



Meditate Your Way To Better Family Council Meetings

The GMR Group of India is a well known case study about creating a family constitution. I was presenting at a family office conference in Hong Kong a while back and had the opportunity to meet one of the advisors that had helped the Rao family to form their constitution. He explained that his role included being there to remind the family on the terms of their family constitution. He further explained that the advisors to the family included family spiritual advisors and that they had a family practice or ritual of commencing each family council meeting by meditating together. (Along a similar line I have some clients who pray together at the start of each family council meeting.)

If you are a hard-nosed business man this idea may sound a little uncomfortable to you, but let's just think about the wisdom – and the theory - behind this for a second.

If you want to preserve family wealth for generations, then this all comes down to a question of joint family decision making, or family governance (quoting James E. Hughes Jr. author of Family Wealth; Keeping it in the Family). Long term success is a matter of having a process that helps the family to make more right decisions over the long run, than wrong decisions. Capacity to make excellent decisions together is very important.

Decision Making & Family Anxiety

Family systems theory tells us that families can make decisions together in one of two ways (though really this is a spectrum). First, they can either be reactive and automatic and default to established family patterns. Or second, they can make decisions based on reasoned principles – which means they can think. The higher the anxiety level in the family (whether latent or because of a crisis – perhaps because the family is going through a transition period) the more likely that the family will react in the former of these two ways. Family systems theory says that successful families are better at making principle based decisions; they are better at thinking rationally. If you want to preserve family wealth for generations, anxiety is an enemy. If you want your human capital to

flourish, anxiety is an enemy.

This has a lot to do with meditation. Meditation is a way to bring down anxiety. Meditating as a family group can help bring down anxiety within the group. It calms the mind and allows you to be less reactive and therefore to think more clearly. Meditation also helps to balance the left and right brain and to develop intuition. It therefore eventually leads to the ability to find more creative solutions. Therefore there is a direct correlation between meditation and making better decisions together and managing family anxiety.¹

Seeing Your Role In Family Conflicts

A meditative practice also has another significant benefit for families that work together. The biggest risk to any family owned business is family conflict. One of the fundamental reasons for establishing a family council is to avoid family conflict. Key skills in being able to work through family conflict include the ability to listen with empathy to each other and to be aware of how your own reactions and body language are being perceived by the family members you are listening to.

Again family systems theory explains that you can never change your brother, that the only person you can change is yourself. You have to be the change you want to see

¹ Obviously the results that you get back depend on the long term effort that you put in.

in your family. To work your way through family conflict, you have to develop the skill of being self aware. This leads us back to meditation again. Meditation can help you to develop the ability to see the role that you play in your family dynamics. against family conflicts.

In summary, if you want to reduce the anxiety levels at your family council meetings, if you want to take the decision making and problem solving ability of your family council to the next level, if you want to increase your ability to work productively through periods of family conflict, follow the example of the GMR group and find yourselves a spiritual advisor for your family council, or find someone who can help lead the family through a meditation together.

Watching Your Breathing

Here is one more thing you can try. The next time you get angry, notice what is happening to your breathing. What is your “angry breath” like? Contrast this to how you breathe when you are relaxed and calm. What is your “calm breath” like? Make an effort to practice your “calm breath”.

The next time you are in a family council meeting – or for that matter, a board meeting or a management meeting with your family members – notice your breathing and if you find that “angry breath” starting to flow, make an effort to change it back to your “calm breath”.

Emotion can follow the breathing. And remember that “practice (and persistence and effort) makes perfect.”

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About the Author

Originally a tax and trust lawyer from South Australia, Christian moved to Hong Kong 15 years ago. In July 2008, he formed Family Legacy Asia to provide independent advice to Asian families on family governance. In this role he acts as a process consultant to help family businesses in Asia work together, through facilitating family meetings and helping the family to prepare their own family policies and constitution. He also advises several Asian Family Offices on trust and succession matters. He acts as an advisor on several private trust company or “PTC” structures.

Prior to founding Family Legacy Asia Christian was a Managing Director and the Head of Wealth Advisory in Asia for JPMorgan Private Bank for 6 years. In this capacity he was responsible for running JPMorgan’s Asian trust business.

JPMorgan recruited Christian from PricewaterhouseCoopers in Hong Kong in mid 2002. At PwC he was a Partner in their Tax Practice specializing in estate duty planning and trust structuring and he ran their Trust & Private Client team.