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Family First

Communication tips for families who work together.

by *Meghan Richey*

Forty-four years ago a young Ron Hanson sat at the weathered wood table in the kitchen of his parents' house and listened to a conversation that he could still repeat to you word-for-word today.

"We lost the family farm that night, and in the process of losing the farm, we lost the family," he says poignantly. "That was 44 years ago, but I remember that night vividly — the night it all ended. I've learned that farms can be replaced — families cannot."

Unfortunately, Hanson's account of lost land and lost relationships is far from unique. Across America, multi-generation farms are breaking up at an alarming rate, and hurt feelings, grudges and broken dreams are often the side effects.

Family members might assume that effective communication and strong relationships would flourish in an environment where they talk to each other every day while working together side by side. But, that often is not the case.

Since that fateful night at the kitchen table, Hanson has learned a thing or two

about the keys to successful multigeneration operations and family communication. He's now an agricultural economics professor at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, as well as a celebrated public speaker and counselor sought after for his estate planning savvy, communication know-how and relationship insight. Here's some wisdom Hanson offered at a young leaders' conference hosted by Agriculture Future of America (AFA).

The need to share

What is the most valuable asset in a family farming operation? It's not the cattle or the equipment. It's not even the land. Hanson says that, above all, family relationships are the most valuable and most important asset of any family farming operation. Yet all too often they are neglected or taken for granted. The inability to openly share personal feelings coupled with the failure to discuss expectations ruins family business operations and those valuable relationships in the process, he says.

"Balancing personal needs, family needs

and farm needs can be a real challenge," Hanson explains. "It is extremely easy to get so wrapped up in the working demands of the farming operation itself that we often forget or ignore the needs and personal feelings of those that we love the most in our lives."

Though family members may work shoulder to shoulder, he says effective communication often doesn't come easily when emotions are withheld.

"Some people think they're being strong by not sharing their feelings. Others might say they're just private people, and they'd rather work things out by themselves. They say they don't like to let others know how they're truly feeling because it's none of their business.

"Well, when you're family and you work together, it is their business to know how you're feeling," he continues. "Your feelings affect everyone you have contact with. You have to have open and honest discussions on a regular basis about your expectations and how you're feeling."

Family equals team

"The single most important word of advice for family members farming together

is to remember that any successful family farming operation requires a team effort approach by each individual family member involved," Hanson says.

The most important aspect of the team effort is that each family member feels valued and feels like they play an important role in the family operation. "No matter how large or even how small each member's actual contribution to the operation is, each person needs to feel important and included with the family farming unit."

Hanson says each family member must be given the opportunity for a degree of responsibility with the business and a chance to gain recognition for their efforts that contribute to the overall success of the operation. Additionally, they should be offered the opportunity to participate in decision-making discussions.

"Relationships suffer when a family member discovers that others are making decisions without them that affect their happiness and well-being," he says. "Suspensions and mistrust quickly develop when they realize they weren't allowed to be a part of the decisions or even have a voice. This often happens with spouses, particularly daughters-in-law that marry into the farming family, and it happens with children that work or live off the farm."

With the resulting lack of trust comes failed communication, Hanson explains. The excluded individuals withdraw emotionally and become reluctant to share their personal feelings. "Once this trust between family members is destroyed, open and honest communication ceases. The family is unable to operate as a team, and the operation's success usually suffers," he says.

"The common bond of being a family that works together to achieve the same goals provides the inner strength for a family to face the stress and daily pressures of the farming operation itself," Hanson says. "Family members must remember that the family relationships are a higher priority than the farming operation, and they need to adhere to this in their actions."

Expressing appreciation

The pace can be hectic, the workload burdensome and the stresses numerous, but Hanson says making a point to praise a job done well can make all the difference in family members' perception of whether they are appreciated.

"All too often individuals involved in a family farming operation or even in a farm marriage have the definite feeling of being taken for granted," Hanson says. "Sons or daughters farming with Dad often feel that no matter how hard they try

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Business meetings, family style

"It takes a lot of effort by all family members for any farm business to be successful as a family operation," says family-farm relationship specialist Ron Hanson. "Conflicts happen. Resolving them takes patience, persistence, understanding, courage, personal strength and forgiveness."

Holding farm family business meetings on a regular basis improves family communication and reinforces the feeling that the family farm is a team effort among all family members, Hanson says. Regular meetings also allow everyone to be involved and better informed in the business happenings to eliminate unpleasant surprises among family members. He offers the following ideas for implementing farm family business meetings.

Date. Set a specific date (maybe the first Monday morning of each month) so that family business meetings take place on a regular basis through the entire year.

Location. The meeting place should be on neutral or friendly territory if possible. This usually means getting out of the house and off the farm.

Attendees. Decide who gets to attend the business meetings. Will you invite all your adult children or just those involved in the farm operation? What about their spouses? Are managers or nonfamily employees invited and treated the same as family? Does attendance grant equal participation and decision-making rights?

Agenda. Establish an agenda for each meeting, so that the meeting itself has direction and a specific purpose to achieve. Identify various reports (finances, marketing, purchases, etc.) to be presented during the meeting. Provide a time during each meeting for open discussion of ideas and suggestions to be shared with others.

Rules. Establish any necessary ground rules to be followed during the business meetings. Who chairs each meeting session? How are ideas agreed upon? Does everyone who attends the meeting get to participate in decision-making? How does the family resolve any farm business disagreements?

Etiquette. Conduct each meeting on a business-like basis. Develop an attitude of professionalism among family members. Use proper business etiquette during the meeting.

Records. Keep minutes (records) of all major business decisions discussed and agreed upon. This will help clear up any potential misunderstandings that might develop later.

Goals. Set aside one meeting date a year to discuss and establish family goals and farm business goals for the year ahead. Review goals from the previous year. This creates a vision for working together to achieve a common purpose.

Hanson encourages families to remember these strategies when farm family conflicts arise:

- ▶ Initiate an open and honest discussion between family members.
- ▶ Build a feeling of trust between all family members.
- ▶ Keep all family discussions on an objective and positive basis.
- ▶ Try to identify the real cause of the problem. What is it that is really bothering someone?
- ▶ Be assertive but not aggressive when sharing your views or feelings. State your position without threatening or attacking the opinions of others.
- ▶ Make sure other family members understand that even though you might disagree, you still love and respect them at all times.



PHOTO BY SHAUNA ROSE HERMEL

or how many hours they work, they never hear a word of appreciation or praise for what they have done well. But if they ever mess up or make a mistake, they never hear the end of it.

“It’s easy for those sons or daughters to become frustrated and discouraged to the point of no longer trying to do their best,” Hanson continues.

Similarly, he tells the story of a farmwife who shared with him that if her husband had told her that he loved her and cared about her as much as he loved and cared for his new tractor, she would have stayed on the farm and found a way to save their marriage.

“The really sad part is that these family members do love and appreciate each other;

they just don’t say it,” Hanson says.

“Everyone needs to know that someone else cares about them and worries about them. Sharing a few simple words of appreciation and love can make a dramatic difference in any farm family relationship.”

He says simple expressions of appreciation, such as “thank you,” “good job” or “I love you,” are especially important for the overall well-being of each family member during times of farm stress and financial hardship.

The father issue

Multitasking is nothing new to those working on family farm operations. But dads working with their adult children often must walk the difficult line of being both father and boss. Hanson calls this dilemma the Boss Hat/Dad Hat issue, and it brings plenty of communication complications that can

affect the family’s relationships as well as the operation’s success.

When Dad is wearing the Boss Hat, he has authoritative power and supervises his adult children as employees in the farm operation. Yet, when he is wearing the Dad Hat, he is more relaxed and understanding and takes time to listen to the children’s concerns and other family matters.

“The tricky part is for Dad to figure out when he needs to be wearing which hat and how long he needs to wear it,” Hanson explains. “He may have to change hats several times during the same day, and the adult children need to be able to make the distinction between the Boss Hat and the Dad Hat so they can respond appropriately.”

Hanson reminds adult children that when they make a significant mistake and dad becomes angry, he is wearing the Boss Hat and responding as any other boss would.

Dad's dissatisfaction is not a reflection of his level of love for his children; rather it is disappointment with their work performance in the farming operation. Similarly, he reminds dads that they need to correct mistakes in a positive manner that builds confidence and self-esteem in these adult children.

"When that adult child that messed up does a good job on something else, Dad needs to give them praise," Hanson says. "If he only criticizes without recognizing accomplishments, then a negative working environment develops. It goes back to expressing appreciation.

"Dad has to treat farming sons or daughters as adult people capable of making decisions and providing their own ideas," he continues. "If Dad only wears the Boss Hat, the children may feel like they are only hired help, which damages the working

relationship. Without a chance for input or recognition for their contributions, the adult children will soon lose interest in the family operation and have little motivation to help ensure its success."

Passing it all down

A family's communication skills are often put to the test during the process of handing down the operation to the next generation.

"You can't treat all your children equally, because all parents have favorites, whether they admit it or not," Hanson says. "But, you can treat them fairly and equitably in estate planning."

The most sensitive issue in ownership succession is that of determining inheritance for children who do not work on the family farm, Hanson says. The son or daughter that returned home to the farm has sacrificed for years to help the parents expand the

operation, thus building net worth for the parents' estate, he explains. Hanson refers to this concept as "sweat equity."

The children working on the farm have made contributions that the other children have not, which parents need to recognize and reward. The other nonfarming children must understand the value of what their sibling has contributed, Hanson notes. Sweat equity may entitle the farming children to a larger share of the final estate, or they may be offered the first chance to buy the operation.

"All the children, both farming and nonfarming, should share in the parents' estate, but in fair and equitable division," Hanson says. "It is the responsibility of the parents to initiate the estate planning process and to guide the family communication so that it stays effective."

