A cohesive family means a strong family business, and there’s no better way to build cohesion than by hosting regular family meetings. These meetings are an opportunity to remind people of the benefits they get from being part of a family-owned business, and to build the family’s skills so the business will be even more successful.

The biggest focus of a family meeting should be to build the family’s knowledge about the business. The business is the core of all of the relationships the family has with one another. It creates the context for all the work the family has to do. If the family has strong knowledge about the business, that helps build cohesion in other areas.

Communication before the meeting

First and foremost, give the family as much lead time as possible so they’re more likely to be able to attend. To do that, the date needs to be set for a year in advance. Use a tool like SurveyMonkey or Doodle to gather feedback about the family’s availability. The key, especially if your family is large, is to find a time that works for most people. The chances of getting every single person every year is very small. People have babies. They have to attend graduation ceremonies. They have weddings. Some years they’ll make it and some years they won’t.

The agenda, too, should be planned well in advance. That way, you can organize webinars, emails or conferences calls ahead of time to introduce new concepts to the family. The goal is to avoid introducing new concepts or rolling out new proposals to the family for the first time at the meeting. In order to build cohesion and engagement, you want to provide ample opportunity for the family to give feedback, and thoughtfully review a new policy or recommendation before they’re asked to vote on it.

Choose a location

Since the primary focus of the meeting is on the business, my suggestion is to hold family meetings at one of the business’s facilities. Choose either headquarters or another operation, and use that facility as part of the educational programming at the meeting. If it’s a manufacturing facility, you can hold tours of the plant. If it’s a restaurant, you can ask the management or other employees to take the family on tours.

There are two advantages to holding the meeting at one of the business facilities.

1. **You can do a deep dive on the business operations at that facility.** A deeper understanding of one aspect of the business will help the family understand the whole more fully.

2. **The family can get to know the management team that runs that operation more intimately.** This will foster respect and understanding between the family and the employees.

Hold an education day

I recommend holding an education day with the family prior to the official meeting start. Invite the management team, your CEO, your CFO, and other experts, to hold training for the family on a specific topic, like growth strategy, acquisitions, financial analysis or some other topic. If you read a business book you’ll understand generic business, but if you’re learning from your own business professionals, you’ll be learning about your business specifically. That can be very helpful for creating context.

Having done an education day, the meeting itself can be used to get an overview from your CEO, your CFO, and different business unit managers who can provide a deep dive into their business and their strategy. It’s a great opportunity to have the family learn about and get excited about the business in a more interactive and intimate way.

Demonstrate product and production

Depending on your particular business, there are a lot of ways to get people close to the product, whether by tasting or holding or doing tours.

My family business is a hand tool company, so we often set out product tables at family meetings. Family members can look at the tools, pick them up and ask questions. Business managers are on hand to show the people the tools. This also gives the family and the
management something concrete to talk about, bridging any awkwardness.

One company I know is a food company. They have a test kitchen adjoining their board room, and the family can do taste tests of all the foods they're working on, or the foods that are very popular with the mass market.

**Focus on family governance**

The family meeting is a precious opportunity to hear the ideas of people who aren’t involved in the day-to-day running of the company. Use the time with the whole family present to discuss issues or topics that the family council is working on or thinking about. Do break-out sessions with the whole family to gather the family’s feedback. This is a great use of the family’s time, and helps build engagement. It’s not a time for making decisions. It’s a time for gathering feedback and exploration.

**Don’t forget about family time**

Take time to have dinners together, do fun activities, and ensure that the youngest generation feels included. For example, don’t take the whole family to a formal sit-down dinner where the parents of little kids are going to be completely stressed out trying to keep their kids entertained.

My family has developed a tradition that allows us to include people of all ages. My parents host a gathering in their yard. We ask a local company to set up a mobile pizza oven, and spend the evening making gourmet pizzas. Sometimes a band plays live music, and we get a moon bounce and a water slide for the kids. It’s a very informal event, with people hanging out all night, talking and dancing. It may take some trial and error, but your family can also develop fun traditions so everyone can enjoy their time together.

**Programming for kids**

Speaking of little kids—it’s more important that when the whole family gets together, the youngest generation also has time to spend with one another. You can take the little kids on an abbreviated plant tour if you have a plant. If you’re a food company, make put together a special menu just for the kids. A lot of these kids live all around the country, and only see each other a couple times a year. So leadership skills, team-building exercises, problems solving and other kinds of fun interactive activities can be very useful.

**How can you accommodate every age?**

* Infants will probably go to meetings with parents
* Ages 1-3 would enjoy playing with each other under the watchful eyes of a sitter or two
* Ages 4-12 may enjoy camp-style activities, and interactive plant tours
* Ages 13-15 may spend some time with the littler kids, and may want to attend some of the family meetings
* Ages 16-22 can spend time in family meetings, and also do some things as an independent group. This may mean going on a day trip or doing things that are more relevant to them in terms of building relationships and fostering independence.

The kids are your future shareholders. In some cases, they may already be co-owners with you in the business. It’s important to do anything you can right now to build good will and engagement with the youngest generations. If you take the time to make them think that the family business is fun, and that they enjoy their cousins, will pay off huge dividends long term.

**Budget considerations**

Getting a multi-generational family together is not going to be cheap, but it doesn’t have to be lavish, either.

Whenever I talk to my family or other families about the cost of family meetings, I advise them to think about the cost of not doing this? The cost of not investing in your family this way would result in conflicts, lawsuits, lack of engagement, lack of cohesion. Failing to build good will and cohesion is much more expensive than paying for a regular family meetings and social events.

The time and resources invested today will reap rewards for many generations to come.
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

FAMILY MEETINGS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Activity</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Select spokesperson, note taker, and time keeper</td>
<td>10 minutes</td>
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<tr>
<td>What are the transitions that will happen in the family, board and business in the coming decade?</td>
<td>10 minutes</td>
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<tr>
<td>What are the risks and biggest challenges to remaining family owned in the next 10 years?</td>
<td>10 minutes</td>
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<tr>
<td>What does the family need to do to avoid risk or mitigate its challenges?</td>
<td>10 minutes</td>
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</table>

Spokesperson

Note taker

Time Keeper

What are the transitions that will happen in the family, board and business in the coming decade?

![Diagram of transitions](image)
What are the risks and biggest challenges to remaining family owned in the next 10 years?

What does the family need to do to avoid risk or mitigate its challenges?