

# Women Encourage Candor at Family Businesses

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A conversation orientation in the family carries over to the business -- especially for women, who are increasingly becoming the family firm's "vocal heroes."

Have you ever wondered if family conversations at home impact your family business? When working together on a research project about [how predecessor parenting styles impact successors](https://familybusiness.org/content/Firm-but-flexible-parents-raise-the-best-family-business-leaders) (<https://familybusiness.org/content/Firm-but-flexible-parents-raise-the-best-family-business-leaders>), we found that parents communicate with their children differently based on their views on how to parent.

This made us ask more questions about communication in family businesses. We were curious about whether the business family communicates differently at work than at home and what that impact would be on overall employee communication. We were also curious to know if gender mattered in the relationship between family communication at home versus at the business. We know from books like *Men are from Mars and Women are from Venus* that men and women communicate differently. So we wondered if differences in communication at work could partly stem from how men and women communicate and interact at home. We studied family communication patterns in families who own and manage a family business.

## Two Kinds of Communication

Scholars who've researched family businesses have seen that families have a stable and predictable way of communicating, based on their world view and opinions and how they create and share them. Families have two main ways of communicating:

- A Conversation Orientation prioritizes and encourages open dialogue and debate.
- A Conformity Orientation prioritizes cohesive family relationships through a hierarchical and concentrated communication style.

We anticipated that both types would carry over into the business setting. In families with a conversation orientation, parents engage in debate with their children and encourage dialogue. As a result, children gain confidence in communicating, speaking up, and sharing ideas. We predicted this type of communication in the family setting would encourage employee voice and create a "vocal" family business.

We also anticipated that a closed and directive, or conformity, style of communication at home would also carry over to the family business. Parents with a conformity orientation prioritize sharing the same attitudes, values, and beliefs, and thus, communicate with their children in a controlling manner and expect obedience. As a result, family members are not likely to feel safe or confident sharing opinions that oppose the beliefs of other family members, at home or at work. We predicted that conformity communication in the family would continue in the family business, lowering employee voice and creating a "silent" family business.

Additionally, we thought gender would play a role in whether the family's communication orientation carried over to the business. In family businesses, we typically see men assuming leadership roles whereas women assume family roles such as maintaining family relationships and passing on family values. Indeed, some family business research describes women's role as "chief emotional officer" compared to men's role as "chief executive officer" (Lyman, 1988; Salganicoff, 1990; Ward, 1987). Gender roles also influence how men and women interact and communicate. In general,

men tend to be more task-oriented, more verbally assertive, and tend to communicate to gain social status. Women tend to be more relationship-oriented; they place a higher value on conflict management and comforting skills and are said to communicate to enhance relationships and connectedness.

## What We Studied

We collected matched, survey data from 206 U.S. family business leaders and their family member employees in 103 small family businesses. The majority of the family businesses (51%) had been in operation more than 10 years, and 61% had two or more generations currently working in the business. All of the businesses had fewer than 100 employees, but the majority (57%) were considered micro-sized, with five or fewer employees.

We asked the family business leaders 26 questions to determine how they communicated with their parents while growing up. An example of a *conversation orientation* question was “my parents liked to hear my opinions, even when they didn’t agree with me,” and an example of a *conformity orientation* question was “when anything really important was involved, my parents expected me to obey without question.”

We also asked the family employees five questions to determine their *employee voice*, or how they communicate while at work (e.g., “proactively voice out constructive suggestions that help the unit reach its goals” and “raise suggestions to improve the unit’s working procedure.”) We also asked all survey participants to state whether they were male or female.

## What We Found

Our most interesting finding was that conversation orientation in the family cultivates “voice” in the family firm, especially for women. That is, female family employees are empowered by a conversation orientation to speak up at work, and female family leaders seem to be better than male family leaders at encouraging both female and male employees to speak frankly. This indicates that employees in female-led family businesses feel safe and confident enough to express themselves both at home and on the job. This is contradictory to past research that finds women in business families to be silent and more “behind the scenes” players. Our research shows that women in business families are starting to speak up and offer advice. They are becoming vocal heroes rather than the unsung heroes of the past.

## Takeaways

Practically speaking, our research highlights conditions that encourage and discourage employee communication in the family business. It is important for business families to remember that good communication starts at home. If a family business has conditions that discourage employees from speaking up to benefit the business (for example, even an open and participative communication style at home might not carry over for a male family leader with a male family employee), the business should consider the following to foster a sense of security when key communication is needed from employees:

- Occasional retreats or other settings outside of the workplace
- Surveys
- Regular one-on-one meetings
- Weekly team meetings
- Remember that it’s never too late to start implementing good communication practices!

## Explore the Research

Madison, K. & Shanine, K. (2024). He-said, she-said: A family science and gendered perspective of communication in small family businesses. *Journal of Small Business Management*, 1-36.

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