

Generational Jenga

Insight to how different generations can work together on the ranch to achieve a successful balance of wisdom and innovation.

Story by Kayla Jennings, photos by Megan Silveira, assistant editor

Clarity. Transparency. Relationships.

Several things are at play when it comes to building a strong network of crew members on the farm or ranch.

If too many of the building blocks are missing, the whole operation may tumble. Understanding more about creating a healthy workplace environment and using multiple generations as a competitive edge instead of a hindrance is paramount.

“Differences do exist across generations in the workplace,” explains Rodd Welker, Eagle Advisor Group. “I just don’t like those to be seen as an obstacle, rather, as an opportunity to learn. The best-case scenario is when you have mutual learning happening between the generations, and it’s not a one-sided situation.”

Welker, a human relations expert, has worked across several industries from corporate to academia to not-for-profit in his 35 years of experience, and he has seen how vital effectively navigating the different generational dynamics can be. Those successes are what drew him to his current role in consulting.

“The common thread was I loved developing my staff, my team, and watching them grow,” Welker says.



Alex Askew (left) and Phil “Doc” Goodson

Clarity is key

When it comes to balancing different generations in one work environment, Welker opens by taking a step back and starting with the individual.

“I always say that we are individuals before we are a generation,” he describes. “We have to be careful of the stereotypes that often are associated with the different generations. We’re individuals before we’re a generation, and getting to know that individual transcends trying to know their generation.”

That’s not to say generational differences should be discarded

entirely. In fact, understanding generational norms in tandem with an individual’s unique needs is the ticket.

Welker says communication of expectations tends to be the biggest difference in generations, because these varying groups often see priorities differently.

Baby boomers, born between 1946 and 1964, or Generation X, born between 1965 and 1976, tend to prefer face-to-face contact and are far less comfortable with technologies available for remote communication. In contrast, millennials, born from 1977 to 1995, and Gen Z, born between 1996 and

2015, often feel more comfortable with texting or email. There are certainly exceptions, but this is just one common difference Welker says is worth understanding.

Despite those dissimilarities and others, he has seen the agricultural industry experience much success in multigenerational work environments, and there are some clear reasons why.

One of which is an emphasis on relationships. Family or not, there is true value in building relationships in the workplace. A strong foundation lends itself to more ease when inevitable conflicts arise.

Springfield Angus, situated 40 miles north of Raleigh, N.C., has seen this value play out firsthand. Phil “Doc” Goodson has been at the helm of its registered Angus business for more than 46 years, while also working as a surgeon until 16 years ago.

Part of the traditionalists’ generation, born before 1945, he employees two men who share his passion for Angus cattle: Frumencio Barrera, otherwise known as Tiger; and Alex Askew. A millennial, Askew began working part-time with Goodson in 2019 and grew into a managerial role earlier this year.

“I wanted to expand my knowledge base and learn,” Askew says of his career. “This is as good of place as any to come to learn by being around a wealth of knowledge in Doc.”

In turn, Goodson knew he needed Alex to fill a void in his business.

“We’re 60 years apart, but Alex brings to us computer skills,” Goodson says. “He is also doing our AI (artificial insemination) work

and has good experience with that. Ultimately, he brings things to the table that I don’t bring, and I bring experience, which he doesn’t have at this time.”

These two are a success story of different generations working toward a common goal, but it doesn’t come without hard work. One tip Welker offers farmers and ranchers in this situation is to establish clarity. He says clear expectations

regarding every component of the workplace is a proactive approach to stop conflict before it happens.

Springfield Angus has been a benefactor of that philosophy.

Every morning, the trio gathers to meet about the day. Askew says it is 15 minutes well spent as they determine the tasks at hand and how to best execute those tasks.

“It’s a way we keep everything with our business organized,” Goodson adds. “As you can imagine, we have a lot of things going on with our program. We go over everything we need to get done that day, that week, and that month. So, with Alex, myself and Tiger, we get everything done in a very effective way by planning ahead.”

As fellow cattlemen know all too well, it is easier said than done.

“When things don’t go quite as planned, we have to readjust our thinking,” Askew says.

Whether it is at the ranch office or in the field, welcoming new ideas and being transparent when seeking a solution is the way to go.

Goodson says keeping an open mind has served him well not only when working with employees,

but also other professionals in the industry positioned to cattle producers. Even so, it starts with a good team at home.

“We don’t always see things the same way, but we adjust accordingly,”

Goodson describes. “Our working relationship is really very positive, and that’s important. I always tell people, without good employees, you can’t make this deal work.”

From the word “go”

These strategies, when implemented on the front end, not only encourage a healthy workplace environment but can also make a difference on a producer’s bottom line. When the team works as a synergistic unit, everything becomes more efficient.

“Asking those questions and gaining an understanding for both parties up front, and then seeing if that sits well for both sides is ideal,” Welker advises. “A lot of it depends on if a person has a higher potential to take over the ownership one day. If you’re hiring someone to be the next leader, then it is very important to talk about some of these dynamics early on.”

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While this is true for all employees and business partners, Welker points to these relationships sometimes being more challenging between family members — especially when it comes to the future of the ranch.

“If you’re speaking of just different generations, that’s complex enough, but when you then add to that the family dynamic, I think it even becomes more challenging at times,” Welker adds.

Often in agricultural settings, a younger generation will push newer ideas the older generation is apprehensive to try. That is when Welker goes back to clarity and planning.

He likens the concepts to parenting young children. A parent wants to advise their children to make sound decisions and guard them from the

repercussions of a poor one. At the same time, a wise parent knows some lessons are best learned through experience.

In a business setting, though, Welker understands these mistakes can come at a cost — sometimes a detrimental one. That is when transparency comes to bat. Most often, if different generations are clear about their feelings toward the business and its direction, a sound compromise can be made.

These strategies all culminate to one philosophy Welker says is paramount when facing generational diversity on the farm or ranch.

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“It is important for each generation to see value and to appreciate the other by recognizing the contributions that have been made previously and the contributions of this next generation.” — Welker

the other by recognizing the contributions that have been made previously and the contributions of this next generation,” Welker says. “It’s all about valuing one another, appreciating one another. Those are strengthening behaviors that bode well. Keeping that in mind, even when conflict or challenges arise, acknowledging and appreciating one another is paramount.” **AJ**

Editor’s note: Kayla Jennings is a freelance writer from Throckmorton, Texas.

