PRACTICAL GUIDE

COMMUNICATION IN THE BUSINESS FAMILY

PROFESSIONAL CONVERSATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL UNDERSTANDING

by
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Editor

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Where this practical guide includes references to persons in the masculine, these apply equally to persons of any gender.

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FOREWORD

WIFU aims to be effective for family businesses and business families in three ways: *firstly*, by researching subject areas relevant to this form of business and family; *secondly*, by communicating the research results in an academic and practice-oriented manner and, *thirdly*, offering business family members relevant and useful tools to help them manage their demanding everyday lives more successfully. This practical guide pursues this last goal: it is about methods that can improve – or even professionalise – communication, speaking and listening in families as well as at the crossover of family, business and shareholder groups.

Communication is the main activity within social systems. Everything we do with other people, whether in our private lives or our everyday business life, is based on communicative processes. Communication happens or, in Paul Watzlawick's words, "We cannot not communicate".[1] No matter what is done or not done in the context of the business family, everything can be evaluated by the other participants as communication, and the communication of information can be understood in different ways in each case.

This practical guide introduces basic theoretical understandings of communication and, most importantly, practical attitudes and methods that effectively increase the likelihood of constructive exchange within the business family. Such methods are especially helpful for those in positions of responsibility, such as family welfare officers, but can be very useful for anyone who wants to improve their interaction with others. I hope you enjoy reading this book and that you will have fun experiencing the effectiveness of the techniques and exercises presented.

Heiko Kleve
Witten, Summer 2024

> ***"In my eyes, communication is like a huge umbrella that encompasses and influences everything that goes on among human beings. As soon as a human being is born, communication is the single most important factor that determines what kinds of relationships he enters into with others and what he experiences in his environment."[2]***

[1] Watzlawick et al. (2017). Translated from German by the author.
[2] Satir (1975), p. 49. Translated from German by the author.

1 | INTRODUCTION: WHY ARE METHODS NEEDED FOR THE BUSINESS FAMILY?

Methods can be understood as ways to better achieve goals. Of course, we cannot interpret human life – i.e. biological bodily processes as well as thinking, feeling and communicating in social contexts – in a technical way. While physical laws of nature, such as gravity, or mechanical relationships, such as in machines, are predictable in their modes of action, the same is not true of human systems. Our bodies are not machines and thinking and communicating follow invisible principles that cannot simply be observed and that are, therefore, only transparent to a limited extent and have many influencing factors. Accurate predictions about the behaviour of human systems are not impossible but are, therefore, very difficult.

1.1 | COMMUNICATION METHODS AS AN ORIENTATION FRAMEWORK

The methods we use to try to influence these systems, such as professional communication and conversation techniques, are also affected by a "technology deficit":[3] they enable us, at best, to increase the probability that a situation will develop in the way we want it to, but give us no certainty. All those who deal with the influencing of bodies, psyches and social systems live with this uncertainty, whether they are doctors, psychologists or businesspeople, managers or politicians. This uncertainty also applies, without reservation, to methods of communication intended to help shareholders in family businesses to deal professionally with the challenging tasks they have to address on a daily basis.

Even if methods in the context of human systems are not engineering tools, they can certainly offer helpful orientation frameworks and structures for communication and behaviour in complex situations. Precisely because business families, like all social systems, are confronted with many unexpected factors, and their members have to deal with unplanned events, the methods for resolving these situations are important. We live in a world that challenges us anew every day and it is helpful, therefore, to find ways that orient our thoughts, feelings and behaviours appropriately and that we know are useful in understanding ourselves and other people and in creating new ideas, constructive attitudes and suitable options for action.

When it comes to shareholders who are not operationally active in the business, they cannot professionalise their role without methods. This practical guide is intended to support shareholders, for example, in their function as "family welfare officers", in order to fulfil their demanding responsibilities in family management professionally. Such responsibility requires broad knowledge.[4] However, those in this situation should not only acquire knowledge, but also the tools to use this knowledge effectively. This is the goal we are pursuing here.

1.2 | METHODS TO HELP SELF-REFLECTION

We place a special emphasis on methods of social self-reflection – in a sense, on communicating about communicating. Talking and listening in the business family help those involved, and the family as a whole, to understand each other better than before. This methodical approach is particularly useful when it comes to solving problems, when conflict resolution is necessary or when challenges make everyday life stressful. The business family members can reflect on the family by talking to one another professionally within the circle of shareholders. Reflection means turning away from observing the outside world and looking at one's own, for example, at the way we relate to each other, our social actions and our communication. Only through this reflection can we clarify the question of what we want to maintain, strengthen and develop in terms of our behaviour – or what we should change.

[3] See Luhmann & Schorr (1979).
[4] See Rüsen & Heider (2020).

This reflection is crucial for human systems, which can only be stimulated to change through self-change. Or, to put it another way: we cannot change social systems or other people directly, but only by looking at what we, ourselves, can do differently, and this stimulates the systems in which we are involved to change as well. Whether and how this will succeed, however, cannot be predicted with certainty. We can only increase the probability that other people and the social systems relevant to us will develop suitably, and it is precisely for this reason that methods of self-reflection can be extremely helpful.

In the following, we present possible methods for professional communication. In order to place them in the context of shareholders of family businesses, we begin with a brief introduction to the subject area of business families as particularly challenging social systems.

We then assess professional methods of activating cognitive, emotional and behavioural processes, i. e. supporting thought, feelings and actions, and go on to outline core communication-theoretical basics to become familiar with both person-oriented and solution-oriented conversation techniques.

In addition to these conversation techniques, two group methods that promote individual and social self-reflection and can be helpful in the creative search for solutions to problems are presented: the Balint round and the reflective team.

Finally, since more and more social communication takes place online, we want to conclude by looking at methodologically structured work and communication in this context and outline some suggestions in this respect.

2 | BUSINESS FAMILIES AS CHALLENGING SOCIAL SYSTEMS

Social systems are systems that are established between people, i. e. between the bodies and the psyches of people. The mode in which social systems operate is that of communication.[5] To influence such systems, effective communication is essential, i. e. speaking and/or acting in such a way that your actions trigger differences in the social system, so that in the future you communicate differently there, acting or speaking differently from before.

2.1 | SPECIFIC COMMUNICATION ISSUES IN BUSINESS FAMILIES

Business families are also understood in this way – as social systems in which people talk and act, in short, communicate. Communication in business families is particularly challenging because it differs from communication in "normal" families.[6] In so-called normal families, people live their private lives, take responsibility for each other and are connected by kinship; above all, emotionally, they are oriented towards each other in love. In these families, professional life is separated from private family relationships, both in terms of time and place. The places where they live and work tend to be different, as do their partners in each of these worlds. In sociology, we call this "functional differentiation",[7] and it can also be observed in family members and the roles that they take on.

In business families, functional differentiation is also evident, but in a different way from normal families. The spheres remain functionally separate, but life and work, as well as the people and the roles involved, tend to coincide. People who are related to each other are not only related by kinship, but are also connected in terms of the business, for example, through ownership. This particular combination of factors in family businesses and business families is usually illustrated with the three-circle model: the three systems of family, business and ownership are interconnected, coupled, intersect and may even become entangled.

Due to this close interlocking of family, business and ownership, confusion can arise with regard to actions and speech – that is, communications – as participants attribute communications to their relevant social contexts in different ways.[8]

EXAMPLE: CHALLENGING COMMUNICATION IN BUSINESS FAMILIES

A banal example in this context is that of a father, who is also the managing director of his business, asking his daughter, whom he expects to succeed him in the business: "How are you doing?" How does the daughter understand the question? Does she attribute it to the family context, the business context, the owner context or all of the above contexts at the same time? Which role does the daughter hear from the questioner: the role of father, manager, owner or all roles at the same time?

Depending on this communicative attribution, she could react quite differently. If she does not know which role her father is speaking in, then a metacommunication would be appropriate: "Father, which role are you speaking in right now? And in which role are you addressing me – as your daughter or as your potential successor? So, what exactly is your interest in the answer to your question?" Such complexity in communication and roles is typical for business families.

Metacommunication, i. e. making communication itself the subject of communication, is a basic self-reflection competence in business families. Many misunderstandings and resulting conflicts can be

[5] See Luhmann (1984).
[6] See Kleve & Köllner (2019), for example, who provide a comprehensive summary of this.
[7] See Luhmann (1997).
[8] See extensively on this Schlippe (2014).

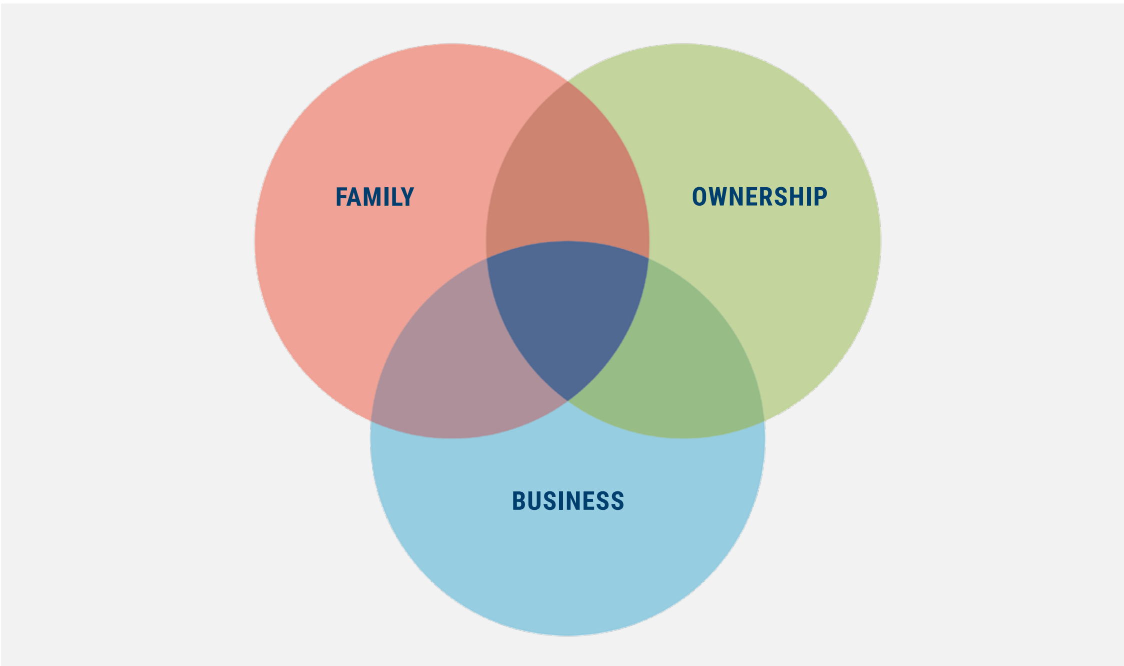

Figure 1: Classic Three-Circle Model[9]

avoided or resolved through metacommunication. If I do not know exactly what is meant, I ask – I talk about communication. I only answer when I know what the question refers to. The members of business families cannot "understand" their everyday life as naturally and unquestioningly as is generally the case in families.

2.2 | PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATION IN BUSINESS FAMILIES

The complexity of the three interacting systems – the interconnected contexts of family, business and ownership – requires that communication be professionalised to a certain extent, at the latest when regular and persistent misunderstandings and conflicts arise, i.e. when the business responsibility brings more burden than joy. Then, the time has come to no longer leave communication to its own devices, but to do something to make it more professional and organised.

We see two sides of business families that successfully master their challenges: a family side and a formal organisational side.[10] When business families explicitly address their particularities, reflect on them and clarify strategically important questions about their relationship to the family business and their own responsibility, then they are no longer just the "family of a family business", but a professional and organised business family.

We can illustrate this stage of a business family's development with the following picture, which now distinguishes this social system from the family in the three-circle model and makes it clear that the business family, in a sense, means the formation of a new system. In this system, the identity as a business family is consciously assumed and repeatedly reflected upon through communication and the continuous application of professional methods.

What has to be addressed methodically in business families, above all else, can be called *professional communication*. This professionalisation goes

[9] According to Tagiuri & Davis (1982).
[10] See Schlippe et al. (2021).

hand-in-hand with the business family organising itself in a family-strategic way.[11]

EXAMPLE: COMMUNICATION AT THE ANNUAL BUSINESS FAMILY WEEKEND

A business family that is in its fourth generation and now comprises 15 shareholders combines the annual shareholders' meeting with a joint weekend for the business family, with partners and children also invited. Various activities are on offer, including cultural events in which everyone participates and opportunities for specific groups, e.g. for young successors or partners. However, throughout the weekend, the most important activity is communication – both informal and in a specially created topic and discussion groups – on strategic family and business issues. The cohesion of the business family is based on one thing above all: the bond between family members, which can only be sustained through building communicative relationships that are nurtured, supported and passed on to the next generations.

The aim here is to offer methods of supporting this professionalisation through individual and social self-reflection within the family circle of partners, namely by the members of the business family, using tried and tested forms of conversational leadership. At best, they achieve a three-dimensional strengthening process that firstly supports, enriches and expands the cognitive-rational, the emotional-social and the action-oriented dimensions of living and working together

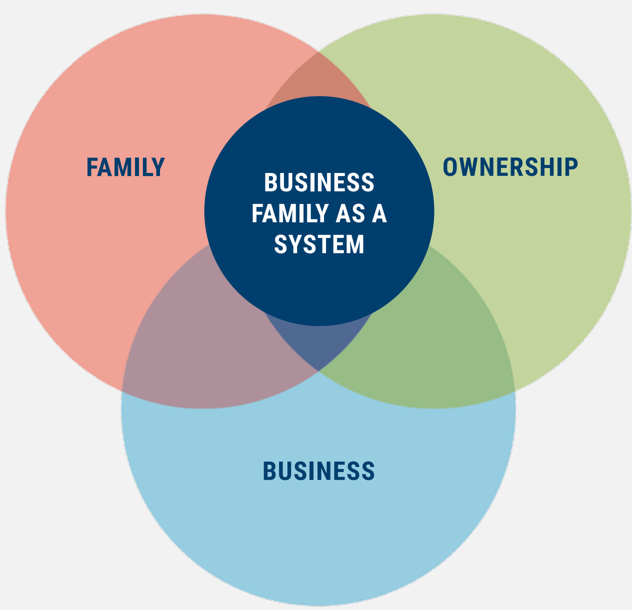

Figure 2: The Business Family as an Independent Social System

[11] See Schlippe et al. (2021); Rüsen (2020); Rüsen et al. (2022).

3 | COGNITIVE, EMOTIONAL AND BEHAVIOURAL ACTIVATION

Human life, whether individual or social, is characterised by three dimensions which, ideally, achieve a balance with one another: *cognitive-rational, emotional-social and action-oriented*, which we refer to by the acronym CEA.[12] Every social system must ensure that it acquires or generates the necessary knowledge (*cognition*), stimulates appropriate positive, supportive and sustaining social relationships and individual attitudes (*emotion*), and implements appropriate strategies (*action*) to accomplish its tasks. Put simply, it is about the appropriate balancing and realisation of individual and social resources, described through the metaphors of *head*, *heart* and *hand*,[13] which shape the change, development and growth of human and social systems.

We now want to look more closely at all three dimensions and the simultaneous stimulation of thoughts, emotions and actions. We can evaluate the effectiveness of particular methods by whether they lead to cognitive stimulation, positively influence feelings and enable new options for action. In the best case, the differences from before are perceptible; therefore, after a methodical intervention, the question arises as to what is different now – in terms of thoughts, emotions and actions. Furthermore, we can ask what has changed and determine whether and which differences are perceptible in the head, the heart and the hand and how these can be described, explained and evaluated.

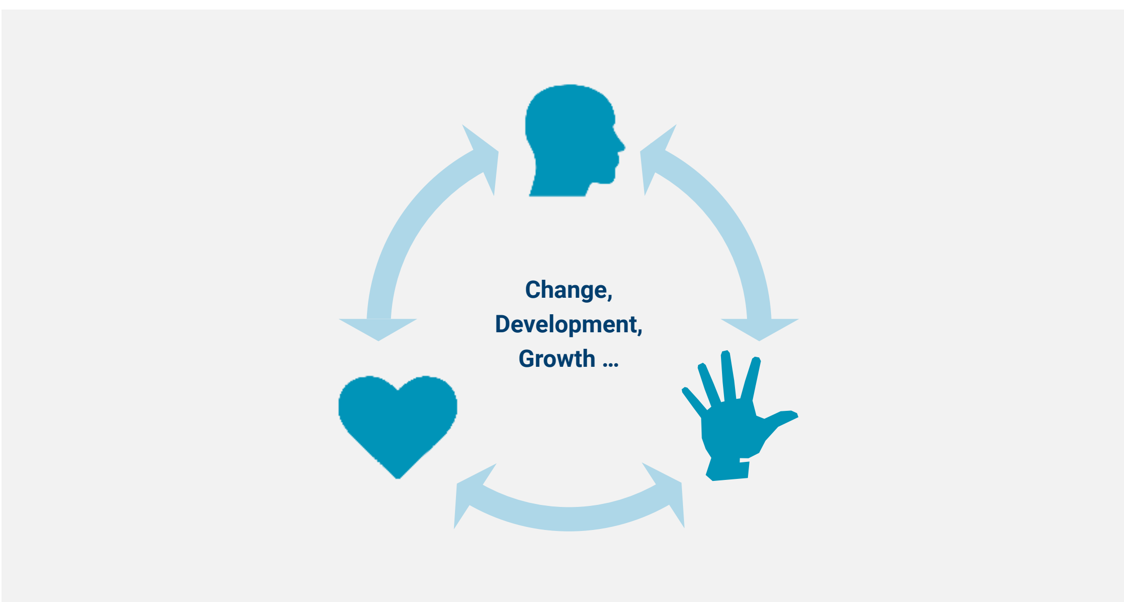

Figure 3: Head, heart and hand as dimensions of change

[12] See Kleve (2019); (2020a); (2020b).

[13] This concept dates back to the pedagogue Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746–1827), but is currently used by various authors – with their own interpretations and concretisations with regard to the understanding and constructive stimulation of human systems, for example C. Otto Scharmer (2020), Matthias Varga von Kibéd and Insa Sparrer (2020).

CEA EVALUATION ACCORDING TO METHODOLOGICAL WORK

After each methodological intervention, we can ask ourselves and the people involved:

- What is different in our thinking now? What new ideas have we gained? What insights have been made possible? *(Cognition)*
- How do we feel now? What feelings have emerged? How have we gained emotional confidence? *(Emotion)*
- What does this mean for our desires and actions? What impulses for action have arisen? How do we want to implement what we have achieved methodically? How will other people notice that we are changing our actions? *(Action)*

Sometimes, however, figuratively speaking, the three doors to change do not open all at once, but one after another. As a rule, we expect our thinking to expand and become more concrete before we feel anything on the emotional level and act differently. There is, however, another way: there are situations that we can stimulate methodically in such a way that positive changes appear on the emotional level: we feel better than before, but we do not know what that means in terms of thinking, and we also do not yet have any idea how to transfer the changes into action. In this situation, patience is the best adviser: we wait until positive differences become apparent also on the cognitive and behavioural levels and we can then perceive the appropriate knowledge and corresponding impulses for action.

CEA-REFLECTION IN THE BUSINESS FAMILY

The CEA dimensions can be used to describe the social structure of a group of shareholders or a business family and to clarify the issues needing explanation within such a system:

- *Firstly*, regarding the cognitive question of meaning (the head): What is everyone trying to achieve together? What is the common goal? How is everyone is oriented towards this goal and cooperating in achieving it?
- *Secondly*, regarding emotional cohesion (the heart): How can sustainable relationships of trust be developed and established between the shareholders?
- *Thirdly*, regarding action (the hand): How are the resolutions made then practically implemented, decisions taken and strategies developed?

Finally, we can say that we stimulate thoughts, emotions and actions above all when we work together *in an appropriate but unusual way*:[14] we communicate appropriately, but in such a way that we are always *productively and constructively* irritated. If we do everything as we have always done – i. e. *in an appropriately ordinary way* – we will reap the same results as we always have. It is, however, precisely when problems have become established or conflicts have become entrenched that a leap into the unknown is necessary, so that something changes. This is exactly what the methods presented are intended to support and stimulate – joint experimentation in the business family.

[14] On the distinctions between and the different combinations of (in)appropriate and (extra)ordinary, see Andersen (1990).

4 | COMMUNICATION THEORY – A SHORT DIGRESSION

Communication is a core operation in social systems and, thus, also in business families. Leading, shaping and initiating constructive conversations should be a central competence of shareholders. To realise this competence professionally, listening is just as important as talking.

EXAMPLE: LISTENING AS A VERY SPECIAL COMPETENCE

In his children's book *Momo*, Michael Ende describes[15] a very special quality of its protagonist, Momo. This quality, ability and competence led to the girl receiving many visitors; people who were in difficult situations, no longer knew what to do and were in despair went to Momo. The advice "Go to Momo" was dealt out to everyone who had problems of any kind to solve.

But what was behind it? What could this girl do so well that everyone struggling sought her out? The answer was that Momo could listen in a way that hardly anyone else understood, in such a way that the people she listened to suddenly had wonderful ideas, felt warm and had the courage to act completely differently.

Listening is indeed something very special. As the expert on social change in management, C. Otto Scharmer, observes, it is possible to listen in such a way that thinking opens up, that new ideas and insights bubble up, that we feel empathetically connected and secure, and that we can realise new possibilities for action.[16] Listening, in the best case, thus opens up all three dimensions of the CEA universe.

In order to learn to listen, it is important that we acquire some basic knowledge about the nature of communication, such as the basic axioms of communication theory. According to such theory, we can visualise interactions between people with the help of four dimensions or aspects:[17] content, relationships, self-revelation and appeals.

4.1 | CONTENT ASPECT

Firstly, communication naturally revolves around the *content* communicated, which is, so to speak, spoken by some and heard – and at best understood – by others. However, there is no direct line between speaking and understanding that directly transfers the one into the other.

THE DIFFICULTY OF SUCCESSFUL COMMUNICATION

Saying something does not mean that it will be heard. If it is heard, it does not mean that it is understood in the way it was meant. If it is understood, it does not mean that it is accepted. And if it is accepted, then no determined action follows from it.

Between meaning, saying, hearing, understanding, accepting and acting lie boundaries that cannot simply be bridged and may be accompanied by many barriers. At the borders between these areas, the factual content as originally spoken usually changes, so that it is highly unlikely that what is said is understood by the listeners in the way that it was originally meant.

[15] Ende (1973), p. 14 f.
[16] See Scharmer (2020).
[17] See Schulz von Thun (2010) for basic and further information.

4.2 | RELATIONSHIP ASPECT

Secondly, communication between speakers and listeners is embedded in their *relationship* to each other. The relationship between the participants determines the manner of communication, and the respective roles are decisive in forming a similar (symmetrical) or dissimilar (complementary) relationship. Communication between partners tends to be assessed as symmetrical, while that between parents and children, for example, is regarded as complementary.

Members of business families need to understand in which relationship contexts they are currently interacting with one another: are they currently acting as members of the family, the business or the shareholders? And, in addition to their current role, is it clear to them in which roles the others involved in the communication are currently acting? If this is not transparent, metacommunication that addresses the relationships and roles is extremely helpful.

4.3 | SELF-REVELATION ASPECT

Thirdly, every speech and action in the communicative context is a *self-revelation*. This means that we not only express factual messages but also personal emotions with these messages. It is the non-verbal levels of speaking – the voice, its volume, gestures, facial expressions and posture – that reveal what the speaker and listener are feeling, whether they are happy, sad or angry. If we want to talk sensitively with each other, then the ability to "read" the feelings of those involved in the communication is particularly important. Sometimes it can be helpful to bring these feelings (not only our own, but also those we perceive in others) into the conversation, i. e. to verbalise them.

4.4 | APPEAL ASPECT

Finally, speaking may also be accompanied by appeals – requests that expect certain actions from the listeners. If we want to decipher the appealing aspect of communication, we should ask ourselves what the speaker wants to achieve from us, or from others, with their words. By what actions would the speaker know that their appeal has been received as they wished?

All the aspects of communication mentioned refer to both speakers and listeners. Accordingly, we have four mouths and four ears, as the founder of this communication theory concept, Friedemann Schulz von Thun, metaphorically observed.[18]

[18] See ibid.

SPEAK/MEAN	LISTEN/UNDERSTAND
1 Content message (matter)	1 Understanding the content
2 Relationship level / roles	2 Relationship/role understanding
3 Self-revelation (e. g. feelings)	3 Empathetic understanding
4 Appeal (e. g. expectations)	4 Understanding expectations

Table 1: Communication according to Schulz von Thun (2010)

SOCIAL UNDERSTANDING

Complementing the model of communication described above, we can consider communication as a threefold selection on the part of speakers and listeners that ideally amounts to social understanding:[19]

- *Firstly*, both sides select information, the factual message, i. e. *what* was said or heard;
- *Secondly*, a *message* is selected, i. e. the communication may be perceived linguistically, but perhaps also non-verbally, and
- *Thirdly*, this is accompanied by an *understanding*.

Yet, understanding does not refer to a congruence between the speaker's and the hearer's understanding of the content. Such congruence can never be verified, because speakers and listeners cannot investigate each other's psyches or each other's minds. We take diversions via communication; we speak and listen. Therefore, understanding can only mean social understanding: that communication continues, that we continue to talk and listen, that we remain in a relationship. What happens on the psychological level remains in the black boxes of the heads and psyches of those involved.[20]

This fundamental consideration of communication in the context of leading conversations now leads us to two concrete methods that can be used to improve speaking and listening in business families. If not earlier, by the time self-reflection processes have become necessary because problems or conflicts have arisen, both the person-oriented and the solution-oriented methods are suitable.

[19] See, on this communication theory, Luhmann (1984).
[20] See Fuchs (1993) and Baecker (2005) for a detailed and fundamental discussion.

5 | PERSON-ORIENTED CONVERSATION

Person-oriented conversation, as a basic method for the professional organisation of communication in social systems, is based on the work of the American psychologist Carl Rogers (1902–1987).[21] Rogers, himself a therapist, counsellor and educator, wanted to know what made his work with clients so successful and, therefore, recorded many conversations and evaluated them. He asked himself how he should act or speak to have the greatest benefit for his clients, and identified *three attitudes* – which we can also evaluate as emotional attitudes for shaping the social relationship between the participants in conversations – *and two helpful methods*.

Rogers calls these attitudes “acceptance”, “empathy” and “genuineness”. We form constructive relationships with the people we talk to when our speech and behaviour affects them in this way, as accepting, empathetic and genuine.

5.1 | ACCEPTANCE, EMPATHY AND AUTHENTICITY

Acceptance refers to the appreciation and recognition of the people with whom we are in exchange. Even if we are in conflict on a substantive level, that is, if we disagree, we can still respect the person with whom we are in dispute. It is precisely the separation between the recognition of the person and the (critical) evaluation of what is said or done that is essential for appropriate and constructive communication.

Empathy means empathetic listening and speaking. When we communicate in this way, we not only pay attention to the factual side of the communication and reflect on the relationships and roles in which we are currently positioned, but also pay attention to the self-revelations and the appeals. What feelings do the speakers convey with what they say? What do they expect from us, what behaviours, actions or linguistic responses? We bring these feelings and perceived expectations into the conversation; we verbalise them and, thus, make them transparent and negotiable.

Authenticity expresses that we “wear our hearts on our sleeves” appropriately and sensitively. We convey what moves or irritates us, our feelings or, more generally, personal perceptions, and make these available to the other participants in an appropriate, situation-appropriate way.

Carl Rogers found that conversations that lead to the participants relating to each other in this three-dimensional way are particularly constructive, especially when it comes to solving problems or clarifying conflicts. In addition to these three principles, he distinguished two basic methods for conducting conversations: *paraphrasing* the content and relationship level, and *verbalising feelings*, that is listening to and expressing the emotional self-revelations and appeals of the speaker.

5.2 | PARAPHRASING CONTENT AND VERBALISING FEELINGS

Paraphrasing means that the speakers first repeat what they have understood – briefly, succinctly and pointedly – until they receive confirmation. The aim here is to avoid talking past each other. In other words, all persons involved in the communication should relate to each other in such a way that they start from the respectively named aspects of the conversation and they talk together and in a meaningful way. This kind of conversation increases their understanding of one another because each person must first listen carefully to what the other side is saying before making their contribution.

Verbalising feelings means noticing what else is being communicated, the non-verbal communication in addition to the content and relationship-related aspects of the communication, for example through volume, facial expressions and gestures. This should be brought into the communication appropriately, such that the introduction of these perceived self-revelations and appeals made by the other person constructively stimulates the conversation, deepens understanding, clarifies problem areas and promotes conflict resolution.

[21] On this approach, see, for example, Rogers (2016).

EXERCISE: PERSON-ORIENTED CONVERSATION

The next time there is a dispute in your business family in which you are involved or are called on to help clarify the situation, you can try out the person-centred approach.

First, listen carefully to the other participants. Pay attention to the content being expressed, but also to the self-revelations, the non-verbal expressions; notice the feelings and expectations that are communicated in this way.

When you express yourself, first try to summarise succinctly what you have understood. In addition, talk about the feelings you perceive in yourself and others.

When you have done this, give the others space to express themselves. They will confirm your messages or correct them, add to them and expand on them.

Before you express yourself in terms of content, communicating ideas or suggestions, first paraphrase the content and verbalise the feelings expressed. Only when you believe that you have understood the other participants, and they signal this understanding to you, should you go further in the conversation. You will notice that this slowing down of communication paradoxically leads to an acceleration of the clarification processes and, at best, constructively stimulates the thoughts, emotions and actions of all present.

Person-centred dialogue is framed by a humanistic view, according to which people strive for self-realisation in their own lives and the development of social contact with others. This development can be inhibited by obstructive environmental experiences and, thus, create problems. However, through relationships based on acceptance, empathy and authenticity, in which the participants try to understand each other cognitively, emotionally and behaviourally, processes of “self-actualisation”[22] can be initiated. This means that constructive potentials develop: personal strengths and social resources are (re)used to overcome obstacles or to grow from them.

[22] Rogers (2016).

6 | SOLUTION-ORIENTED CONVERSATION

Similar to the person orientation, which is based on growth, self-development and self-actualisation promoted by social relationships, the solution orientation is based on the positive experiences and future-oriented potentials of the participants. This perspective can also help to clarify entrenched problems and to see exhausting conflicts in a new way.

This methodology, developed by Steve de Shazer (1940–2005) and Insoo Kim Berg (1934–2007), a therapist couple from the US,[23] breaks with the fundamental Western view that, in order to solve problems, we have to analyse and eliminate their causes. In contrast, de Shazer and Kim Berg assume that the problems, or their supposed causes, are only loosely connected to, or unrelated to the solutions. Therefore, we can find and create solutions without having to research the root causes of problems.

Central to finding solutions is a determined focus on cognitive and communicative attention. If we talk about problems, their burden becomes greater. If, on the other hand, we think about solutions, focus communicatively on them and talk about them, then finding suitable solutions becomes more likely. Everything stands and falls here with the way mental and linguistic perspectives are used.

Therefore, solution orientation relies on two methodological strategies in particular, one that brings the future into view and the other that brings the past into view in a certain way.

6.1 | THE MIRACLE QUESTION ON FUTURE ORIENTATION

For looking at the future, the so-called *miracle question* turns to a future in which the solutions we would like to see have already occurred. As with many practical experiences in therapy, counselling or coaching, this question frees us from the tunnel vision that leads us to look primarily at the problems and thereby lose touch with the possibilities. By feeling our way into an imagined future space, which we illuminate intensively in thought and conversation, we gain emotional confidence, become flexible and creative again in our thinking and feel impulses for action that can point the way out of the current problem situation.[24]

MIRACLE QUESTION IN THE SHAREHOLDER CIRCLE

In a problematic situation within the group of shareholders, everyone is asked to imagine that the acute problem will miraculously disappear in the coming night, while they are fast asleep, so that they do not even notice the solution.

What will be the first thing that the shareholders notice when they get up in the morning after the miracle has happened? What will be different then? Will there be changes in their own thoughts, feelings and actions? If so, what exactly are they? How will they notice that the miracle has happened in other relevant people? How will these people now behave; what will they say and do? And how will they perceive that something fundamental has changed in others?

[23] See, for example, de Shazer & Dolan (2020).
[24] See also Scharmer's Theory U (2020) for a similar approach.

Such questions about the change, which relate to self-perception and the perception of others, are asked until no new aspects are brought to light. The aim is to illuminate the completed future solution as concretely and vividly as possible.

6.2 | EXCEPTION QUESTION AS AN ORIENTATION TOWARDS THE PAST

With regard to the past, we use the technique of *exception questions* to think and talk about situations in which the current problem did not occur, although we would have expected it to. Again, we do not focus on the problem, but on its non-occurrence. It is interesting to precisely explore such situations to discover what was different in them. Ideally, we thus find our own part in alternative strategies that can contribute to solutions arising and problem dynamics being avoided, because we think, feel or act differently in these situations.

EXCEPTIONAL QUESTION IN THE SHAREHOLDER CIRCLE I

In the case of an acute problem, the individual shareholders can ask themselves and each other in which past situations and contexts the problem did *not* occur in the way they might have expected. When was the problem less pronounced than usual or absent altogether.

The questions this raises are: What is (was) different in such situations or contexts? And who contributed in what way to these changes, to the exceptions to the expected problem state?

Here it is important to work out the differences in as much detail as possible and to ask whether these differences could also be used to find solutions to the current problem situation. Personal strengths and social resources may be revealed in the exceptional situations that could also be activated and used in the existing situation.

This solution view of the past can be extended even further, for example, by looking for problems similar to the current one that has been solved. How did the solution succeed then? Who did what, and how? Can anything useful be derived from this for today's problem-solving strategies?

EXCEPTIONAL QUESTION IN THE SHAREHOLDER CIRCLE II

Exceptional situations can be used even more fundamentally by looking at past solutions to problems similar to the current ones. It is not crucial that this similarity is specified exactly. More important is the associative link in thinking or communicating – that certain past problems that were solved come into the mental or communicative focus.

Then the following question can be asked: How did we solve that problem back then? What did we do to achieve this? Which of our resources and strengths could we use for this? How did we manage to activate and use them? Is there anything else we can learn from the past situation to resolve the current one?

Ultimately, the solution-oriented view of the past is about looking for strengths and resources, for individual and social possibilities that could be activated to support current problem-solving or conflict resolution.

7 | BALINT ROUND AS A GROUP DISCUSSION

For business families, it is important to ensure cohesion, i.e. to work on building, maintaining and deepening trusting relationships. This happens through communication and social interaction. Consequently, it makes sense to designate times and places for open exchange with each other. One method to establish such open exchange rounds is the Balint group method, named after the Hungarian doctor Michael Balint (1896–1970).[25]

Each person first tells what moves them in terms of thoughts, feelings and actions with regard to the group focus (e.g. concerning life, work or decision-making within the business family). The statements of the individual participants, however, are not commented on; everyone simply listens to each other. Only when the round is over, when everyone has spoken, are the topics to be explored in greater depth determined.

To select the topics to be discussed in-depth, the group recapitulates together the issues raised. If certain topics have been mentioned several times, this is a criterion for selection. Similar or related topics may emerge that can also be selected for in-depth joint discussion.

After the topics to be discussed further have been determined, the discussion begins. To start, a person for whom the topic is particularly relevant, may have something to say about it. After that, the others can report on the cognitive, emotional and behavioural resonances that the topic and discussion trigger in them. The aim is not to give suggestions or advice, but to share perceptions, thoughts, experiences or spontaneous ideas related to the topic.

The Balint round ends with a “flashlight” in which each person briefly relates how they perceived the round and what changed as a result, what was constructively stimulated. Perhaps new ideas emerged; emotions may have changed or an impulse for action felt that is to be implemented in practice.

This exchange format – originally used in the medical context about challenges in everyday work, concrete cases and treatments – has now spread far beyond health-related fields of work. It is used for open, structured and topic-oriented group discussion so that all participants benefit. This methodical format thrives on the open and trusting articulation of cognitively, emotionally and behaviourally relevant topics by every individual. Such discussions should ideally take place in a circle of chairs without tables.

[25] See in detail https://www.balintgesellschaft.de [22.01.2021].

8 | REFLECTIVE TEAM AS "MULTI-BRAIN THINKING"

Another method that can be used in group sessions within the business family is the so-called reflective team.[26] Its aim is to attempt "multi-brain thinking" (Fritz B. Simon) by having several people brainstorm together on a clearly defined question.

In this method, the group is divided into two sub-groups: one sub-group forms the reflecting team, comprising about two to five people who sit together in a circle of chairs. The other group members sit in an outer circle, or outside the reflective team, in such a way that they can hear what is being said in the inner circle.

The task of the reflective team is now to work together on a previously defined question. The question must first be clearly identified. It may be a problem to be solved or a challenge facing the business family or individual members of it, but the reflecting team needs a mission, a focus on which to reflect. Every thought that occurs to the participants of the reflecting team, any emotional perceptions or impulses to act are brought into the conversation.

The reflection is not about jointly creating a "right" idea or working out a proposal but, above all, about bringing together a variety of different perspectives, diverse cognitive, emotional and behavioural perceptions. The participants let themselves be inspired by each other; they take up the perceptions of others, connect to them, expand and complement them in their own way. Similar to improvisational theatre, in which the actors adopt a "yes, and ..." attitude towards each other – confirming and expanding the contributions of others – the reflective team is about the joint production of new, perhaps previously unimagined, perspectives.

The decisive factor in this method is that the participants in the inner circle refer to each other and talk to each other and that there is no cross-communication between the inner and outer circle during this communication. The inner circle talks; the outer circle listens.

After the reflective team, they talk together about which new perspectives, ideas or behavioural alternatives have become visible.

During the reflection, those sitting in the outer circle listen attentively, noting what seems appropriate to them, together with further potential problem-solving aspects. It could also be agreed that a chair remains free in the reflective team, which can be temporarily occupied by a member of the outer circle to make a spontaneous announcement, which may constructively stimulate the communication of the inner circle. When the idea has been introduced, this person leaves the reflecting team again. The reflection can continue until so-called saturation is reached, i.e. no more new perspectives emerge and the discussion is generating no further relevant differences in thinking, feeling or acting.

Sometimes, members of the reflecting team may take on specific roles from which they reflect, comment and express ideas. Such roles could be differentiated by the CEA dimensions or refer to the three levels of our observations of reality: describing, explaining and evaluating.[27]

[26] See Andersen (1990).
[27] See, on these levels of reality construction, for example, Simon (2007).

EXPANSION OF THE REFLECTIVE TEAM THROUGH ROLE DISTRIBUTION

If a diversity of perspectives is to be stimulated, then it is also possible for those in the reflective inner circle to take on different roles through which they perceive and express their perceptions, ideas, insights and spontaneous ideas.

A role differentiation could follow, for example, the CEA tripartite division:

- *Firstly*, one or two people would act from the cognitive perspective and use rationality and logic to express their thoughts.
- *Secondly*, one or two people might try to speak mainly from an emotional perspective. They would articulate feelings or perceptions and express their emotions on the topic.
- *Thirdly*, one or two people would focus on the behavioural perspective, talking about impulses or even proposals for action.

A second differentiation could be the division of labour into description, explanation and evaluation:

- *First*, one or two people recapitulate what was *described* in terms of the problem: How was the issue narrated? Which questions arose? Could the problem have been described differently?
- *Secondly*, one or two people look at the *explanations*: What causes and effects were distinguished? What if-then chains were relevant? Which questions arose? Would other explanations be plausible?
- *Thirdly*, one or two people address the *evaluations*: Which characteristics were attributed to the phenomena named? What questions arose in the process? Would other evaluative attributions also be possible?

At the end of the reflection, the participants of the outside group summarise the aspects that are relevant to them and clarify with each other how these points can be used to approach the solution to the problem or the clarification of the conflict

9 | COMMUNICATION IN THE VIRTUAL SPACE

Finally, we want to look at the special features of communication in the virtual space which, since the coronavirus pandemic of 2020/21, has found its way into business families more than before. Essentially, everything discussed so far about conducting conversations also applies to virtual communication in video chats. All the outlined techniques of speaking and listening can also be used in this context without restriction. Nevertheless, there are some special features for the successful conduct of online meetings.

Especially for shareholder or family groups whose members live far away from one another, digital meetings can greatly facilitate the organisation and realisation of shareholder meetings since, despite physical distance, people can still be socially close to each other.[28] They can see and hear each other via the media forms of the internet. In the meantime, numerous software programmes and platforms make it possible to work together – sitting behind monitors – and to realise cooperative and collaborative social processes.

However, anyone who thinks that this form of audio-visual relationship-building behind the monitors is easy will soon be disabused. If people cannot align all five senses with each other, but can only see and hear each other with no common space for the other physical sensors, then the ability to empathise is limited. However, it is precisely this ability to empathise that helps people to form social relationships in an appropriate way, enabling them to align themselves with each other, to communicate with each other compassionately and objectively at the same time.

Due to the limited sensory bandwidth of digital communication, it is even more important in these technically supported forms of interaction than in face-to-face encounters to take time to focus, to direct our joint attention towards each other. How can we do just that? To this end, I would like to give five hints relating to the spatial environment, physical mindfulness, initial rituals of the meeting, rules of good conversation and a closing ritual of the meeting.

9.1 | SPATIAL ENVIRONMENT

Firstly, the spatial environment in which the technology is used – where the computer, camera and microphone are located – is important. This space should be as free as possible from other distractions. Ideally, there should be no other device at hand, no smartphone to distract from the current interaction. For it is central that – as in real life – we relate completely to the “now” of the current interaction, are completely focussed on what is happening in the other spaces conveyed to us via our screen.

9.2 | PHYSICAL MINDFULNESS

Secondly, we should practise physical mindfulness, especially about appropriate seating that allows for a good physical presence. If we can only see and hear others, then it is helpful for a good relationship that we perceive ourselves fully, i. e. that we feel the ground with our feet, sit firmly on our chair and have a backrest that provides security and support. The better we perceive ourselves, our own body, the more intensively we can follow others on the screen, listen to them, look at them, perceive feelings and factual aspects and refer to them in our spoken contributions.

[28] For the following, see my post “Social proximity in physical distance” in the Carl-Auer blog *Reduced complexes* of 13.05.2020, https://www.carl-auer.de/magazin/komplexe/soziale-nahe-in-physischer-distanz [24.01.2021].

9.3 | OPENING RITUAL

Thirdly, it is beneficial if we take enough time at the beginning of online meetings for an initial ritual – acknowledging each other, hearing each other once and seeing each other consciously. Since we are only visually and auditorily oriented to each other, it makes sense that, before we get to the actual subject of our meeting, we at least briefly engage in small talk, tell each other about ourselves. For example, we could talk about where we are at the moment and perhaps also guide the camera around the room in question. If this is considered too private, then a short round in which each person articulates their current mood and state of mind is sufficient. This round could also begin with a question, for example, “At the end of this session, how will you know that you have benefited from it?”

9.4 | RULES OF GOOD CONVERSATION

Fourthly, we need to adhere to the rules of good conversation even more consistently than in face-to-face dialogue. Since we cannot observe as sensitively pauses in conversation or that the opportunity has come to speak up ourselves, we should first make sure that everyone who has the floor can finish speaking. Since the pauses between individual contributions can be longer than in face-to-face interaction, it is advisable in virtual rooms to signal a wish to speak by raising a hand or using the corresponding platform device. It is advantageous, especially with more than three people, to appoint a moderator at the beginning to ensure that the rules of conversation are observed and to structure the online time together in a coordinated manner.

9.5 | CLOSING RITUAL

Fifthly, it is appropriate to end the virtual interaction with a small closing ritual. This can be a greeting or farewell with a raised hand. If more time is available, a closing round would round off the meeting perfectly, with each person saying briefly what the current mood is and what they assess to be the most important element of the conversation that is coming to an end.

In summary, social closeness at a physical distance is a prerequisite and does not come naturally. Even if we have all the necessary techniques at our disposal, interpersonal sensitivity and empathy are prerequisites for the success of virtual meetings. Since we cannot use all our five senses in virtual space as we can in real life, we need to pay much more attention to establishing mindful communication than is commonly the case.

If, however, we do this seriously and thoroughly, then the home office or the virtual meeting in the business family becomes a stimulating interaction that rewards us with interpersonal closeness even in times of physical distance. It is exactly this closeness that makes both private and corporate relationships what they are at their best: spaces in which we can achieve those things that we can only create together with other people – works, of whatever kind, that emerge from social processes of cooperation and collaboration.

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THE WIFU FOUNDATION

The non-profit WIFU Foundation, founded in 2009, is committed to promoting not only research and teaching, but in particular practice transfer in the field of family entrepreneurship. Our most important supporters include around 80 family businesses from German-speaking countries. The focus of our activities is the acquisition, communication and dissemination of high-quality and current issue-related knowledge on family businesses and business families.

Our funds are primarily used to establish and maintain chairs, to support research projects and to award scholarships to young scientists. One focus of our funding is to support the work of the Witten Institute for Family Business (WIFU), based at Witten/Herdecke University, with its three research and teaching areas of business administration, law and psychology/sociology. The WIFU has been making a significant contribution to the cross-generational sustainability of family businesses in the field of research and teaching for more than 25 years.

Another focus of our work is the organisation and execution of congresses and other events on family entrepreneurship-related topics. Practice-oriented knowledge and skills to promote succession in the management of family businesses within the business family are conveyed in working groups, training courses and other formats. Our events are characterised by a protected framework which provides room for an intimate and open exchange. A comprehensive and active public relations work for research results in the field of family entrepreneurship completes the range of tasks of the WIFU Foundation.

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