

The Three Big Questions for a Frantic Family Summary Article

What is the most important organization in our lives? The companies where we work? The schools where our children learn? The churches where we worship? As important as all of these are, none compares to our families. It is the single most relevant, impactful and precious institution in society, and yet, as an organization it is largely ignored.

What I mean is that compared to the other organizations in our lives, we spend almost no time doing any formal planning or strategizing about how to run our families. Even those of us who take part in strategic planning at work or school or church somehow feel content to live our home lives in a reactive, unplanned way. Exceptions to this include our finances, where we spend time thinking about savings and investments and budgets. But when it comes to the management of our daily lives and activities and priorities, we tend to wing it, reacting to issues and problems as they come up without any context or plan.

And the cost of winging it is huge. Chaos, stress, regret, missed opportunities, frayed relationships. All of these are byproducts of lives lived without context and clarity.

Does that mean that families should, or can, completely eliminate stress and chaos from their lives? Absolutely not. Even if it were possible—and it isn't—part of the fun of living in a family is the joy of the unknown. To run a family like a well-oiled machine would be to drain the passion and adventure out of it all. But there is plenty a family can do to drastically reduce unwanted chaos and live with greater context, clarity and purpose. In fact, there are three basic questions that every family needs to answer.

The Three Big Questions

Question 1: What makes your family unique?

Every family is different, and every family needs to understand how it differs from the one next door. Otherwise, we become generic and feel unnecessary pressure to be like the Jones'. We start to second-guess why we don't take the kids to Disneyland, or why we're not remodeling our kitchen, or why our kids aren't playing on the competitive soccer team. If we don't actively determine and understand what it is about our family that makes us unique, we have no context to give us the strength to be different.

There are two basic ways that families differ: their values and their strategies. Luckily, a family doesn't need to worry about differentiating these or over-defining them in order to identify what makes them special or unique. All a family has to do is figure out what two or three qualities are at its core,

The Three Big Questions for a Frantic Family Summary Article

and what life experiences make them different.

A good way to come up with family values is for parents to ask themselves what it is that they have in common at the deepest level, and what behavioral qualities are inviolable and non-negotiable for members of the family. If you are a couple, a great way to go about this is to think about what values attracted the two of you to one another, what common qualities you shared that you both admired. An important rule to keep in mind when coming up with family values is that you never want to pick values that you wish you had, but that aren't true.

A second part of uniqueness has to do with your family's strategy. This amounts to the big choices you've made in how you live your life. For instance, does one of the parents stay home to be with the kids full-time? Do you live near relatives? Do you live below or near your means? Are you fiscally conservative? Do you have lots of family friends or just a few? Ask yourselves which of the answers to these questions, and others differentiate you meaningfully from most other families.

Once you've determined your values and strategy, you've established a context for making big decisions that should guide your life. When your neighbor asks if you want to go in on the purchase of a condo at the lake, you can reflect on your values and strategy and easily determine if it makes sense. When the coach of the baseball team asks if Johnny wants to play on the traveling little league team, you can ask yourself whether or not this is compatible with your family values. And when your best friends invite you to spend the summer traveling in an R.V., you can decide if that is something that suits your family's identity or not. Sure, you will still be required to make a judgment, but doing so will be relatively easy in the context of who you are.

Question 2: What is your family's top priority—rallying cry—right now?

The idea here is that every family needs to know what issue or goal sits at the top of their list of priorities in the current time period, which is usually between two and six months. Without a top priority—I like to call it a rallying cry—everything seems equally important and we spread our time and energy across too many worthy but impossible challenges. At the end of the day (or the week, month or year) we are often left disappointed that the biggest things didn't get accomplished.

To identify your families rallying cry ask "what is it that we must accomplish by the end of this year (or whatever period) in order to say that it was a productive time for our family?" Answers will vary greatly from family to family, and from period to period. For instance, one family's rallying cry might be to help dad through a difficult career change, while the family next door might be focused on the discipline of their twin boys. And that same family might decide that their top priority a few months later is to spend more time together as a family, while the neighbors' might be to cut expenses.

There is no good or bad answer, or right and wrong one. It's just about figuring out what matters

The Three Big Questions for a Frantic Family Summary Article

most. Once that's done, a family has to come up with the four or five big things that need to happen in order for the top priority to be accomplished. For instance, in order to help dad through the career change, the family will need to ensure that dad gives up some of his volunteer activities at school for a few months, that the family cuts back on some expenses that are creating financial pressure, that dad enlists the help of a career counselor and that mom and dad have a weekly date to discuss options and progress. And while this might seem like a goal for the dad alone, it is something that everyone in the family needs to find a way in which to contribute because it affects the entire family. After all, it's the rallying cry for the family, and nothing else is more important.

Finally, a family has to recognize that in addition to the rallying cry and the four or five things that accompany it, there are daily responsibilities that need to happen to keep the family moving. Finances. Education. Health. Relationships. Faith life. These must be acknowledged too, because they do not go away. However, they cannot become the sole purpose of the family, because every organization needs to know what it is doing to improve itself, not merely to survive.

Question #3: How are we going to talk about and use the answers to these questions?

In order for this all to work, the leaders of a family have to discuss the progress they are making on a regular basis. Even five minutes once a week to review the rallying cry and the various areas of focus will be a great step forward. An occasional date or meeting to discuss the next rallying cry will be necessary, but those will probably come about easily as the three questions become part of the fabric of the family's operations.

It is one thing to know what makes your family unique and what needs to be rallied around right now, it is another to put them to use as a guide for living with purpose and clarity. Another key to making it work is keeping it in front of you, and having regular discussions about it. This requires a visual of some kind, nothing overly formal, but something that can be easily referenced and accessible. A single page with a family's values and strategy, and with its top priority and corresponding categories, will suffice. Sticking it up on the refrigerator or kitchen whiteboard will go a long way to keeping the family anchored.

Conclusion

So, those are the three big questions that I hope will provide a simple context to help families live with more purpose, clarity and meaning. I've chosen to keep the model simple and practical because I believe families have even less time and tolerance for bureaucracy and protocol than companies do.

If we just take a little bit of time to explicitly decide what we stand for, what we want, and how we're going to go about succeeding as a family, I truly believe we'll be more successful as families. The most important organization in your life deserves that, doesn't it?