

Ground rules for family meetings

In good family-meeting teamwork, participants accept that the group is as important as the individual. When individuals do what is supportive of the meeting, the meeting can take care of the needs of each individual. Put the group's interests first and you will be more likely to get what you need.

1. Be present

Demonstrate your respect and commitment by setting aside potential distractions. Turn off phones, cell-phones, iPads, laptops, and any other electronics. If you need to be reached in case of emergency for your children or business, designate a contact person if needed during the meeting. Be present at scheduled times of beginning and ending in meetings so the meeting can get the job done. Devote room in your life and your heart to this meeting.

2. Be respectful in words, body language, and action

Speak respectfully, pay attention when someone else is talking, and avoid jumping in to finish sentences. Avoid negative body language such as eye-rolling, shaking your head, or other indications of emotional reaction unless you follow up by talking directly about your reaction. Keep profanity to a minimum. If you have a question or point to make, wait for an opening or raise a hand to indicate you have something to bring up. You will appreciate it when others do that while you are talking.

3. Be willing to edit what you say so it comes across better

Saying anything and everything you feel under the guise of "honesty" can simply be a license to attack. Deliver your points with tact and respect. You will be more likely to be heard. Appropriate editing of your message will reduce the chances that other people will get defensive, which leads to breakdowns in communication.

4. Own your views as your own

Make "I" statements rather than broad, global statements that imply you know the truth or that something "is obvious." Saying "everyone knows that is ridiculous" is unhelpful and destructive to communication. Saying, "I really disagree with what you just said" is more honest and may be more accurate. If others do share your views, it will be clear there is a shared perspective on an issue. If it turns out your view is not shared by others, you may then open up to new viewpoints or solutions.

5. Avoid indirect communication

Families are notorious for allowing indirect communication and alliances. Indirect communication allows avoidance of conflict rather than resolution of problems. It can in fact make small problems grow into feuds between allied camps. Deal directly with whomever you are having the conflict, whenever possible.

6. Listen

Listening is a skill that must be practiced, but it pays off tremendously in effective communication. Be willing to demonstrate you understand what the other person is saying before making your own point. You may find you are reacting to what you believe someone said, not what was really said. When someone else is saying something you disagree with, make sure you are listening to the points he or she is saying.

7. Be patient

Recognize and accept that, with limited meeting time, not all comments or questions can be dealt with right away. Be willing to let some things go by. Pick your issues for what are most important. Over time it is likely that the really important things will get discussed and dealt with.

8. Tolerate tension in yourself and in the group

Honest communication on difficult issues will inevitably lead to feeling uncomfortable, angry, or afraid during some parts of the meeting. There may also be times when people are arguing over their differences. A good family meeting allows for this up to a point, as long as the conflict is bringing out unresolved issues and staying respectful. The role of the leadership is to monitor how this is going and to lead it to some resolution. Tolerate feeling uncomfortable as best as you can rather than try to smooth things over just to avoid conflict.



Dr. Jim Grubman of Family Wealth Consulting has provided services to individuals, couples, and families of wealth for nearly 30 years. He has helped clients at all levels of affluence, from the “millionaire next door” to the Forbes 400. He brings his knowledge of the client’s perspective to his training and consulting with family offices, wealth management firms, attorneys, and other advisors.



356 Montague City Road
Suite 100
Turner Falls, MA 01376



Phone: 413.775.0557



Email: jim@jamesgrubman.com
www.JamesGrubman.com



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