples of breakdowns in communication causing a failure in estate transfers (page 2).

Even though these disputes appear as family members fighting over business interests, property, cash, or antiques, experience has taught us that the underlying cause behind virtually all of these kinds of disputes are unresolved upsets and traumas from the past. For example, a brother and sister, who we'll call Jane and John, were embroiled in a bitter dispute over some family heirlooms. They could barely sit in a room together with a mediator to work out the distribution of these heirlooms. After one short conversation using the tools we'll outline shortly, we discovered the real problem underlying the current dispute was the fact that fifteen years ago when John was in college, Jane never came to visit him. He was initially frustrated by this, but because he was never able to communicate his feelings to Jane, his unaddressed frustration escalated over the next 15 years to resentment and finally, revenge.

It follows then, that the single most important thing families can do to foster and develop unity between them is to adopt a shared commitment to regularly using tools that can quickly and effectively diminish or resolve upsets and disputes within the family. It seems so simple, yet these tools are almost completely ignored in our society, and many of us never even learn them to begin with.

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REAL WEALTH, REAL FAMILIES, REAL CONFLICTS

Sumner Redstone

Value of estate: \$7.7 billion

Amount contested: \$233 million

Feuding parties: father, daughter, and son

Sumner Redstone and his daughter, Shari Redstone, have a history of feuding. Sumner is chairman and majority shareholder of CBS, Viacom and National Amusements, among other companies. During the summer of 2007, the pair made headlines when it was reported that Sumner wasn't sure if he wanted his daughter, who was and remains the vice-chairman of CBS and Viacom, to succeed him. During the dispute, both Redstones publicly divulged that they were considering cutting business ties with each other.

John Seward Johnson I

Value of estate: \$400 million

Amount contested: \$400 million

Feuding parties: wife and children

John Seward Johnson I was one of the sons of Robert Wood Johnson I, a co-founder of Johnson & Johnson. When he died in 1983 of prostate cancer, he left almost the entirety of his fortune to his third wife, Barbara Piasecka, a former maid 42 years younger than him. Johnson's children immediately contested this, claiming that Piasecka abused their father and "terrorized" him into leaving her all of his money. Three years and \$10 million in legal fees later, a judge found that Johnson had not been mentally competent when he signed his will, and ordered Piasecka to pay Johnson's children \$160 million.

Fred Koch

Value of estate: \$5.6 billion

Amount contested: \$2.3 billion

Feuding parties: four brothers

The four sons of Fred Koch, co-founder of energy conglomerate Koch Industries, spent nearly twenty years feuding with one another over whether two brothers, Charles and David, cheated the other two, William and Frederick, out of \$2.3 billion when they sold their shares of Koch Industries in 1983 for around \$1 billion. For years, the billionaires reportedly communicated only through lawyers, occasionally making efforts to publicly humiliate and discredit one another. After years of fighting and millions of dollars spent on legal fees, the brothers reconciled in 2001.

This paper provides an overview of how our Family Unity Program works to resolve conflicts within a family (or any group of people). We start by sharing information about how our brains process information and by explaining why most family members, when it comes to upsets and disputes, truly believe they are in the right. We then discuss reactive patterns of behavior that are often so engrained in the family's dynamic that they appear invisible to everyone.

Finally, we describe a structured conversation that enables family members to fully understand each other's perspectives. Understanding each other's perspectives is the starting point for forgiveness and resolution.

How We Process Information

Our brains are constantly processing massive volumes of information. We condense all that information into something that is useful to us by doing three things: we distort, we delete, and we generalize. This gives each of us a unique view of the world that we believe to be real. Therefore, the first step in the conflict resolution process is asking family members to accept the possibility that their perspective around an upset or dispute has been created through their brain distorting, deleting and generalizing information.

Believing We Are Right

The second step is to understand how the part of our brains known as the "Reticular Activating System" operates. Simply put, our eyes and ears see and hear what our brains tell them to. When this step is combined with how we process information, it highlights how we first create our own unique perspective about what actually happened, and then search for additional information to reinforce our perspective. This is known as "confirmation bias," and it acts to powerfully reinforce our sense of "being right." By this point, we are completely convinced that we are right, and as a result we behave in one of six ways towards others who disagree with us:

1. We declare ourselves right
2. We declare the other person wrong
3. We dominate others
4. We avoid their domination
5. We justify our own position
6. We invalidate their position

If you pay attention, you'll find that most of our statements during an argument are simply positioning ourselves in one of these six ways, and the person we're arguing with is doing the very same. It's a vicious circle that will never lead to resolution.

Reactive Patterns of Behavior

The fourth step in the resolution process is to make the family aware of reactive patterns of behavior. Simply put, family members have certain patterns of behavior that are present in their relationships with each other. Because these patterns are so reactive, it is like having a behavioral autopilot that suddenly turns on in a variety of situations. These patterns of behavior are frequently so engrained in the family dynamics, they can appear invisible.

When these patterns are identified and become visible, family members have the opportunity to turn off their behavioral autopilot and choose a different response. This immediately changes the dynamic within the upset or dispute, and paves the way for positive resolution.

Oftentimes, the level of intensity of the feelings and emotions associated with these reactive patterns is so high that professional intervention is desirable. In these situations, there are techniques available that have been adapted from the treatment of people suffering from PTSD, techniques which can very quickly reduce the intensity of their feelings and allow them to move to resolution of the upset they're dealing with, as discussed below.

Diminishing or Resolving an Upset or Dispute

The best way to diminish or resolve an argument or dispute is to allow each person to fully communicate their perspective. As the famous author Dr. Stephen R. Covey said, "Seek first to understand, then to be understood. . . . To feel understood is the deepest psychological need. . . . Understanding comes through listening. . . . Most people listen with the intent to respond instead of listening with the intent to understand." (Stephen R. Covey, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Training Manual, p.123-128)

We provide families with a structured conversation that enables each family member involved in the upset or dispute to completely deliver their communication and be fully heard. Understanding each other's perspective is

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Seven Habits of Highly Effective People

the starting point for forgiveness and resolution. This approach enables the family to diminish or resolve upsets and disputes and strengthen family unity.

Please note that this is a structured conversational process that has been proven over many years and through many relationships. It does not in itself provide a solution, but rather provides a framework for family members who are in a dispute to understand each other's perspectives. It is within this framework that resolution and forgiveness occurs.

When families work with us, we provide the tools, techniques and experience needed to accomplish the vital task of resolving the upsets and conflicts that keep them apart. The Family Unity Program has been designed to be interactive, often providing relief to conflict within the first day. We have seen astonishing successes when families and organizations commit to using these tools and techniques to resolve conflicts with each other. Using them diligently by everyone in the family opens up entirely new opportunities for closeness, collaboration and alignment as they work to create a thriving family experience for themselves.

Imagine the transformation this could bring about in a family formerly wracked with schisms of all kinds, but now has a fully functioning family council. Think of how quickly disagreements and upsets could be resolved, completely sidestepping the formerly certain outcome of having them grow into frustration, resistance, resentment, or revenge!

This may sound too easy and too good to be true, but we can assure you that these tools DO work, and in fact, they work wonders within the family. And while at first they may seem a little unfamiliar to use,

in a very short time, they become second nature for everyone and the sense of ease and joy they bring to the family make it very easy to sustain the effort.

We frequently meet people for whom the engrained patterns of conflict and separation within their family or business organization seem so solid and immovable to them that they are unable to even imagine a different way of relating as a possibility for them. One mother felt that way about her recalcitrant children, who for years had refused to engage in any meaningful discussions to improve their relationships with her. Even their social visits had become fewer and fewer over the years, despite the fact that they all lived within a short drive of each other.

We suggested our Family Unity Program as a starting point to begin repairing their relationships, but she refused to believe real improvement was possible. Eventually she relented when her anxiety turned into desperation, and she was astonished at how dramatically things shifted for everyone in the family after just the first day of our two-day program. By the end of the second day, everyone was successfully using the tools to heal conflicts that in some cases went back over two decades, and as a result, entirely new possibilities for closeness opened up for everyone in the family. The reconnection in this family allowed them to engage in further developing themselves as a thriving family.

If your family is suffering from unresolved conflicts that are getting in the way of having the close relationships you're craving but may have already given up on, we promise you--there's hope. 

