

ARH ETHICS & GOVERNANCE HUB

Family Constitution Conversation Starter

A guide to values, roles, and continuity

SAMPLE GUIDE · EDUCATIONAL PREVIEW EDITION

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1 Begin with the conversation

A [Family constitution \(family constitution\)](#) is not a legal instrument and should not be treated as a binding substitute for appropriately prepared legal documents. Its value is different: it gives a family a deliberate place to articulate what it wants to preserve, how it will speak about difficult issues, and how its shared values may inform future decisions.

The process matters as much as the written result. A useful constitution is created through a sequence of conversations that are sufficiently structured to be honest, sufficiently patient to include different generations, and sufficiently practical to guide real choices.

1.1 Before the first gathering

- ☐ Decide who should be invited to the first conversation and how their perspectives will be heard.
- ☐ Agree on a neutral facilitator or meeting steward for the initial discussion.
- ☐ State clearly that the goal is shared understanding, not immediate agreement on every issue.
- ☐ Choose one or two focused subjects for the first session rather than attempting to define the entire family story at once.

1.2 The conversation canvas

Topic	Questions to open the conversation
Purpose	What do we hope our shared wealth, enterprise, philanthropy, or reputation makes possible for this family and its communities?
Values	Which behaviors earn trust in our family? What should guide us when there is no easy answer?
Participation	Who should be informed, consulted, or invited to take responsibility as circumstances change?
Continuity	What knowledge, traditions, skills, and relationships deserve intentional transfer across generations?

2 Three structures that can support continuity

Many families benefit from different forums for different work. The appropriate shape depends on the family, its geography, its enterprise, and the complexity of its assets and relationships.

2.1 The family assembly

A [Family assembly \(family assembly\)](#) creates a broad, periodic space for information-sharing, education, connection, and renewal. It can be especially valuable when a family is growing, geographically dispersed, or preparing younger members for more informed participation.

2.2 The family council

A [Family council \(family council\)](#) can make recurring work more manageable. It may prepare agendas, coordinate communication, identify questions needing outside input, and provide a sustained home for family governance between larger gatherings.

2.3 The written constitution

The [family constitution](#) turns the conversation into a living reference point. It may describe purpose, values, communication practices, learning expectations, ownership principles, participation, philanthropy, and how the document itself is reviewed. It should be revisited as the family, business, and circumstances evolve.

2.4 Drafting prompts for a first working statement

2.4.1 1. A sentence about purpose

“We seek to use the resources entrusted to us in a way that ...”

2.4.2 2. A sentence about conduct

“When our interests differ, we will try to ...”

2.4.3 3. A sentence about preparation

“We will prepare rising generations for [Stewardship \(stewardship\)](#) by ...”

3 From values to practice

The test of a values statement is not whether it sounds admirable. It is whether it helps a family make a better decision, have a more constructive conversation, or recover coherence when pressure rises.

3.1 Turn each value into an observable practice

Value	What it could mean in practice	How we will revisit it
Respect	We make time for material decisions; we hear relevant perspectives before concluding.	A meeting cadence and a process for raising concerns.
Preparedness	We define learning opportunities before responsibility is transferred.	An annual development conversation.
Transparency	We clarify what is shared, when, and with whom, while honoring appropriate privacy.	A communication protocol reviewed after major transitions.

3.2 A practical next step

Choose one real topic for a first gathering: a future transition, family philanthropy, next-generation education, shared property, ownership expectations, or communication practices. Build the meeting around a few open questions, document what was heard, and agree on the next conversation before the session ends.

4 Key terms

family assembly – Family assembly: A periodic gathering of a broader family group used to share information, renew values, build connection, or address topics of common interest.

family constitution – Family constitution: A written statement of a family’s vision, values, policies, and decision guidelines; it is a values-and-governance framework, not a substitute for enforceable legal documents.

family council – Family council: A representative group that provides a recurring forum for dialogue, planning, communication, and coordination among family members.

stewardship – Stewardship: The practice of caring for assets, relationships, capabilities, and opportunities in a way that considers both present and future beneficiaries.

5 Educational notice and references

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Selected references

1. [John A. Davis, “The Three Components of Family Governance.”](#)
2. [ARH Global Advisors, “Fiduciary Governance.”](#)