

## **The Three Big Questions for a Frantic Family**

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Original – 217 Pages

Summary – 4 pages and some change

Disclaimer – While this summary contains quotes and some small re-produced portions of the original book, this summary is not the work of the author of the book summarized. It contains only my carefully chosen selections of what I personally deem to be the most important and significant aspects of the book. This summary is not meant to replace or re-produce the book in any way, and should not be considered a full substitute for the book.

The first part of the book is a story about a family trying to find some focus and definition in the midst of their hectic life. They work through the issues that are laid out in more detail in the second part of the book. This summary is only a summary of the second part...called The Model.

### **The Frantic Family**

The vast majority of families I know – including my own – would admit that one or more of the following adjectives apply to them: reactive, scattered, frantic, chaotic, stressed. At first glance, this is almost humorous. Complaining about the crazy lives we lead is something of a rite of passage in our culture; the cost of which is both real and painful.

Kids who are being shuttled from school to soccer to ballet to baseball to piano lessons to birthday parties to counselors to tutors are not turning out the way their parents want. And the parents who are doing all this shuttling and working and cooking and cleaning and socializing and exercising are not feeling fulfilled. It is not supposed to be this way. Life should be lived with a sense of purpose and sanity that allows us to be the people we were meant to be.

What is it that our families are lacking that causes all of this? It's something that is as simple as it is critical. I'm talking about context.

### **Context**

Context – the set of circumstances or facts that surround a particular event, situation, etc. When it comes to families, I might define it in a slightly different way. Context is the information and framework we need to make a decision in the most informed, intentional manner possible. Running a family is difficult, but it should not be complicated. It comes down to mastering a handful of simple concepts, which requires more persistence and dedication than it does intelligence.

We don't take time to explicitly decide who we are, what we stand for, what we want, and how we are going to go about succeeding and thriving as a family. Why don't we? Until we achieve some simple clarity around the context of our families, no amount of discipline or structure is going to amount to much.

### **Fast, Fast, Fast**

The solution I am suggesting here was developed with two of my favorite aphorisms in mind. First, the 80/20 rule, also known as the Pareto Principle. Basically, this rule promotes the idea

that 80% of the value of any endeavor comes from the first 20% of the work. Beyond that, diminishing marginal returns set in. And when it comes to helping you get context with your family, I believe that the first hour or so of the work will provide the most benefits. Implementing the suggestions that follow should take no more than 60 minutes up front, and 10 minutes per week. Secondly, Don't make the Perfect the Enemy of the Good. A good simple plan that can be implemented quickly is better than a perfect one that takes months and years to put into practice.

### **The Three Big Questions**

1) *what makes your family unique?* If you don't know what differentiates your family from others, you won't have a basis for making decisions, and you'll try to be all things to all people.

2) *what is your family's top priority – rallying cry – right now?* You need to know that the single most important objective is for your family over the next 2-6 months. Without a top priority, everything becomes important and you end up reacting to whatever issues seem urgent that day.

3) *How do you talk about and use the answers to these questions?* If you answer the first two, but don't use those answers in daily, weekly, monthly decision making, it will yield no benefits.

### **Question 1 – what makes your family unique?**

Two primary topics help us identify our uniqueness: value and strategy. Identifying them need not be an over rigid, complex, or disciplined process. Sometimes just answering the simple question, "what makes us unique" will get you there.

#### **CORE VALUES**

These are the fundamental and positive qualities that are undeniable about your family, something that would almost be impossible to suppress even if you wanted to. You should have just 2 or 3. All the good qualities under the sun are not necessarily good candidates to be called core values for your family. A good way to start is for parents to think about what inspired their relationship in the first place. In one particular family, the man always admired how his wife would call out the truth. She recognized the same thing in him, and they realized later in life that it was a commonly held value...the importance of standing up for what is right. They labeled this value – "passion for whatever you're doing".

One way to know if you've identified a core value is to ask yourself if you sometimes take it a bit too far. If a value is truly core, you'll accept the occasional and inevitable exaggeration of it, even if there is a cost.

Now, one of the problems that families and companies have with values is that they end up with too many. We must have the courage to differentiate between values that are core and others that are not. Values that are desirable but not yet true should be called "aspirational values". Values that are universally desirable, like honesty, integrity, fairness, etc, should be called "permission to play values". These represent a minimum standard of behavior.

When families confuse aspirational and permission to play values with core ones, they end up adopting a long list of every positive adjective in the world. Not only does this make them sound generically delusional if they fail to differentiate them from every other family.

## STRATEGY

The other element of how a family can differentiate itself and identify uniqueness is in the strategy that it chooses... i.e.- the 2 or 3 purposeful decisions a family makes that drives how it will live week by week, month by month, year by year. The best way to identify those anchors is to write down anything and everything that is true about your family without classifying or categorizing them. This is a messy process designed to help you get clarity, not an exercise in precision or exactitude. Here's a sample list from one family:

4 kids under 10                      mom stays home                      dad has own business  
no immediate family in the area                      active in church                      dad runs for exercise  
kids attend catholic school                      most of friends come from school  
mom goes to the gym                      mom is writing a musical as a hobby  
live on a ranch in an older neighborhood                      vacation with another family  
dad coaches basketball and soccer                      mom volunteers at school  
kids aren't allowed video games, .....this list could be 40-50 items long

Then you look at the list and look for any overriding themes. This family in the above example came up with the following themes:

*Their lives are centered around faith and church.*

*They try to maximize the time they spend with their children.*

*They don't live near parents or siblings so they nurture family like relationships with friends.*

That is their strategy. Faith and church...Maximize time with kids...Substitute friends for day to day family. Is it the right strategy? Who knows? But it is the one they've chosen based on how they are living their lives and how they want to keep living. And it gives them clarity about how they will make decisions in the face of pressure to do and be what everyone else wants them to do and be.

What happens if you later come to the conclusion that you did not identify the right themes or categories from your list? Change them. A little change along the way is to be expected, if not encouraged. So then, what is a family left with after clarifying its values and strategy? A paragraph. 2-3 sentences that describe how that family is not exactly like any other family in the world.

*We are a passionate family that believes in standing up strongly for what is right, even when there is a cost. We live our lives around our church and our faith, placing special emphasis on maximizing our involvement in our children's lives, and nurturing family-like relationships with our friends.*

Just write it down, in the plainest language possible. All that matters is that you've identified what it is about your family that makes you who you are.

## **Question 2 – what is your family’s top priority – rallying cry – right now?**

Answering this question will provide the quickest and most dramatic sense of relief to frantic families.

### **RALLYING CRY**

The best way to determine that priority is to ask the right question in the manner that best provokes an honest answer. Here are some examples:

*If we accomplish just one thing as a family before July 4<sup>th</sup>, what would that be?”*  
*If there is one thing about our family that needs to be different by Christmas, what is it?”*

First, limit yourself to one primary answer. Second, the key is to identify the right time frame, usually between 2-6 months. Overly aggressive time frames, not to mention multiple top priorities, are recipes for disappointment and failure. So, what might a typical answer look like?

*We need to finish our move into the new house by September.*  
*We have to reorganize our finances and record keeping within the next 3 months.*  
*By the end of the year, we will make a decision about moving to another state, or staying here.*

Sometimes the answer that everyone agrees on first is either too broad or too tactical. In other words, the first attempt might really be a 2-year goal, and so they need to come up with something more realistic, more near-term. Or maybe it’s not broad enough or deep enough, and they need a longer-term goal. A mom and dad might say, “we need to revamp our financial plan so we can send our kids to college and save for retirement”. That will likely take many years. A more realistic goal might be “reduce our day-to-day expenses”. Once that has been accomplished, they can think about the next steps.

### **DEFINING OBJECTIVES**

Defining objectives are just the basic categories of things you’ll have to do to achieve your rallying cry. So the family that decides to reduce living expenses might create the following defining objectives: trade in the gas hog, eat out less often, take a more simple vacation, refinance the house, or postpone the kitchen remodel. Those are five specific and trackable activities that, if accomplished, will assure them of accomplishing their top priority.

### **STANDARD OBJECTIVES**

These are just those regular, ongoing responsibilities that a family must pay attention to in order to keep its head above water. Coming up with these isn’t difficult. That’s because most families draw from a similar pool. These include financial health, physical health, spiritual health, marriage, education, social life, fun, etc. What’s important about them is not that they differentiate your family but that they encompass those things that were important 3 years ago, last year, and this year, and will be important 3 and 6 years from now. That way when you identify and call out your rallying cry, you’ll know you’re being responsible by acknowledging your on-going duties.

## **Question 3 – How do you talk about and use the answers to those questions?**

One of the most common mistakes is to neatly produce a handsome document and bind it in posterity. Make it simple and put it in a place where you have to see it regularly. Like a kitchen whiteboard, or the fridge.

### MEETINGS

Yes meetings. It is critical to talk about your context, and most important, regularly assess your progress against defining and standard objectives. Weekly is a good idea because you can track progress without removing the sense of urgency. Make the meetings very, very short...10 minutes should be enough. Start them by reviewing your rallying cry, and assess your progress against the defining and standard objectives. Use a color system to rate them. Green means you are doing as well as possible. Yellow means "OK" but there is some concern if you don't make more progress. Red means you are way behind and need to put attention there. Once you have rated your progress, discuss those areas in need of attention. Agree on what needs to be done in the next week to move the colors in a positive direction. And then, and this is key, end your meeting.

Finally, who should attend the family meeting? This depends on the nature of the family and the age of the kids. I recommend that the parents hold the meeting, and then talk to the kids for a few minutes the next day. Show them what the family needs to focus on and where progress is being made.

### VISIBILITY

Find the best way to capture your information, and then display it. A whiteboard or chalkboard or bulletin board with the context info on it, large enough to read from a few feet away is my recommendation.

That's it, nothing more, except of course, to do it.

And example of the scorecard in use, and a blank one, can be found on the additional PDF document I posted with this summary.