

The International Family Offices Journal

Editor: Nicola Saccardo

Editorial

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Family harmony – moving beyond imposition, expectation and judgment

James E Hughes, Jr and Feisal Alibhai

When considering the family, many of us find that our ability to communicate with each other from a place of trust is challenging. Our resistance to expressing ourselves stems from our inability to feel safe to voice what we truly feel.

The author Ai Yazawa put his finger on the breakdown many of us experience when we gather together as a family: “People can’t be just tied together. They have to connect. Otherwise they’ll find themselves bound hand and foot”.

We must explore affinity if the family is to flourish. Is each family member simply communicating out of historic duty and obligation tied to blood? This amounts to non-connection, or artificial connection.

Without a great deal of caring, trust continues to elude us. Care is the first requirement of every interaction. Care in an emotional and spiritual sense, reflected in each of the participant’s priorities, makes it possible to hear with the heart what is communicated through the ears and mouth.

It’s only as each of us rises above the usual conversations we engage in based on our thoughts and risk sharing how we truly feel that we are able to truly communicate. Unless we know what each family member feels, our heartfelt and enthusiastic participation in the family will be limited.

The secret is to engage in-depth with the primary obstacles to family longevity and continuity consisting of imposition, expectation and judgment. With most people, if we could only see them differently – if we were to truly get to know them – we would bring out their peaceful, caring side.

Recognising our commonality as family members is a huge step. There comes a time each of us must make

a decision to go forward as a family, no matter what may have occurred in the past, which no longer defines our future. A softened open heart proves itself stronger than anything we may have suffered from the family.

The assumption in most families is that imposition, expectation and judgment arise from the top and filter down. This is what occurs in many places of work in which the boss calls us in and dresses us down. Imposition, expectation and judgment also happen from the bottom up, as well as sideways and diagonally, encompassing every dimension of the family – parents to children, children to parents, siblings, cousins, uncles and aunties.

The key is to cultivate awareness that, consciously or unconsciously, we impose on family members. We expect them to fall in line and are quick to judge when they don’t. As an ancient truth says, “Judge not that ye be not judged”. For this reason, it’s essential to establish agreements that we all subscribe to.

Many of us feel uncomfortable when we detect disunity. Keep in mind that unity is a two-way street. If we hope to bring the family together, we need to create buy-in. In the process we may ruffle a few feathers.

It’s commonly believed that to reach agreement, we need to compromise. The danger is that we end up selling ourselves out. By settling for the lowest common denominator, we betray what matters most to us.

Negotiation is fundamentally different from compromise. To negotiate, each of us needs to be true to ourselves. If we don’t hang onto what’s important, we may end up agreeing to something that comes back to bite us.

To check that we are negotiating in good faith, it may help to share our intentions and subsequent agreements with advisers in the light of our governance. However, the final arbitrator is found only deep within us. This is why we search our heart. How can the family thrive if we neglect our core values, talents and aspirations?

Imposition, expectation and judgment arise from ingrained beliefs and patterns of behaviour. To neutralise these, we need to be aware each time they surface. The key is to simply observe.

It isn’t always smart to confront a family member who uses imposition, expectation and judgment to pull the wool over the eyes of other family members.

When considering the family, many of us find that our ability to communicate with each other from a place of trust is challenging.

We all resist head-on confrontation, and they are likely either to react angrily or resort to passive-aggressive behaviour.

If we are used to operating from a process-driven headspace, the key to negotiating successfully lies in neutralising any emotional charge that surfaces. We all perceive the world differently, each believing our view is an accurate assessment of how a situation really is.

It's useless to attempt to change another's viewpoint. If we take it on ourselves 'to help another understand', we may end up undercutting their ability to function. By attempting to persuade another member of the family, we actually inoculate them, shortchanging their ability to function authentically.

All we are required to do is to share from our heart. We speak our truth free of emotional charge, encouraging others to also express themselves. Whether others value what we communicate is beside the point, as long as we don't expect them to affirm us.

Can you hold onto yourself in the face of another's perception and allow their point of view to touch your heart? Are you willing to let them impact you while holding fast to what's important to you?

To negotiate effectively, we need to ensure that we are as authentic as we are capable of. We do this by bringing the whole of ourselves to each conversation.

Many family members don't feel safe if they feel they are being imposed on. If they sense something is expected of them, they may fear being judged if they don't comply. Only when every member of the family feels safe will they be willing to place all their cards on the table.

Family meetings are often laced with tension. Growing up, we may have learned to keep our mouths shut because some topics were rarely if ever discussed. Think back to your school days. Did your parents discuss with you the school they expected you to attend? Even Britain's King Charles had zero say when it came to his school years. He loathed his time at Gordonstoun, a boarding school in the Scottish highlands that his father Prince Philip attended years earlier.

What about the grades you were expected to achieve? Or the extracurricular activities you were urged to participate in? Perhaps it was just assumed that when you reached the age of majority, you would become part of the family business.

As a member of the family, we may pride ourselves that we don't drink or do drugs. We expect others to follow suit. It doesn't seem to occur to us that times have changed. For instance, today it's considered normal for many young adults to use psychedelics. In their quest to deepen their spirituality, they may even choose to visit a shaman and imbibe plant medicine as they seek to realise their deeper selves.

If we hope to negotiate successfully as a member of the family, we need to move beyond thoughts and words, instead choosing to be discerning observers.

Many of us draw surface conclusions about what's really going on with those around us. For instance, you're in a restaurant and all around are couples. How do you spot those who have been together for a while? It's pretty obvious, isn't it? They rarely talk.

If a couple don't talk to each other, we assume they have a problem communicating. The reality can be very different. They are communicating that they have no intention of hearing what's important to the other.

It's also possible that this couple can be together saying nothing and meaning everything as they look at each other. Words are unnecessary.

How do you spot those who are newly coupled? They never stop talking. Surprisingly, while it looks like they are communicating, they may not be communicating anything of substance. They talk without ever touching each other's hearts.

You have no doubt come across the aphorism from Diogenes of Sinope, a Greek philosopher and one of the founders of Cynicism: "We have two ears and one tongue so that we would listen more and talk less". The magic bullet for effective negotiation is to listen until we actually hear what the other feels.

If we are going to let another into our inner being, we need to feel secure. Since many of us don't feel secure, we resist letting anybody in. We don't enter into their world because we're afraid that their impositions, expectations and judgments may swallow us up.

If we hope to connect, we need to risk revealing our deeper selves to each other. We refer to this as intimacy, which is a give-and-take proposition that takes two forms: 'into me see', meaning that I reveal my inner self to you; and 'into me see', meaning you reveal your inner self to me.

Maya Angelou hit the nail on the head when she

If we hope to negotiate successfully as a member of the family, we need to move beyond thoughts and words, instead choosing to be discerning observers.

Imposition, expectation and judgment lead us to categorise a person's actions as 'right' or 'wrong'. If we deem the other to be in the wrong, we feel we have a right to judge them.

said, "We can learn to see each other and see ourselves in each other and recognize that human beings are more alike than we are unlike". Imposition, expectation and judgment are a mirror image of how we feel about ourselves. They arise not from our heart but from our ego.

Let's be clear what we are referring to when we speak of the ego, because it's a term that across the generations has been used differently. Today the ego refers to the way we present ourselves to others, and much of the time to ourselves. It's an image of ourselves we carry around in our head. This develops early in life as we learn to hide our true feelings behind a facade.

Imposition, expectation and judgment lead us to categorise a person's actions as 'right' or 'wrong'. If we deem the other to be in the wrong, we feel we have a right to judge them.

With this in mind, let's dive into a family meeting. As the family discusses a topic on which there are divergent views, an argument breaks out. Each hears the points others make, but heart never touches heart. They are communicating that they don't intend to be affected by what others feel.

If someone resists doing what we expect them to do, it's because they don't really understand, right?

Consider a child who is asked to clean up their toys. An hour later, we enter the room expecting it to be tidy. When we discover it's still a mess, what's the first thing we say? "Didn't you hear what I said?"

A half-hour later, we discover that the room is still a mess. Now what do we say? "You're not listening to me. Didn't you hear anything I told you? I said to clean up your room. Now pay attention and get it done!"

A communication problem? Not at all. The child chooses to ignore us. The problem isn't a lack of understanding, needing to hear it again, or the fact that what we are saying isn't clear. The child simply doesn't agree with what we need them to do. They don't have the same agenda as us. To us, cleaning up the room is important. To the child, it's not at all important.

What masquerades as a communication problem is in reality a clash between what matters to each of us. Neither of us is willing to allow the other to impact us. We are communicating that we are determined not to be influenced by the other.

Imposition, expectation and judgment can trick us. For instance, a husband tortures his wife and the rest of the family emotionally, including the dog, by procrastinating on just about everything. When they complain, he accuses them of whining. To cap it off, he also criticises himself as "a hopeless procrastinator", which he uses to justify further non-performance.

Faced with such behaviour, can you spot the imposition and expectation that's happening before your eyes? Can you detect the judgment that's being dished out?

The expectation this husband telegraphs is, "If you really love me, you'll be patient". He excuses his behaviour by saying, "I'm doing the best I can". None of us like to admit we do hurtful things to those we care about. He hides the fact that he deliberately hurts the family by procrastinating.

When it comes to our emotional life, many of us are grown-up children, each king and queen of our castle. We expect the world to revolve around us. In the adult world, we call this narcissism. We act as if everything exists for our benefit. That's appropriate for babies who can't feed themselves, change their diaper or even turn their body over without assistance. As we grow, it's essential that our narcissism dies – and it usually dies a slow if not painful death.

Others in the family have their own agenda. We all need to learn that we can't always get our own way, which gives us an opportunity to negotiate for what's essential to us.

What about the wife who allowed her husband to make all the business decisions, agreeing to everything he suggested, then after his death finds she has no mind of her own? She may realise she is effectively a non-person. How can she be expected to participate fully in the family?

Heart-touching heart isn't where good communication begins. It's the result of a journey in which we gradually become mature enough to negotiate in good faith. Many of us may be nowhere near this level of maturity. We aren't sufficiently grounded to allow the other to get under our skin, allowing them to impact our heart. Yet to connect heart to heart is what all of us long for.

Let's talk about how being judged can be debilitating. If we mess up, it doesn't take another to make us feel bad. We can do it perfectly well ourselves.

We are our own worst critic, unforgiving of ourselves.

“I have had a stressful day”, a wife shared. “I spent much of the day telling myself I’m such an idiot. I backed our new Jaguar into a car that I didn’t realise was behind me, damaging the bumper. To most people it would be a minor hiccup, but to my husband it’s a huge deal. I was extremely anxious before calling to tell him what happened. I even went to a body shop to see if I could have it replaced so as to avoid telling him. He’s my biggest critic. Every time I put a foot wrong, he delights in making it seem like it’s the end of the world. I felt bad enough about the bumper, then I had to suffer his insulting behavior.”

Many of us are used to walking on eggshells. We put up with others’ judgment as if it’s normal. In time, we may have the courage to confront our self-criticism and move beyond it. We can learn not to take another’s criticism onboard.

What does it take for a critical husband to quit judging his wife? The facets of ourselves that weren’t faced during our upbringing led to distortions of our character. These are reflected back to us in our relationships. Do we have the courage to face up to these aspects of ourselves?

“If we could all just sit down and talk”, people say, not aware that those without a well-developed centre are unable to connect heart-to-heart. They simply can’t do it. They don’t want you under their skin, and they don’t want to be under your skin.

To counteract any judgment we feel, it helps if we maintain a state of flow. This enables us to identify the things we can accomplish together as a family. This is what’s so amazing about flow, all it asks of us is that we be the unique person we truly are.

In place of imposition, expectation and judgment, we can simply describe what we are seeing. “It’s a beautiful day” is just a perception that describes how we feel. There’s no imposition, expectation or judgment involved.

When we stand up for ourselves, we break through the artificial barrier that limits our options. Instead of settling for peace at any price by compromising, we come from a position of strength and thereby expand the boundaries of the family system. We open up new frontiers of fulfilment.

For matters that require the family to agree, we need to ask ourselves whether we are being true to ourselves or simply insisting on having our way. Being ourselves means we are neither compliant, defiant nor resistant. Knowing ourselves allows us to distinguish what can be surrendered without any loss of authenticity. This enables us to remain open to consider the needs of the entire family.


The more we are in touch with our feelings, the better our ability to negotiate based on what can truly improve the family as a whole without resorting to imposition, expectations and judgment.

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This article ‘Family harmony – moving beyond imposition, expectation and judgment’, by James E Hughes, Jr and Feisal Alibhai, is taken from the 32nd issue of *The International Family Offices Journal*, published by Globe Law and Business.

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