



A SHOUT OUT FOR THOSE WHO HATE “PROCESS”

By Matthew Wesley

Last Wednesday was one of those beautiful summer days most people in Seattle live for. Blue sky, perfect temperature, glistening water, snow-capped mountains in every direction. It is these days that make the grey, wet days of winter a mere discipline of anticipation. On this beautiful day, I sat with a fellow at his home on their patio talking about the family he had married into. It is a remarkable family.

In many ways this family is very close and deeply connected to one another. Over four living generations, despite occasional spats and personality conflicts, they truly care about the well-being of everyone in the family. There is also a remarkable lack of entitlement and a track record of solid accomplishment across the generations. Very few are living off the fat of the land – children and grandchildren have advanced degrees, are holding down great jobs, marrying well, and are productive. This is not to say that there isn't trouble in paradise. They clearly have problems, individual and collective, but they are close and committed to one another in ways that are quite rare. They are not one of those families who are in crisis. At the same time they are facing some very significant challenges.

Most of these challenges involve the history of how power and control have been exercised within the family and a deeper recognition that what has gotten them to this point is not sufficient to take them to where they need to go. As the founders are passing away and the next generation is nearing retirement, their historic approaches to governance are inadequate to meet the challenges these transitions represent. The adult children of G3 are telling their baby-boomer parents that they need to “up their game” to make things work better or they will be forced to face cleaning up some pretty difficult situations. G2 gets this and wants to make sure they don't saddle their children with problems their own dynamics have allowed to languish. The external generational changes are calling the family to develop new competencies to meet these challenges.

Almost all of the families we work with are facing what might be called “adaptive challenges”. These are challenges that serve as inflection points in family history. If the family meets this challenge they will do well, but if they fail, the likelihood of creating sustainable inter-generational success becomes far less likely. These challenges are “adaptive” because

they require the family to adapt. That adaptation requires the development of new capacities and capabilities. Sometimes these challenges are quite painful, sometimes not. Some families are muddling through and some are overwhelmed. Occasionally these families are being proactive, and often they are reactive. Most often they are a bit of both.

What these families implicitly realize when they call us is that what has gotten them to this point is insufficient to get them to where they want to go. They are often eager for solutions, for things to do and for action. They want to make plans and move forward. They want to resolve things. They want to “fix” problematic situations and, often, problem people. This can be a terrific impulse, but it is almost always a bit misguided. The interesting thing is that families are almost always wanting to do these things from the same levels of awareness and the same capacities that they have been using to date.

By their nature, adaptive challenges requires the systemic ability to “raise the game” to a different level. This is what makes these challenges “adaptive”. They require the system and the individuals within it to learn and grow together. That kind of adaptation requires the family to develop new capacities and capabilities. It requires the family to operate at a new and unfamiliar level of functioning.

While Einstein apparently never said it, a wise quote often attributed to him is “No problem can be solved from the same level of consciousness that created it.” To move to a different level of consciousness, you have to develop new ways of thinking and acting in the world. External challenges require the development of new disciplines and new competencies. For families facing these types of challenges, the same patterns they used in the past – their collective structures of consciousness – are insufficient to address the challenges faced today.

In talking with this family member on this beautiful summer day, he spoke to the family’s skepticism for doing process work. They want to get on with the work at hand. They are a practical people. The problem is that what they have been doing – as good as it is – has gotten them to where they are today facing challenges that are currently over their heads. They will hopefully discover that, when done well – process work is nothing more or less than developing new skills to meet those challenges. We believe that process for the sake of process amounts to unproductive collective navel gazing. Process work that builds awareness and develops new skills creates first the capabilities and then the full capacity to meet the core adaptive challenges a family faces.

As a very concrete example, playing tennis is a “process”. When one first learns to play, the “sub-process” of the tennis swing is awkward and requires a great deal of thought and attention. It requires explanation, self-awareness, observation, trial and error, good coaching, and hours of practice to truly understand the process of a good tennis swing. It seems wildly cumbersome and awkward at first. In the beginning, all of the focus is on the process itself and has very little to do with results or even what we would consider “playing tennis” – indeed in the early stages the results are almost incidental. The point is the footwork and the approach to the ball and the backswing and the follow-through. It is nice when the ball goes exactly as it

should, but the value of this intermediate feedback lies in what one has learned about a good tennis swing and the encouragement it provides to continue the practice. The point is almost entirely about the process itself, not the game. At some point, however, the process becomes automatic – the process simply occurs almost on its own and one finds oneself playing tennis at a different level. The process is largely forgotten and lies in the background as one simply enjoys the game. The aspiring tennis player has “upped the game.” At that point, process has become automatic, not a matter of mindful attention.

Awhile back I was talking to an older friend. This fellow had founded a co-housing community many years ago and I asked him to reflect on that journey. At one point he said, “When I first started this place, I thought leadership was about getting stuff (not the word he used) done. After about ten years, I realized that leadership is almost always about the quality of the process of how stuff (again, not the word) gets done.” For I, that was a keen insight. This man was speaking about the development of his own skills and the skill sets of those he was leading. At the end of the day it is about results – it has to be – but to retain connection with self and others and sustain efficient and effective results over time, it also has to be about the quality of how those results were achieved. The quality of how results are achieved depends almost entirely on “process”.

In families, process work is the development of new skills necessary to meet the adaptive challenges of the future. Process, we believe, should never be an end in itself; instead, it should serve in the creation of capacities and capabilities the family didn’t have before but comes to attain. It is about creating proficiency and a kind of consequent excellence. This work is about calling forth the best possible future for the family and calling upon the highest and best selves of the people within the family system.

Matthew Wesley is the founder of The Wesley Group. He graduated from Stanford Law School and practiced as an estate planning attorney with successful families for over 20 years. Matt left active practice to help families do what estate documents alone could not - help to ensure successful intergenerational wealth transfer. In addition to his legal background, Matt has extensive consulting experience and a deep background in psychology, personal development and family systems, and organizational communication and development. Matt works closely with his wife, Marcia, who is a licensed psychologist with over 20 years of counseling experience.

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