Two-way Communication Essay, Research Paper

Two-way communication, with both parties able to express themselves on the most deep-rooted issues and really hear the other, is key to change in a familybusiness. That was the central point of John Messervey’s address to the FamilyBusiness center, September 9, 1997 at the Springfield Sheraton.Messervey, of the National Family Business Council in Lake Forest, Illinois,believes that nearly every family business will benefit by change&emdash;andthat those who attended are ready to catalyze that process: “You are herebecause you want something to change.”The specifics will vary from business to business; in recent cases, Messerveyencountered these desires: a son wanted his father to invest in a new project; amother was accused by her child of meddling; a sibling looked for ways toprevent his brother from antagonizing key employees; another sibling was askedto “quit pretending she’s working.”Messervey’s analysis concentrated on the family, which he sees as “the prototypefor all organization; business patterns are just an extension” of the rolesplayed out in family dynamics. In every family there will be “customers forchange”&emdash;those who stand to benefit from upsetting the applecart, oftenthe family scapegoats or those who feel disenfranchised. But there are also”guardians of the status quo,” who like things just the way they are andvigorously protect their turf. One of Messervey’s clients compared change in hisfamily to “bowling in sand.”Every family has its own set of myths, roles, and rules or customs. But at thesame time, there are “secrets” and “unspeakables”; these hidden shames are theaction points for changeTo demonstrate, Messervey showed a short clip from “Prince of Tides,” showing asharply dysfunctional family. Nick Nolte plays a husband who blocks his wife’severy attempt to bring up important issues. But at the same time, he and his ownmother have some serious unfinished business to take care of&emdash;deep anddark “unspeakables”&emdash;which causes every interaction between them to run upagainst a wall of mutual hostility.In Nolte’s fictional family, as in any other, those who are ignored find a wayto act out and be noticed. And since family members know better than anyone elsehow to hit the “hot buttons” that will get a reaction from other family members,the stakes can be pretty high. When you know how to get someone really furious,you run the risk of starting a long-lasting feud that could run for decades. ButMesservey comments, “they must have really cared for each other; you don’t fightif you don’t care.”He believes many of the silly disagreements among family members are “to addheat. Over time, all relationships cool.” These little sparks are a way to keepthe relationship fresh and interesting, even after a half-century or more, asMesservey demonstrated with a second video clip, from “For Better or ForWorse”&emdash;where, despite 56 years of happy marriage, a couple still can’tlet go of an ancient minor argument.But that family was able to openly air their disagreement. In families withdeeper problems, attempts at communication are continuously rebuffed. Messerveyquoted sociologist Carl Whittaker’s book, The Family Crucible:Why, in spite of a genuine desire to change, does a family hold back???If afamily has tried repeatedly to change and has met only pain and failure, makingstill another attempt can have frightening overtones??What if they reallytry&emdash;and fail again? What is left except utter despair? The family cringesin fear; they fight against the change which they know they must attempt.But don’t confuse fear by disempowered family members of initiating change withresistance to change by those who will lose power: that resistance, saysMesservey, is a sign that things are working. Change is imminent and theguardians of the status quo are desperately trying to block it. They feel thepressure, the need to acknowledge the issues; the call for change can no longerbe simply swept under the rug. In fact, the rug is bulging so high off thefloor&emdash;to stretch the metaphor a bit farther&emdash;that someone hadbetter do something before there’s a liability suit to contend with.Some families have ignored so many little issues that, like a dense forest thatneeds a huge fire to clean out the underbrush, they really need a big blow-up toclear the air.One option to deal with this pressure is to bring in a different kind ofconsultant: one who is oriented toward process, rather than symptoms. Messerveysays this kind of consultant is much better suited to complicated systems.The old fashioned expert consultant may provide a checklist of solutions, but ifthose solutions focus on past mistakes, on fixing only the obvioussymptoms&emdash;and fail to address the underlying issues at the root&emdash;thedestructive patterns will reemerge. The process consultant, on the other hand,looks at systemic health, patiently approaches the situation with a focus on thepresent instead of the past, and works together with the client to findsolutions the client will “own.” Rather than affixing blame, the goal is tochange the long-held patterns, to strive toward organizational wellness in anon-judgmental, intuitive approach that focuses on solutions&emdash;notproblems.A consultant&emdash;or an organization working internally&emdash;should examinepower, control, conflict, and intimacy. Intimacy isn’t often discussed in familybusinesses, but, says Messervey, “it’s easier to stay angry than to admit ourneed to be loved.”Messervey uses the Beavers Scale for measuring conflict management: familymembers self-evaluate based on a series of questions, and are ranked into fivecategories, from severely dysfunctional to optimal. Another part of the testmeasures the level of family entanglement, from extremely enmeshed todisengaged. At the severely dysfunctional level, there is not only nocommunication, but no leadership. The next two steps are tightly bound, eitherby a dictatorial leader or by an inflexible set of rules.Finally, the adequate and optimal families are flexible, comfortable withfeelings of “love, annoyance, and frustration,” focused on goals, and able toresolve most conflicts. They rest easy, knowing that, “whatever happens, we canwork it out.”