



WIFU_compact_10:

Communication in the Business Family

All social systems – whether families, groups of work colleagues, neighbours or clubs – have one thing in common: they operate through communication. Through communication (and, for that matter, also attempts to refuse communication) people interact with one another and make themselves heard. Communication is not only verbal but encompasses a range of non-verbal behaviour. Without communication, there can be no social structures and, thus, no groups, communities or societies where people interact regardless of their approval or disapproval.

Do business families communicate differently from “normal” families?

In a “normal” family, private and professional roles are distinct. However, in a business family, people meet in the private sphere who are also related to one another through their roles in the business and/or by business ownership. As these private and professional systems are closely linked, communication is often confused; its context remains obscure or is understood differently by the various parties.

Mother: “How’s uni going?”

Son: “Do you (as a mother) want to know whether I am enjoying university? Or do you (as a managing director) want to know when I will finally graduate to enter the firm?”

To prevent misunderstandings and conflicts, business families should consider *meta-level communication*, meaning the communication *above* communication, to increase clarity around the context and social role of the speaker.

Can communication be untangled and better structured from the start?

Yes, this is possible and can be taught. To this end, WIFU works with the CEA model: “C” for cognition, “E” for emotion and “A” for action. In other words, the model connects the head, heart and hand. Using these three dimensions, we can structure the issues affecting a business family or shareholder circle:

- **Cognition:** What is the substantive objective, what is our common goal, and how can we achieve these?
- **Emotion:** How do we feel about each other? How can we achieve confidential relationships and cooperation among everyone in this circle?
- **Action:** What can we and must we do to achieve our goals, decisions and strategies, and put them into practice?

Can (and should) communication be professionalised?

Since misunderstandings can lead to conflicts and conflicts can pose a danger to the business, professionalised communication belongs to the set of ownership competencies. The art of listening and understanding can be developed by distinguishing the four aspects of statements or propositions identified in the four-fold communication model created by Friedemann Schulz von Thun.

- **The content:** What is said? This question is not as trivial as it sounds, as it cannot be expected that the listener will understand the words spoken exactly as they were intended to be understood by the speaker.
- **The relationship:** In what roles are the participants of a conversation encountering one another? Is their relationship symmetrical (spouses) or asymmetrical (parents, children)? Do they meet as siblings, or as shareholders?
- **The self-revelation:** What feelings do we notice in other people? Are they angry, enthusiastic or stressed?
- **The appeal:** What does the speaker expect from me or others? What are we supposed to do?

In our family, we are too diverse to achieve structured communication ...

This is the case for almost all families. There are, therefore, two methodological approaches: communication *focused on people* and communication *focused on solutions*. Each business family needs to decide which method suits them best. Likewise, a specific issue within the family or shareholder circle may determine whether one or other method is appropriate.



PERSON-CENTRED COMMUNICATION (ACCORDING TO CARL ROGERS)

Here, the focus is on the relationship with others, self-revelation and one's own development. The method comprises three distinct attitudes: *acceptance* (respecting and valuing someone else), *empathy* (trying to share another's feelings) and *authenticity* (showing one's own feelings). Two key modes of conversation are paraphrasing and verbalising; the first serves to establish certainty around the contents of the conversation, while the latter describes what is implicated non-verbally and emotionally.

SOLUTION-FOCUSED COMMUNICATION (ACCORDING TO INSOO KIM BERG AND STEVE DE SHAZER)

This method distinguishes finding a solution from searching for the origins of an issue. Utilising the so-called *miracle question*, it looks to the future: "How would we know tomorrow morning if a miracle had happened overnight and solved our problem?" Similarly, the *exception question* could be used retrospectively: "Why was this issue not present in the past although it could have been expected?" Alternatively, "How did we solve this kind of problem in the past?" Overall, this method concerns the recognition of solutions.

THE BALINT-ROUND AS GROUP DISCUSSION

All participants share what interests them or triggers action without others commenting. Afterwards, a subject for discussion is chosen. Everyone will talk about their subjective feelings at a cognitive, emotional and active level, but no advice or suggestions will be made in response. The advantage of this method is that it elicits input from the group and focuses on relationships, not on guidelines for action.

THE REFLECTING TEAM (MORE BRAINPOWER)

In this method, the participants are split into two groups: the reflecting team (in the inner circle) receives an instruction from the entire group to work on one specific issue. The others (in the outer circle) listen to the team, make notes and think along. Afterwards, both groups discuss their ideas, recommended actions and new perspectives to see how their insights may be used to solve the issue.

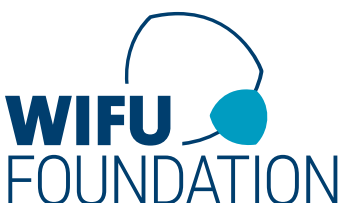
How do we recognise success in methodological communication?

The CEA model can also be helpful here. After finishing work in the family circle, members may ask the following questions: **Cognition** What is now different about our way of thinking and what have we learnt? | **Emotion** How do we feel now? Which emotions do we recognise in ourselves? | **Action** Which impulses to act did we develop? How can other people recognise that we will act differently?

Is this sustainable throughout everyday life?

Not all everyday conversations will be (or can be) structured and conducted with clear roles. However, it is important to remain conscious of the differences between private and professional communication. If someone is unsure during a discussion about what the other person is "really" trying to say and how they are feeling, they should ask and clarify the situation.

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