



Roy: I'm going to be 55 in a couple of years and want to retire then to relax a little and do some traveling. Let's start working on a plan for the farm to provide me an annual retirement income for as long as I live. You can keep all your equity in the business until you're ready to slow down.

Dave: What a hair-brained idea! The farm can't afford that! I'll have to keep working here for a long time, and you will too if you want it to pay your bills.

Roy: I've worked on this farm with you for 15 years! You are just trying to rip me off as usual!

Dave: No way am I going to saddle myself and my kids with a deal like you want! What are you smoking? Ever since you got married three years ago, you've been making ridiculous demands.

Roy: What you mean, is that ever since I got married, I haven't always been available to cover for you when you decide to take time off.

Dave: I'll fight you tooth and nail on this!

Roy: See you in court, Big Guy.

A way to halt the escalation and steer the conversation toward constructive problem solving is to ask questions to find out what the individual is upset about. Pursue understanding rather than victory. Questioning, actively listening, and reframing can turn ping-pong into a more positive game of catch.

If either of the cousins had tried playing verbal catch, the conversation would probably not have gotten so bitter. Dave might have turned it with something like:



"Roy I understand that you are thinking about your retirement and security for your wife if something should happen to you. I am starting to think more seriously about these things myself. But I am also concerned about the long-term viability of the farm and what that means to my children. I am wondering what other options there may be that would meet your needs and also be good for the farm. What do you say we get some more information together and make a date to talk with our accountant or a financial planner?"

Personal Advice

Giving advice on personal matters rather than techniques of the job is a touchy task. Some people are reluctant to provide it when asked, and others gratuitously offer it on the slightest provocation. More often than not, unsolicited advice is unwelcome. Even a person who appears to be seeking advice may simply want to reach a sympathetic ear. Often most helpful are questions that support a person's examining his or her own situation, such as "What have you done so far?" or "What do you think you should do?"



Rethinking Communication in Family Business

1. **Receiving feedback:** Recall and write a few things that family members have said that upset you. What would you have preferred they say instead?
2. **Giving feedback:** Recall something you have said that upset someone else in the family. How could you have rephrased it to yield a more productive effect?
3. **Family feedback:** Ask all family members to record critical messages they hear from each other during a set time period. Discuss the results of these messages and how they could have been delivered to better effect.

In the following story, would a different approach by either antagonist have softened, if not prevented, the confrontation?

The Hermann family ran a large greenhouse operation with a direct marketing store attached to the workshop. Margaret and Roger had started the operation and now worked with their two adult children, Hugh and Sandra. Sandra managed the direct marketing store and frequently brought her two-year-old son, Eric, to work with her.

One day as Sandra was busy talking to a customer, Eric wandered into the adjacent workshop and became curious about what his Uncle Hugh was doing. Hugh was welding a piece of equipment and as soon as he saw Eric, stopped his work and took him promptly back to the store. He felt annoyed about the interruption in his work but seeing Sandra was with a customer, said nothing to her. It wasn't long before Eric again wandered into the workshop area. This time Hugh took him firmly by the hand and snapped at Sandra as he handed him back, "Take care of your kid, eh?" When Eric appeared in the workshop a third time, Hugh lost his temper. He marched into the store and began shouting at his sister. "What's wrong with you anyway? Don't you care that your kid might get hurt in the workshop? Not only are you making it hard for me to do my job, you're being a lousy mother. Maybe you should just stay home where you belong and take care of your kid."

Sandra reacted in kind, with as much hostility as she felt from Hugh. "Don't you shout at me, you bully! If you didn't always leave the door open, Eric couldn't get in there. You're always complaining about Eric. If you were a decent uncle, you'd spend more time with him. And of course you'd like me to stay home. You never have liked the idea that I'm an equal partner in this business. Deal with it."

The way these two communicated clearly will take a toll on their work relationship and ability to cooperate in this family business. Neither Hugh nor Sandra seemed to be building for a harmonious future in their exchange. Imagine how differently this scene might have played out if the first time Hugh had brought Eric back to the store, he had phrased his concerns as an "I" message.

"I was busy welding and Eric came into the shop. I'm afraid he'll get hurt. Plus I really need to get this job done and can't concentrate when he's around. How can we make sure that I get my job done and keep Eric safe?"

Even if he had delivered his angry message as described, Sandra might have defused the situation by paraphrasing and reframing. *"I understand that you're concerned about Eric's safety and want to get your work done. When I am busy and get interrupted, I get upset as well."*

Sandra could have tried to enlist Hugh in figuring out how to prevent future occurrences.

"It's tough for me when I am working with a customer. What do you think we should do to make sure Eric is safe, you are not disturbed, and I can take care of business out here?"

If you can, recall a family situation similar to the one with Sandra and Hugh. What "I" messages might have substituted for inflammatory statements? Would paraphrasing and reframing have helped? Would the people involved have reacted differently if these techniques had been used?