

Ranching With Family

Working together day in and day out can test the strongest of family bonds, especially in times of stress.

by Troy Smith

You can choose your friends, but when it comes to family, you're stuck with the luck of the draw. Pity the folk whose luck is bad. This writer happened to draw pretty well. All tallied, blood kin and in-laws, too, my relations are quite amiable as long as you keep them well-fed. All fooling aside, a strong family bond is a blessing and the basis for the most reliable human support system any individual can possess.

But the surest way to test the strength of family ties is for relatives to enter into business together. Despite difficulties, family businesses, often involving multiple generations, have long been a hallmark of American agriculture. The common goal of many farming and ranching parents has been to bring the next generation into the business. On many operations, that goal has been accomplished successfully, even repeatedly. On as many or more, it didn't work.

We're not talking about financial failure, although money matters often are a factor. We are talking about failed personal relationships among family members who didn't communicate. At work or play, human beings will disagree. Communication is difficult when they become disagreeable.

"If you don't think that's true

for farm and ranch families, just observe a husband and wife sorting cattle together on a hot day," offers Ron Hanson, professor of farm management and agricultural finance at the University of Nebraska. Coming from a family divided by lack of communication, Hanson frequently speaks to agricultural gatherings about how families in business together can share burdens, break down barriers to communication and protect their relationships.

"Even simple misunderstandings, complicated by the stress of daily life, can damage personal relationships

between family members," Hanson says. "The inability to share personal feelings or the failure to discuss expectations can result from a breakdown in communication, especially during periods of stress associated with work, finances or personal needs. Even members of close-knit families can get so wrapped up in their own problems [that] they fail to communicate effectively. Everyone is talking, but no one is really listening."

Mutual respect

Hanson says problems frequently arise when two generations of a family enter business together, such as a

father and son, but their relationship never evolves beyond that of parent and child. Cecil McCurry, McCurry Bros. Angus, admits it takes special effort to relinquish control and to let the next generation shoulder more responsibility.

Nearly a half-century ago, McCurry and his four older brothers began operating together in Sedgwick County, Kan.

They successfully divided responsibility for their cattle, farming and grain-elevator enterprises. McCurry credits the longevity of their family business to mutual respect and to open communication.

"Each one of us had his own area of responsibility. Not that we didn't discuss and debate, even argue, over business matters. We weren't shy about expressing our opinions, but ultimately each man had final say over his area. And that was that," McCurry says. "We've never been very disciplined about scheduling family business meetings, but we've managed to stomp into the elevator office to air our gripes on a fairly regular basis."

McCurry says the ability to share feelings openly remained

the key to maintaining family harmony as his three sons and two nephews joined the operation. But passing the torch of responsibility to "the kids" has been challenging.

"They've had their own ideas about how things ought to be done, and letting them go ahead hasn't always been easy. I know I'm pretty bad about wanting to throw in my 2¢ worth or wanting to have the last word. It has required patience and a lot of give-and-take on both sides. Passing the torch is hard, but we're trying to let the younger generation handle their responsibilities without a lot of interference. Really, they are doing a pretty good job," McCurry adds.

Words of appreciation

Hanson says praise for a job well done can make a dramatic difference in any family relationship. Too often, however, the efforts of individual family members easily are taken for granted. Because of the hectic pace and burdensome workload, words of appreciation and encouragement may go unsaid. "Sons or daughters ranching



with their dads often feel that no matter how hard they try or how many hours they work, they aren't praised for what they have done well. But if they ever mess up or make a mistake, they never hear the end of it," Hanson warns. "It's easy for [people] in that situation to become frustrated and even discouraged to the point of no longer trying to do their best."

Bruce Snyder is quick to praise the bookkeeping ability of his brother Ken, along with the farming expertise that his brother-in-law Don Eakins brings to their family partnership. In turn, his partners are content to have Snyder implement the operation's marketing program. Like the McCurry clan, the principles of Snyder Brothers Angus, near Paxton, Neb., have their own areas of responsibility. Each understands what is expected of him.

"We took over for Dad (Bruce Sr.) and our Uncle Bill in 1972, and I think we still get along so well because we're careful not to step on each other's toes," Snyder says. "We have enough respect and trust for one another that we don't question decisions related to the details of our individual responsibilities."

Far from being territorial, the partners take a flexible approach to tackling the workload, each jumping in when help is needed in an area not their own. They put their heads together to adjust the general course of the operation, particularly when making major decisions, such as purchases of land or equipment.

Mutual respect prevails in the making of joint decisions as the partners understand how listening to each player's opinion leads to more effective communication.



Who is listening?

Hanson says too much talking and not enough listening are barriers to communication among many farm families. He recommends honing 10 skills for good listening:

- 1) Do not pass judgment until you have understood what the other person actually has said.
- 2) Do not add viewpoints or change what the other person has said.
- 3) Do not permit your attention to drift away while the other person is talking to you.
- 4) Do not interrupt or change the subject.
- 5) Do not close your mind.
- 6) Do not finish for the other person.
- 7) Avoid wishful listening.
- 8) Do not rehearse your response.
- 9) Do not put off the other person. ("We'll talk about it later.")
- 10) Do not rush the other person's talking. ("Make it quick. I'm in a hurry.")

Resolving disagreements

Even in the best of families, disagreements are an inevitable part of life. If families approach disagreements in a positive manner, Hanson says conflict does not have to damage personal relationships. He recommends looking for win-win solutions. Everyone needs to save face, so be willing to make concessions.

Resist the temptation to have the last word or to take a parting shot after things have been settled. Know when to stop talking. When conflict can't be avoided, make it a fair fight, which means being honest.



TROY SMITH PHOTO

A popular speaker on the ag meeting circuit, Ron Hanson advises farm and ranch families to share the burdens of family business, break down barriers to communication and protect personal relationships. Hanson (left) is shown visiting with Nebraska cattleman Marvin Wescott during the December 1999 Range Beef Cow Symposium in Greeley, Colo.

"Stick to the facts of the situation, and don't expand the fight beyond the problem at hand," Hanson says. "Avoid name-calling, and don't yell. Share your feelings without placing blame, and never argue in public."

To promote better communication and to minimize conflict, Hanson recommends holding family business meetings on a regular basis. He says he believes such meetings allow all family members to be involved and reinforce a sense of team spirit. Meetings can help keep members better informed about the operation and eliminate surprises. Meetings also may serve to keep family biases from the actual business management of the operation.

He suggests these guidelines for implementing family business meetings:

- 1) Set a specific date and time (for instance, the first Monday morning of each month), and try to stick to it throughout the entire year.
- 2) Meet on neutral or friendly territory if possible.
- 3) Establish an agenda to give

direction and purpose to each meeting.

- 4) Establish any necessary ground rules for conducting the meeting. How will ideas be voted on or adopted?
- 5) Conduct meetings in a professional, businesslike manner.
- 6) Keep minutes so a record of discussions and decisions is available. This might help settle potential misunderstandings.
- 7) Set aside one meeting date each year to discuss and to establish family and business goals for the next year. Review previous goals, and set new ones to create a vision for working together.

"An important thing to remember always is to keep a sense of humor," Hanson says. "That makes a positive difference in any situation and particularly the stressful ones. Sharing that positive focus with other family members will build stronger and more trusting relationships that will endure the stress and conflicts that families often face when working together."

