

Time to Hold a Family Financial Meeting?



When thinking about family gatherings, you might focus on special occasions like holiday meals, birthday parties and anniversary celebrations. These are all good reasons to bring generations together, but there's another gathering that's equally important: the family financial meeting.

Granted, discussing your health care needs and estate plans can be difficult and uncomfortable, but it benefits the entire family when everyone's on the same page regarding your intentions. Financial matters can be emotional and contentious, so a transparent discussion may reduce misunderstandings, disagreements and conflict. In turn, you'll gain peace of mind knowing your legacy wishes have been fully and effectively shared.

Topics to discuss

You know best how your family dynamics tend to play out, so take them into consideration when deciding who should attend the meeting. It makes sense to include all the children, but whether their spouses/partners and children are invited is your decision based on best judgement. The frequency of financial meetings depends on the circumstances, but it's often valuable to hold one whenever there's a significant change, such as retirement, death in the family or a notable monetary event like a business sale or recent inheritance.

Below are seven topics commonly broached at family financial meetings – they might not all apply to your situation, and you may have others not listed here:

1. Living arrangements (e.g., aging in place; downsizing; staying with family; moving to another city, province or country; residing in a seniors community/nursing home)
2. What to do with the family cottage or other properties
3. Your choices for executor and power of attorney, along with the reasons why
4. Intention and directions for potential incapacitation, end-of-life care and funeral proceedings
5. Wealth distribution as part of your estate plan (e.g., how you want to divide your assets and special possessions, whether grandchildren are included, your philanthropic goals); provide a rationale for these decisions so your loved ones understand the "why"
6. If you own a business, what's your succession plan? Will family members be involved? Will you sell?
7. If you have insurance coverage, inform your loved ones about policy details

The family meeting is also an opportunity to discuss the "softer side" of finances, such as your views on money, the struggles you may have faced when building wealth, and how you envision loved ones managing their own finances. Imparting wisdom you've gained over the years is a great way for family to learn from you and engage in meaningful dialogue about money and financial responsibility.

What makes a successful family meeting?

Emphasize that this isn't a typical gathering, although a social component could be added once the formalities conclude. Try to strike a balanced tone: it's a serious financial meeting with weighty or emotional topics, but it doesn't need to be sombre. Advisors, lawyers and accountants usually don't attend, but they can be involved in meeting preparation, especially helping to explain technical terms or complex concepts you may need to address. Give people enough time to digest all the information. Since you might not resolve everything in one go, book a follow-up meeting if needed.

In-person conversations are ideal because it's easier to "read the room" and communicate effectively, but if some people can't attend, a virtual or hybrid meeting may work. You could hold the meeting at your home for familiarity's sake, but anywhere that's comfortable, reasonably free of distractions and conducive to open discussion will suffice. Create and distribute an agenda in advance so participants are aware of the subject matter and can prepare questions or comments.

Also adhere to basic "rules of engagement," such as not interrupting speakers and not making personal attacks, so the meeting proceeds smoothly and the conversation stays respectful – even when objections are being voiced. When your meeting ends, summarize the discussion, share next steps and assign required roles and responsibilities. Be sure to keep your advisor and related professionals abreast of decisions emanating from your family meeting, so they may continue advising you in the best way possible.

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