



Making Family Meetings Work

Family meetings can be essential strategy sessions for relatives to voice their opinions about the family's philanthropic mission, but conflicts often arise across generations. Advisors can help these meetings work better by helping relatives to put aside their differences in order to give more effectively.

Financial advisors who work with multigenerational families can be instrumental in guiding their clients through decisions concerning all aspects of their multifaceted financial lives. When financial planning leads in a philanthropic direction, it may be natural that clients look to their advisor for help in the next steps. When two or three generations share decision-making authority, or a family's dynamics are particularly delicate, an advisor can play an essential role in keeping a family's philanthropy harmonious.

A wealthy businessman had set up a donor advised fund at a community foundation in North Carolina, for his grown son to use for his own charitable giving, but it sat untouched for almost a year. "The father wanted to establish a fund so that his son could demonstrate more responsible behavior," said Beverley Francis, director of philanthropic services at the Triangle Community Foundation in Durham. But the son saw it as an assignment – or even a punishment – and took little interest in philanthropy. Every time Francis tried to set up a meeting, the son would respond by e-mail, and would never agree to an appointment.

So Francis set up a meeting with the father and son, to give the father a chance to explain that the fund was an opportunity, not a punishment. Next, Francis presented a few grant proposals that she thought the son might want to support, based on interests he expressed in their e-mail correspondence: the arts, the environment and the treatment of drug and alcohol addiction. (The son had recently recovered from a drinking problem.) "The point was to take the fund out of the realm of a father-son disagreement and turn it into a question of philanthropy," Francis explains.

Why Have Family Meetings?

Family meetings, such as this one, come into play at important junctures in a family's estate planning or philanthropy, giving all relatives a chance to set strategy for a donor advised fund or foundation.

These big-picture family meetings are distinct from quarterly or annual grantmaking sessions. Family meetings take place when a donor wants to include other generations or branches of the family, or when a family needs to create or revise its philanthropic direction or mission statement. They tend to take at least a couple of hours, and some may be adjourned and continued weeks or months later, before getting through the agenda. The whole point, advisors say, is to make sure that all involved family members agree with what the charitable vehicle is doing, and that task cannot be rushed.



Initiating the Meeting

The setting of an agenda means talking with each family member beforehand. For advisors who are new to a family, this is also an opportunity to learn about hidden family issues. The advisor then sends a draft of the agenda for everyone's approval. "I tend to do agendas as a series of questions," says Jerry Simon Chasen, a trust and estate attorney in Miami. "My favorite is: What dreams did you have as a kid in terms of how you wanted to see the world changed? I want to get at their covered-up philanthropic ambitions." Other possible questions are: What was your earliest experience with giving to others, and what effect did it have on you? What is the most meaningful charitable gift you have ever given and why? What community issues or challenges make you want to get involved?

Another way to draw philanthropic ambitions out from family members is through a simple values identification exercise. First, make a list of values – for example, acceptance, beauty, justice, pride, self-reliance – and print a copy for each family member. There should be room for other values to be added by the family. Ask each person to select five values on his or her own that are most important to them. After everyone has done this, share the results with the group and talk about the choices. Find areas of similarity and divergence, and talk about what these mean for their charitable giving. Ask if the values they selected have implications for the kinds of giving they might undertake.

If an advisor moderates a meeting—some families are happy to run their own meetings—it is best to start by suggesting operating guidelines, the most important of which is that participants need to speak in turn. Some families even have a prop to pass around—a key, figurine or miniature globe—and whoever is holding it has the right to speak. This is also a good time for advisors to explain what their role is, which is to act as a neutral facilitator and keep the family focused. "I will not offer advice unless asked for it, and it helps a lot to say that up front," says Ellen Remmer, a vice president at the Philanthropic Initiative in Boston. "They will very often say, 'Speak up whenever you want.' Even then I don't give advice very often, but when I do, they have already given me permission."

Finally, advisors who are new to conducting family meetings can call on their local community foundation for assistance. Besides being a wealth of local giving knowledge, a community foundation can give guidance on running the family meeting, or even help the advisor facilitate it.

Conflict Resolution

The biggest challenge in running meetings is keeping interpersonal conflicts from muddying philanthropic goals. "One person thinks so-and-so has been mean to his wife; the mother hates the son-in-law; the two left-wing children have always been different," says Richard Thies, an estate lawyer in Chicago. "No family is immune to having issues, but the meeting is a way to bring a little formality to the process." The trick, Thies and others explain, is to emphasize what all family members have in common, whether it is a desire to honor their late parents, or a cause or type of cause to support. Sometimes participants agree to disagree: they can decide that a



percentage of distributions will be determined by the full board or committee, and a percentage will be given to individuals for discretionary grants. However, discretionary giving should probably be kept to a minimum in order to keep the family giving as close to the family giving mission as possible.

Advisors need to keep in mind that some families, especially complicated ones with remarriages and several generations, approach gathering with a great deal of anxiety. An advisor's presence can reassure all those present that they will be treated fairly and that, despite their differences, they can come to some sort of agreement. "The goal is set by the family," Thies says. "Usually it's some combination of using their wealth for some good purpose and having a wonderful time together."

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