

Communication: Your Survival Depends on It

Communication is to a family business what water is to agriculture—the lifeblood of success.

During the past several years, we've worked hard to unlock the secrets of succession planning for farm families—and nothing is more important than a clear, concise and constant flow of communication.

The success or failure of a plan is always determined by the quality and the quantity of two-way communication within the family. Is there a continuous exchange of ideas, desires and candid discussion?

A good planning environment is based on mutual trust and respect. If you have that, you have a situation ripe for planning and implementation. If you do not, I recommend a crash course in communication. Five keys to good communication are:

1. Clearly define your objectives or the intent of each interaction. Before you engage in a conversation, know the purpose. Conflict often occurs because of misunderstandings and unintended tangents.

2. Try to understand the other person's point of view. It's much easier to share opposing opinions when you start from common ground. When two people stand side by side, they look in the same direction; from there, it is easier to explain what's different.

3. There are numerous options; be open to alternatives. It's important to be honest—and discussions are more productive and less ruthless when we remember that there is no single right way to do anything. I recall from raising my children that there are many different ways to tie shoes.

4. Acknowledge that it takes complementary qualities to build an operation. It takes family members with varying talents and personalities to make a

family operation work. Misunderstandings are often based on motivations, abilities and/or vision, all of which are necessary for growth.

5. Know that it is OK to disagree. If two people agree on everything, one of them is unnecessary. This little quip is common, yet rarely understood.

With these five keys in mind, you should construct a communication strategy. We recommend regular family meetings at a time that is convenient for as many participants as possible. Use a location that is not home turf for anyone. Distribute an agenda before the meeting, and encourage each participant to suggest modifications and voice his or her concerns.

It's also important to establish ground rules for the meeting; Robert's Rules of Order may be a little stiff, but mutual respect, common courtesy and no personal attacks are a must. Always conclude the meeting with some form of action and agreement for follow-up.

Distribute the following conversation starters to help each family member share his or her succession goals:

Nothing is more important than a clear, concise and constant flow of communication



Kevin Spafford
writes from Chico, Calif.

■ Are you interested in participating in the family operation? If so, in what capacity?

■ Are you currently prepared to assume that responsibility?

■ If not, what will it take to prepare for that responsibility?

■ Should family members who are not active in the farm attain/retain an ownership interest in the operation?

■ If not, how should family business assets be distributed?

■ If you want to be included in the operation, are you willing to invest an ownership interest?

■ What are your biggest questions and concerns regarding our succession intentions for the farm?

■ Do you have any other succession-related topics that you would like to add to the agenda for our next family meeting?



For more information, visit
www.FarmJournal.com
and click on the Legacy Project logo
at the bottom of the page.

Send questions or comments to
Farm Journal's succession
planning expert, Kevin Spafford:

Legacy By Design, LLC
2550 Lakewest Drive, Suite 10
Chico, CA 95928
(877) 523-7411
LegacyProject@FarmJournal.com