

Crucial Family Conversations

By Monica Kreiner, Chartered Mediator

Mom or Dad clearly needs additional supports as they age. Your adult siblings are squabbling about what to do. Some live close, some live far away.

Or maybe you are part of the sandwich generation that also has teens. Your teen wants to do something and you are resistant so the struggle is on.

In both these situations, emotions and confusion are running high. It's time you had a crucial family conversation but you know when everyone gets together, it will end up in an argument.

You need a process to help people resolve issues and develop a workable plan.

One of the most common problems in family communication is assumptions. Encourage everyone to look at their own past communication patterns with a view of trying something that is more constructive. Developing curiosity about people's intentions allows for openness. My brothers, who live close to our father, thought they knew why Dad didn't want to go to the Seniors' Lodge. I took the time to be curious about his reasons, to fully hear him out, and discovered that my brothers were off base. That's when I knew we needed to get together and talk.

Another difficulty in resolving family matters is clarity around the issue and ultimately whose decision it is. When families get together to talk, are they clear about their mutual purpose? Is it about sharing information, talking about the reasons for a decision that is already made, expressing concerns, making a plan or something else. Defining the issues in a neutral way allows every perspective room for expression.

When the family meeting does happen, encourage all family members to share, be heard and develop understanding. By fully discussing issues before looking for solutions, a foundation of understanding is built. When people understand the reasons for the decisions in the plan, it helps everyone move forward together.

As a parent of a teen, I often made unpopular decisions. My son would sometimes remind me to "use your mediator voice." What he was asking was for me to clearly express the reasons for my position and spend the time to be curious about his thinking on the issue. When we understood one another, we sometimes came up with different solutions that worked for us both.

You may need the help of a conflict specialist, like a mediator, to have a professionally guided family conversation. Mediators are neutral and their expertise is in the process of helping people have productive, solution-oriented conversations.

Look at communication patterns that don't work and try new ones, be curious, check out your assumptions, and work on building understanding before looking for solutions.