

Advice for Fathers

As we celebrate Father's Day, we share perspectives on balancing fatherhood and managing the family farming operation.

by Kindra Gordon

On many family farms and ranches, fathers working with their adult children have a difficult dual role — being boss and being dad. How can fathers balance wearing both of these hats?

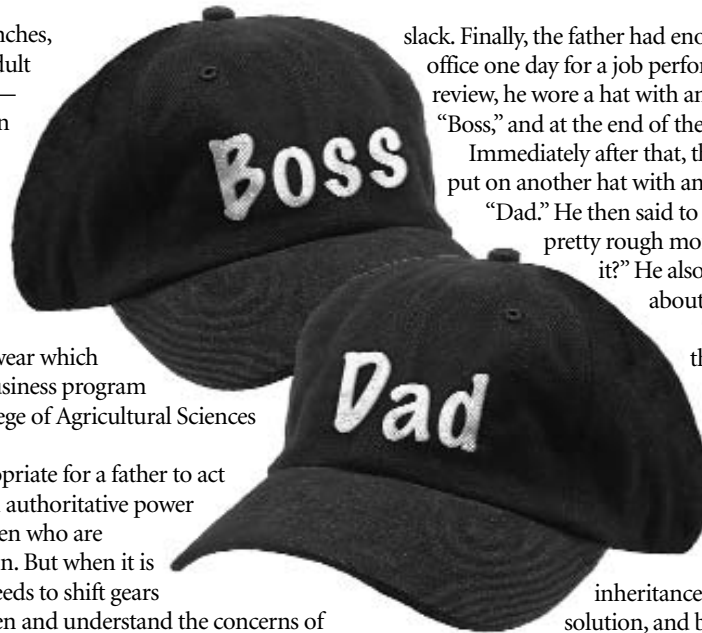
Ron Hanson, who has two decades of experience in counseling farm families, says the key is to realize you can't be boss and be dad at the same time. Instead, you must know when to wear which hat, adds the director of the agribusiness program at the University of Nebraska College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources.

Hanson explains that it is appropriate for a father to act as boss when he is in the role of an authoritative power and when supervising adult children who are employees in the farming operation. But when it is time for family matters, a father needs to shift gears and be a dad by taking time to listen and understand the concerns of his children, as well as showing them that he cares.

"The trick is, fathers may have to change 'hats' several times during the day," he says.

Difficult duty

To illustrate a father who really understood his dual role, Hanson shares the real-life example of a man who had to fire his own son. The son never showed up on time for work, did little or no work while he was there, and often left early, requiring the hired hands to pick up the



slack. Finally, the father had enough and called his son into the office one day for a job performance review. While doing the review, he wore a hat with an index card taped to it that said "Boss," and at the end of the discussion, he fired his son.

Immediately after that, the father took off his boss hat and put on another hat with an index card taped to it that said "Dad." He then said to his son, "I've heard you've had a pretty rough morning; would you like to talk about it?" He also told his son, "I love you. I care about you, and you'll always be my son."

This father admitted to Hanson that it was the hardest day of his life, but reports that today he and his son are closer than they've ever been before. Although the son does not work on the farm and will never have ownership of the farm, a plan is in place that he will someday receive a monetary

inheritance. For this family, that was the right solution, and because the father handled the

situation separately — as a boss and as a dad — he was able to preserve the family relationship.

Other considerations

When balancing the role between parent and boss, Hanson also offers these factors to consider:

► **Adult children need to recognize and understand that being a boss and a dad is a challenge for the parent.** "You must make the

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Parents need to take lead in farm transfer

There's no question that transferring a family farm from one generation to the next can be a stressful, emotional issue. But, it is not a topic that should be avoided, says Ron Hanson, University of Nebraska ag economics professor and leading authority on the difficult subject of family farm transfer.

Hanson says without communication and a written plan, he has seen time and again that this issue will split families. "Don't be naïve. If mom and dad don't do it, how many families do you know that could sit down and work things out when the parents are dead and gone?" he asks.

His advice:

1) Parents are in charge and need to be responsible and initiate the estate-planning process. Talk about different scenarios: What would happen if one parent/spouse died? Remarried? Which children will have the chance to gain actual ownership? How will the nonfarming children be treated fairly and equitably? When will the transfer happen?

He says a common perception among parents today toward their adult children is, "You can buy the farm, but just remember that I still own it." Hanson says that is the wrong attitude. "This sends the

message to children that the parents are still in charge. Passing ownership on is one thing; passing control on is another. There's a world of difference between the two," he says, advising that parents recognize that.

2) Once parents have made decisions for a future plan together, they need to communicate their wishes to all family members, including in-laws and adult children who have moved away from the farm. The plan should be presented as a "we" by both parents to minimize division between the family, and children should be given a chance to discuss their feelings about the plan so issues can be resolved.

Hanson adds, "The key is to plan ahead; start discussions early. It is the responsibility of the parents." He suggests getting help if needed and making certain the plan is legally documented in writing. "If families don't have things discussed, written down and communicated, it can — and does — destroy families," he says.

3) Children should never feel obligated to return to the farm if their career interests or dreams lie elsewhere. Says Hanson, "If the opportunity is there and children have it in their hearts, someday they will come home."

distinction between boss and dad roles. When things go wrong on the farm or someone makes a major screwup, the father will get upset. He is wearing the boss hat," Hanson says. "But, as a dad, he still loves his adult children and is disappointed with their work performance on the farm."

► **As bosses, fathers need to have the ability to correct mistakes in a positive manner that builds confidence and self-esteem in their adult children.** "Give praise when someone is doing a good job. That's key," Hanson says. "If dad only criticizes, points out mistakes and never mentions accomplishments, a negative working environment evolves, which can lead to serious conflicts between dad and the adult children."

As a worst-case scenario, Hanson shares the words of one son who said, "No matter how hard I try, I never hear a word of praise, but if I ever make a mistake, I never hear the end of it." These were the son's last words in a letter to his dad before leaving the farm.

► **Take the boss hat off on occasion.** If a parent only wears the boss hat, he sends the message that everything has to be his way — or else, Hanson points out. This can damage the working relationship, and adult children often lose interest in the farm.

"In these situations the adult children feel they are only hired help, and they have little motivation to be successful in the farm business," Hanson says. "It doesn't take long, and they are gone."

► **Most importantly, treat adult children**

returning to the operation as adults capable of making decisions and providing their own ideas.

Hanson says some parents actually raise their children to be followers when the children are expected to do exactly as they are told and not ask questions.

"Then parents can't understand why their adult children don't have any drive or ambition and lack having new ideas," he says. "These adult children may even lack personal goals or having direction in their lives."

Hanson suggests treating the arrangement like an apprenticeship. "There needs to be balance in farm transfer from one generation to the next," he says. "The turnover can't be too quick or too slow."

