

## Ep #13: 2 Tools for Tough Conversations



### Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

**Ellie Frey Zagel**

[The Family Business Leader Podcast](#) with Ellie Frey Zagel

## Ep #13: 2 Tools for Tough Conversations

You are listening to episode 13 where I talk about two of my favorite tools to use when having tough conversations, including which hat are you wearing?

Welcome to *The Family Business Leader Podcast*. A podcast for multigenerational family business leaders who want to become the leader they were meant to be. If you're ready to learn how to develop your own authentic leadership style, successfully lead your family business and create your own lasting legacy while still honoring theirs this is the podcast for you. I'm your host, Ellie Frey Zagel, family business leadership coach and third-generation family business leader. Let's get to it.

Well, hello all, welcome, welcome. I hope you're having a wonderful, wonderful week. Today I'm going to talk about two pieces of advice that I got from two different family enterprise leaders. One I have spoken a little bit about before and one I haven't. It's one of my favorite tools that I use with my clients.

But before I dive into that I just have to tell you I had such an amazing weekend. Many of you know that I love to flyfish and honestly I don't feel like I get enough time. But this past weekend my husband, my son and I met my father and mother up at a fishing camp that my father has been members at for the majority of his life. He's one of the oldest members both in age as well as duration. My parents had five kids and we used to go there. We'd play in the river. We'd hang out kind of camping, cabin like setting. It was super fun.

Whatever reason I haven't been there since I was 10 years old. So, my dad is in a wheelchair and really wanted to go back, check it out and bring my husband, my son and I, and my mom along with him. It was such a pleasure to kind of see him with some of the guys and the women that he remembers way back when and tell stories. And there was pictures of his fish on the wall, a fish that he caught way back when. And he hasn't been there for 30 odd years either.

## Ep #13: 2 Tools for Tough Conversations

And it was just so amazing to see my father's eyes light up and just have such a great time talking about those days when he'd get out in the trout stream and catch some really, really big fish. Now, my father is not the kind of guy that just loves to catch big fish. He really is the guy that would just like to sit in the trout stream and study the bugs and watch the fish rise and look at the running water. So, I get some of that from him. But it was really wonderful to kind of see him just really come alive and kind of remember these stories.

And my son got to experience that. He's seven. And he's a city boy. We haven't gotten him out into the wilderness as much as I'd like. But he got to be out in really the middle of nowhere on the river, sharing this experience with grumpy and granny. And then the last thing and the reason that this made my weekend so incredibly special is that my husband and I got to fish together. And the river where we were is very, very beautiful. And I haven't done a lot of wade fishing which means instead of being in a boat or a rafter with a guide.

It was just my husband and I in a section of river and we kind of had to figure it out and cast our flies and figure out which fly was the right one, and create a good drift, and keep out of trees, which neither of us did. So, it was just the fact that my husband and I could do this together it was just such an incredible treat. There's a saying that couples who play together stay together. My husband kind of taught me how to – he likes to wakeboard. So, he taught me how to wakeboard and waterski and I've taught him how to flyfish.

So, it is just again, a pleasure that we can do such different things, both involving water, together. Alright, so I hope that you have a great trip coming up or some fun memories that you can create coming up. And I guess you can create memories right now. But anyway, it's the summer here in the US and it's just such a pleasure to be outside doing one of my favorite things with some of my favorite people.

## Ep #13: 2 Tools for Tough Conversations

So, I would like to talk about today a completely different topic, although related, because I do work with my father around the boardroom table at my family's foundation. And I would like to talk about having tough conversations or what you might deem as a tough conversation with your family. Sometimes you and your mom, who's also your boss, who's also the owner are not on the same page, quite the opposite actually. And the conversations that you have together oftentimes devolve into frustration and anger.

You fall into old patterns, it could be a father son relationship or a daughter mother relationship, into old patterns that you've had probably your entire life. And the result of that is these conversations are not fun. They usually end in anger. And nobody being happy, and probably very little being resolved. So, when the arguments become heated the role that you play becomes confusing. The role that you are playing becomes confusing. Who are you when you're having these conversations?

When we work with our family are we the daughter? Are we the employee? Are we the future owner? Are we the president of the company or future president of the company? Who are we when we're in these conversations? And who is that person that you're talking to? Are they your parents? Are they the owner? Are they retiring CEO or chairman of the board? Who are they? So, when this becomes confusing you can see how the anger, and frustration, and confusion kind of will creep in.

Are you making this point as an owner? Are you making this point as a president of the company? How are you communicating with the other person and from what hat, which hat are you wearing in this conversation? So, if what you're doing isn't working and oftentimes you're finding yourselves acting like a teenager or a child with your parents, I mean I realize that you're adults and I realize this probably doesn't happen all the time so it might be very subtle.

But sometimes it happens where you're having a perfectly normal conversation and all of a sudden you're screaming and yelling. And this has

## Ep #13: 2 Tools for Tough Conversations

been a pattern that's been going on for your entire life. So, if this isn't working for you and you're not getting the results that you want, I invite you to try another strategy. Try something new. And today I'm going to teach you two tools to help you navigate any conversation, especially hard conversations that can be with a family member, that can be with a peer, a colleague, a significant other, anybody.

Okay, so the two tools are, drum roll please, one, you can't change anyone unless they want to change. You can't change anyone. You can't change them. You cannot change your parents. You can love them for who they are but if they don't want to change they're not going to change. And you can't convince them if they don't want to be convinced. So, if you can believe that you can't change the other person, your significant other, you can't change your family member, your sister, your brother, your parent, uncle, grandparents.

If you can't change them you can now stop trying to change them. And it might look like they should do something different. They should be somebody different, they shouldn't do that. So, if you're thinking in those terms when it comes to the person you're about to go into a conversation with I invite you to remember that you can't change them and to get rid of those shoulds. You can't change them. They're not going to change unless they want to change. If they want to change they'll come to you. You'll notice a change.

Or maybe, just maybe they're looking for you to lead the way. So, I'll go into that a little bit more in a second. The second tool that I'll talk about is when you work with your family it's helpful to understand which hat you're wearing during the conversation. It makes conversations way less confusing. And again, I'll go into these.

So, let's start with you can't change them. This advice was given to me by a third generation wealth inheritor. The family business had been sold, it's now a publicly traded company. Yet he and his father and I think his father was probably in his 80s at that time, didn't get along. And they had a very

## Ep #13: 2 Tools for Tough Conversations

challenging relationship. The son loved the father but was really having a hard time going and visiting him because of the – I think the combative nature of the relationship.

And his wife told him one day as they were driving up to see his father, “Hey, he’s never going to change, stop trying to change him. He’s 80 odd years old, he’s not going to change.” And for him that made all the difference. He stopped changing his father. He started enjoying his father just as he was even if he was cantankerous or combative. He could just love his father for who he was at that time for the rest of his life.

And I think there is something so powerful when we drop our shoulds. We call them instruction manuals, our instruction manuals for other people, how they should behave, how they should treat us, how they should show up in this world. When we drop those, especially if we’re talking about adults, children are maybe a little bit different, instantly you feel a sense of freedom, a sense of relief. Because if people fundamentally won’t change unless they want to, and you’re trying to change them that’s a constant argument, it’s constant tension.

And so, if you realize, you know what? I can’t change him, her, I can’t change them so I’m just going to love them. And that’s all, that’s what I’m going to do. I might have mentioned this story before but I had the same, I took that advice and I’ve shared this advice with my clients too and it’s been really, really powerful for my clients. But I took this advice from this friend, this third generation wealth inheritor and I applied it to my own life.

My mom and I basically argued, I came out of the womb, we started arguing. We would clear the house with our yelling when I was a teenager. I was a very stubborn child. And she was too, we were definitely combative. And we had a relationship that neither of us liked. And it wasn’t until I was 28 years old that I got this piece of advice and I was like, oh yes. And I decided I can’t change my mom. She is who she is. I can just love her for who she is. She is my mother. Bam, manual dropped, freedom achieved and I just chose to not fight with her, I just chose.



## Ep #13: 2 Tools for Tough Conversations

I was just like, “Listen, you can have your politics. You can have your ideas. You can all of it, you can just do things the way you do things and I can just love you.” It was so powerful. I did end up telling her that this is what I was going to do. I didn’t ask her to do anything different. I just said, “Mom, I’m done with this relationship as the way it is, I don’t want to fight with you anymore, I just want to love you. I’m giving it all up.” And fast forward my mom is now honestly one of my best friends. She and I get along so well.

I didn’t ask her to change. I changed. I changed my mindset when it came to my mom. So, I share this with you and I’ll probably share it again because it’s so powerful. But just realizing that you can’t change other people in your life is such an empowering place to be. So, you don’t keep trying to change them, you can’t do it. You can make a request, “Hey, I’d like you to do this.” But you can’t force somebody to change if they don’t want to change.

You can’t force somebody to honor your boundaries or requests if they don’t want to. There is consequences to that. That’s a different conversation. So, when you’re having a conversation, a tough conversation or really any conversation, walking into that conversation with I’m not, I can’t change them at all and I’m just going to eliminate the shoulds.

The second one is understanding which hat you are wearing when walking into a conversation. One of the reasons I love family businesses is they’re complex but that complexity also can foster challenge. And so, as you know as a family business leader we wear many hats. We’re a kid, we’re an employee, we’re an adult, you know what I mean. My uncle I think still sees me as a little kid sometimes. I’m also in my 40s and on the executive committee but that doesn’t matter, in his mind I am still a teenager sometimes.

So, you wear many, many hats. So, I’m a niece, in this example for my uncle I’m a niece, I’m a trustee, I’m family, I’m a cousin, a sister.

## Ep #13: 2 Tools for Tough Conversations

So perhaps you've seen John Davis' three-circles model, kind of a Venn diagram or three concentric circles depicting the roles of family, management, and ownership. And how those roles often overlap. This model, it helps us make sense of which hat we are wearing and then our roles while wearing that hat. It also depicts the confusion that can take place in a family system. It's complex. There's a lot going on and I think that this three-circles model does a great job visually highlighting some of that complexity. I'll link John Davis' work in the show notes.

So, for an example, one of my clients was facing a challenging conversation with a sibling. It was a classic younger brother, older brother situation. The younger brother was running the company and the older brother was on the board. And then when the company hit hard economic times the older brother was starting to ask tough questions. And was making comments about the performance of the company. And the younger brother took offence to these comments. And the younger brother was thinking thoughts like he should have my back.

He's my family, he should have my back. He shouldn't be saying these things. And the younger brother assumed something like because he's saying these remarks that he doesn't – older brother doesn't trust me. Yeah, you can see how this assumption and these thoughts about his older brother's words would cause some hurt, and resentment, and anger within the younger brother. And then what happens when you're feeling angry? You don't tend to show up in your best self.

So, through coaching I helped the younger brother prepare for the conversation he was going to have with his older brother. He decided he wanted to have a conversation. By understanding which hat he was wearing during the conversation and he decided on president CEO hat he was able to act like the president and CEO versus the younger brother who idolized his older brother.

So as a result, he and his brother, his older brother had a calm matter of fact professional conversation about the performance of the business. That



## Ep #13: 2 Tools for Tough Conversations

had he not been clear on which hat he was wearing, had he brought the, he should have my back, he's family, he should trust me, he's family those hurt feelings that maybe that conversation would have gone a very different way.

I had friends who, two siblings working with each other, would get in fist fights in the office. This is not abnormal, this happens. So, identifying which hat. I should share that the younger brother didn't tell his older brother how he should or should not act. Didn't say, "Hey, you should trust me. Hey, you shouldn't say those words." He didn't say that. But by clarifying the role that he was going to portray going into that conversation the younger brother automatically clarified his brother's role and created agenda accordingly.

So, by deciding that he was going to have this conversation as a president and CEO of the family business he was automatically or maybe subconsciously he was putting his brother into the role of board member. And he created an agenda that reflected what a board member needed to know. And the younger brother wearing the president CEO hat was able to steer the conversation back any time it got into the younger brother, older brother dynamics. He was able to steer the conversation back if it started to veer off into different lanes.

Doing this work, the younger brother was also able to sort out his own personal feelings about the family dynamic separately from the business conversations that needed to happen. So, he put the personal stuff aside, deal with that in another conversation. This conversion is just going to be about business and going into that with the president CEO hat, you are the board member.

So, this advice, walking into conversations, understanding what hat you're wearing, which hat you're wearing was given to a group of 400+ family business leaders during an event that I hosted when I ran The Family Business Center in Grand Rapids, Michigan. The speaker was a second generation past family CEO of an international multibillion dollar company.

## Ep #13: 2 Tools for Tough Conversations

And he was speaking and kind of sharing his family business story with the audience.

And the speaker said it was important to understand which hat he was wearing when having a conversation with the company founder and owner, and his father, especially when the conversations they were having were outside of the office, when it can be a little bit more confusing regarding the topic and which hat you're wearing. And again, by clarifying which hat he was wearing he made it less confusing for his father, the founder, the owner of a company.

So again, I encourage you, I invite you to, before you go into a meeting with a family member especially, by clarifying which role you're playing. What hat are you wearing? And by doing this it'll be way less confusing for everyone, even if you don't tell them, "Hey, I'm wearing the president CEO hat." Or, "Hey, I'm wearing the owner hat or future owner hat." You don't even have to tell them. It's clear in your mind you're going to show up as that hat, as portraying that role. You're going to show up as the president CEO. Or you're going to show up as an owner or future owner.

Okay my friends, that's what I wanted to talk about today. One, going into these conversations, they're just conversations, they don't even have to be tough conversations, I don't want to qualify them. But remember, two tools to help you navigate any conversation, one, you can't change them, so stop trying. And two, it's really helpful to understand which hat you're wearing when heading into any conversation with a family member, especially when it can be confusing. Alright my friends, have an amazing, amazing week. I will see you next week.

Well, there you have it. Thank you so much for listening to *The Family Business Leader Podcast*. If you've enjoyed today's episode, be sure to share it with someone who needs it. If you'd like more information about family business leadership development, please visit [successfulgenerations.com](https://www.successfulgenerations.com). I can't wait to connect with you again next week, until then.

[The Family Business Leader Podcast](https://www.successfulgenerations.com) with Ellie Frey Zagel