



FAMILY GOVERNANCE: IT'S NOT THERAPY

By Matthew Wesley

Just last week, I was speaking with an advisor who asked how the work I did was different from therapy. I find that this question comes up frequently and is the source of a great deal of confusion.

Perhaps this is because getting people to work together in families involves dealing with lots of different personal issues and “dynamics” that arise within a family system. That said, the work I do is not about therapy.

The dictionary defines therapy as “the treatment of disease or disorders, as by some remedial, rehabilitating or curative process.” The dictionary defines governance as “a method or system of management.” Fundamentally, therapy is about fixing people or systems that are broken, mostly from the inside out. Governance is about decision making and developing the frameworks and skills to make productive collective choices.

In families that succeed across generations, decision making must move from a central “command and control” model to a collaborative and participatory model. Failure to make this critical transition inevitably results in divisions and disagreements that tear families apart and erode the wealth. By the end of the second generation, family governance must have transitioned to collaborative approaches to have any reasonable chance of having the family or the wealth endure beyond the third generation. Wise family leaders in the first generation understand this and take steps to instill collaborative decision making while they are fit to do so. If collaborative approaches aren’t clearly understood and implemented by siblings by the end of the second generation, it is too late.

The work I do can be boiled down to helping families move from command and control structures to pluralistic and collaborative structures of decision making. While this transition involves working with lots of different people with varying perspectives, my role is not to “fix” the family system or to help “cure” individual or collective dysfunction. My core professional concern is not to focus on whether individuals are high functioning, happy and engaged people

or that everyone in the family system is close and supportive. My goal is to help the family gain the skills to make effective decisions that work for the collective good in productive ways.

This work is about helping a diverse group of people with different capacities, capabilities, and perspectives come to agreements that will allow them to collaborate in their common interest.

To be effective, these agreements must take into account the individuals in the family and the idiosyncrasies of the family system (there is no “one-size-fits-all” solution). From my experience when this work is done well, it helps in the individual development of family members. I also find that the clarity of agreements almost always allows family systems to function more smoothly. It is clearly useful to know how family systems tend to function from therapeutic points of view to do this work, but these therapeutic models are helpful only insofar as they aid in the application of clear and proven technologies designed to create coherent governing or decision making structures for the family.

At the end of the day, family governance is not, fundamentally, therapeutic work anymore than individual performance coaching or organizational teambuilding or strategic design is “therapeutic”.

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