

Qualities of Leadership

In February, I had the privilege to attend the Association of Agricultural Production Executives (AAPEX) annual meeting. Danny Klinefelter, Texas A&M University Extension economist and founder of The Executive Program for Agricultural Producers (TEPAP) and AAPEX, asked me to facilitate a discussion regarding succession planning and allowed me to survey the attendees regarding their opinions about mentoring.

The attendees I met exhibit three important characteristics—qualities that all farmers desiring to guide the family farm in the months and years ahead should exhibit. They were:

1. Fearless. The people I visited with had a calm resolve in the face of challenge. They know that, regardless of current conditions, the pendulum always swings from adversity to opportunity and their job is to remain resilient and prepare for growth.

2. Visionary. They possess the natural ability to see and visualize what doesn't yet exist—and what might be one of the most important characteristics of a true entrepreneur.

3. Industrious. No, it's not just a fancy word for hard work. These men and women are hard-wired to persistently pursue success no matter what challenges get in their way.

In order to guide a farm to thrive, you have to get everyone involved on board, which is easier said than done. During the past four years, the topic of how to engage Dad in a meaningful succession planning discussion has grown from a casual mention to near fever pitch. When the conversation at the AAPEX meeting turned to this very dilemma, the room exploded in a host of murmurs, reminding me that

the topic is still not being properly addressed.

Engaging Dad is usually the first and biggest hurdle to starting the succession planning process—but the solution is as individual as the family.

At AAPEX the question centered on: “How do we initiate the conversation if Dad won't?” and “What do we do if he's not willing to continue with the process?”

As with most questions, I try to define the objective and who's responsible for a favorable outcome. It is helpful to envision the succession planning process as a negotiation: Identify the parties involved and specify the benefit and the cost to each. Each party needs to define a specific objective for the interaction and formulate a list of questions to address.

Once the list is ready, the involved individuals need to set a date and time to meet. At the meeting, each individual should have ample opportunity to review and discuss all of his or her questions. Once the questions have been expressed, the next thing the group needs to do is:

- define roles and responsibilities for research and follow-up;
- provide optional and alternative solutions; and
- agree on and schedule the next step in the process.

When leading the charge to establish a succession plan—whether you're the “dad” or the “son”—know that you're not alone. It was readily evident by the informal survey I conducted at the AAPEX meeting that there's a need—and support—for a formal succession planning program. A quick tally of the survey results includes these findings:



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writes from Chico, Calif.

■ 96% agree that leadership is the biggest challenge confronting farmers.

■ 87% say that leadership is best developed through guidance and reinforced with experience.

■ 75% say they will learn mentoring skills, 76% will devote time to working as a mentor and 76% will share information with protégés.

■ 91% say that leadership skills are best developed through experience, and 77% say mentors help to hone leadership skills.

■ 82% agree that communication is the most critical mentoring tool.

We're working to formulate a program to address these very concerns. Legacy by Design and Farm Journal Media are committed to “Cultivating Multigenerational Success in the Agricultural Community” through the Legacy Project.

Kevin Spafford is a certified financial planner whose firm guides farmers and agribusiness owners through the succession planning process. He is the author of *Legacy by Design: Succession Planning for Agribusiness Owners*. To pose questions and comments, contact Legacy by Design, 2550 Lakewest Drive, Suite 10, Chico, CA 95928; (877) 523-7411; or legacyproject@farmjournal.com.

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