



Creating A Safe Environment In Which To Hold Difficult Family Conversations

By Christian Stewart and Ian A Marsh

Christian Stewart is the Managing Director of [Family Legacy Asia](#), and specializes in advising Asian families on establishing family councils and family constitutions. Christian is based in Hong Kong.

Ian A Marsh is the principal of [familydr](#) Ian specializes in family dynamics and communication and mediating family disputes. Ian is based in the UK but is a frequent visitor to Hong Kong and Singapore.

"Let me never fall into the vulgar mistake of dreaming that I am persecuted whenever I am contradicted"

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Part 1: By Christian Stewart

If you want to create family agreements and policies, you need to be able to create a Safe Environment for family members to hold discussions. If you have important topics to discuss together as a family, for example the topic of succession, you should be aiming to create a Safe Environment. If you hold family meetings or have a family council, then those meetings should take place in a Safe Environment. If you are an advisor to a family then (if your role is to help with the family meetings and family policies and agreements) then your role includes the responsibility for creating that Safe Environment.

What is a Safe Environment? How do you define it? Here are some brief possible definitions, drawn from various sources:

- In a safe environment everyone feels comfortable bringing up his or her points of view, even when others disagree with him or her.
- People can disagree with you and you don't take it as a personal attack

- An environment where it is safe to be open – where the group can be open with each other
- It is safe to be able to express your feelings
- The family members can agree to disagree with each other
- The family members can have "Adult- Adult" conversations
- The concept should include an environment where it is possible for the family members to be able to have "difficult conversations"
- The family members in such an environment would also have the goal of remaining "non reactive" - to keep in the thinking part of their brain - not to fall back into automatic patterns - not to become emotionally flooded

However the idea of having a Safe Environment is for the purpose of being able to have difficult conversations - otherwise you don't need the safety! So there also has to be a concept of an environment where, perhaps not at first, but in time, family members can be challenged, or can challenge each other. So there must be the chance of some degree of discomfort at some point, but in a contained fashion.

If it is the role of the family advisor to create that Safety, the next question is how does the advisor go about creating a Safe Environment?

Another question is can a family create such an environment on their own, or does it always require an outside meeting facilitator (to get started)?

Part 2: By Ian Marsh

I couldn't agree more that you need to create the right conditions for having difficult conversations and "a safe environment" is as good a term for it as any. Having said that, the more I work in this area the more it seems to me that the people are the environment.

Effective dialogue is more than a series of monologues. It requires that all the participants are in receptive, rather than reactive, mode. Everyone must have their chance to speak and, when done, they must feel heard. That requires openness, acceptance and empathy from all. Contrary to popular belief, "acceptance" does not mean agreement. It means accepting the other's views for what they are.

Physiologically, that is quite challenging. It is well established that in a healthy mind/brain, all memories have an emotional component, whether conscious (what we call feelings) or not. We may each react differently to the same stimulus depending on our

genetic make up, culture, experience, environment and, to a degree, the randomness of that highly complex system, our brain. If, as happens all too often in family discussions, an emotional response triggers our basic fight/flight/freeze mechanism, it will override what we like to call our "higher brain functions", and the outcome is unlikely to be productive! Such explosions only take milliseconds, but it can take years to repair the damage.

Can we learn how to create a safe environment for difficult conversations? Of course we can, but it takes time, effort and practice, and it may not be fully effective until all the participants have done that. In the meantime, a skilled facilitator should be able to help us achieve much the same result.

Christian Stewart

cstewart@familylegacyasia.com
www.familylegacyasia.com

Ian A Marsh

imarsh@familydr.co.uk
www.familydr.co.uk