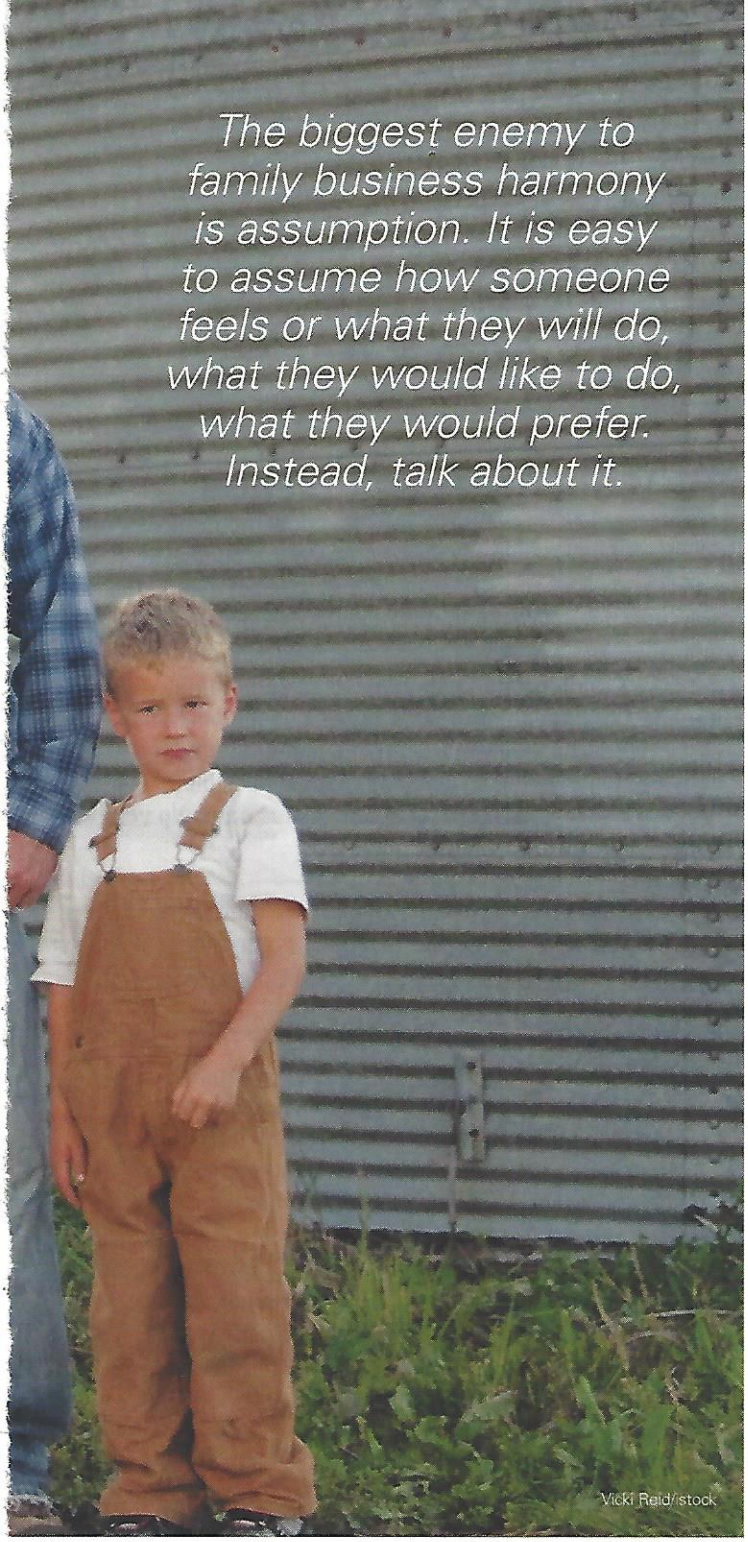
Tackling Tough Issues

Every family farm gets into that difficult business conversation. A farm family coach shows how to effectively come to a resolution.

By Katie Navarra



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At 55 years old, Frank spent countless sleepless nights staring at the ceiling, his mind racing. His body was tired, and he longed for shorter work days. He looked forward to having a flexible schedule so he and his wife could enjoy time together.

But, any time he thought about turning the farm over to his children, the muscles in his chest tightened and he couldn't breathe. It wasn't because he thought his children and their spouses were incapable. In fact, they had impressed him with solutions that made the farm more profitable and more efficient.

Instead, he was afraid that if he was no longer in charge, that he would be useless.

"The older generation needs to learn to embrace the younger generation. They also need to know that the younger generation isn't expecting them to retire, just to change their role in the business," said Elaine Froese, a farm family coach and consultant who assists operations in conflict resolutions.

One year ago, Gina and Dave walked down the aisle and said "I do." Tonight was the night they should have celebrated their first anniversary. Instead, Gina was in tears and felt like an outsider in Dave's third-generation family farm.

His father and uncles, who own the business, remind her that it was "their" father who founded the farm and "their family" who owned the house she lived in. They are also quick to point out that a farmer's work is never done and that she shouldn't expect Dave to have much free time.

"The pain of not knowing how you fit in or being kept out of the loop of decision-making is real," Froese said.

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Culture of agriculture

In the United States and Canada, farm and ranch families are just 2 percent of both countries' total populations. Despite statistically being a small percentage, farm and ranch families have a stronger culture than the larger majority of the population.

In many cases, it's perceived to be easier to ignore an issue rather than work toward a resolution. "Most people have not been taught good conflict resolution skills," Froese said.

Farmers, especially men, are expected to be stoic. They are not supposed to show emotion or encourage difficult conversations. Failure to address the elephant in the room allows conflict to bubble beneath the surface. But when it reaches a boiling point, the result could be tragic.

"Divorce, failure of the farm, illness, stress and death are all hazards of avoiding conflict," she said.

It's easy to point to individual personality, economic difficulties and other external factors as an excuse for why farm families find it difficult to discuss challenging topics.

The challenges farm families struggle with are not necessarily unique. Business of all sizes and specialties must confront issues of changing roles, fair compensation and changing visions. But these issues can be particularly difficult for farm families. In addition to these problems, farm families also tend to experience conflict related to power struggles between parents and children, the addition of in-laws and mental health issues.

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Power play

By natural design, family farm businesses can set up power dynamics that either contrast with the existing family dynamics or reinforce them.

"In parent/children businesses it can reinforce that mom and/or dad are in charge at home and in the business, which can leave employed children feeling disempowered. Or, if the younger generation is in the manager's role, parents can find it difficult to cede control," said Tori Lee Jackson, an associate extension professor of agriculture and natural resources at the University of Maine Cooperative Extension.

It's imperative that all relatives working in the business respect one another as colleagues during the workday. All parties — parents and children, uncles and nieces/nephews — need to show up to work as adults. "I can see the light bulb go on with so many of my clients when they finally realize they have been treating a son or daughter as if they were still 12 years old," Froese said.

Poor communication

Communication is the foundation for any successful business, and this is especially true in farm businesses.

"Transparency is so much better than secrets or surprises," Froese said.

Word choice can ignite or diffuse conflict. Harsh, abrasive language or demeaning words add fuel to the fire. Phrases or questions that attack the person rather than addressing an issue are not helpful. "I think, I feel, I need, I want are much more helpful phrases than those that point blame," she added.

Good communication is more than sharing information or the way feelings are expressed. It's also about approaching conversations with an open mind rather than a predetermined judgment. "The biggest enemy to family business harmony is assumption. It is easy to assume how someone feels or what they will do, what they would like to do, what they would prefer. Instead talk about it," Lee Jackson said.

The unknown

We all feel better when we have certainty in our lives. We feel especially comforted when there is certainty of expectations and timelines. "Anxiety comes from what William Bridges called the Neutral Zone. That is the pain of not knowing," Froese said.

The neutral zone is the heart of transition. It's likely not a very comfortable place, which is why most of us try to rush through this phase of transition. We just want to get on with things. Like when a farmer plants his spring crops, and the seed is underground... waiting to germinate. There doesn't seem to be much going on, but it's a very fertile and important time.

For farm families, this Neutral Zone pops up when a child gets married and a new in-law joins the family. "The son or daughter-in-law may not know how they fit in," Froese said. "They may experience pain around not knowing where the income stream is coming from or what the succession plan is."

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10 Tools for Tough Issues

As a farm child, daughter-in-law, and now mother-in-law of a farm family, Elaine Froese has lived the culture of agriculture. She knows firsthand how conflict avoidance can threaten a farm and conversely how a proactive approach and a commitment to changing attitudes, behaviors and communication patterns can create harmony and happiness. Through her coaching services, she offers farm families straight talk and courageous conversations on the issues that seem impossible to resolve. **Froese's 10 Tools for Tough Issues can help your family start difficult discussions today.**

1. **TAKE CHARGE.** Only you change you. Timeliness is key!
2. **COME FROM CURIOSITY.** "I'm curious about..." Identify conflict style and triggers and seek common ground.
3. **ASK DEEPLY.** Listen to what other family members have to say. Ask open-ended questions and describe feelings. Be soft on the person and hard on the problem.
4. **PLAY WITH POSSIBILITY.** Use a talking stick. Be positive and don't pre-judge.
5. **REALLY LISTEN.** Build understanding by checking assumptions. Explore interests and feelings.
6. **PONDER AND PERK, NOT PROD.** Give yourself time to think before responding and consider the other person's perspective.
7. **CULTIVATE TRUST.** Build confidence, be accountable and foster a culture of fairness, respect and commitment.
8. **RESPECT BOUNDARIES.** Clearly identify roles... Dad or Boss? Is this a family or business issue?
9. **WE ALL END UP IN A BOX.** At the end of our lifespan we all end up 10 feet under or scattered among the dirt we cherish. Come to terms with life, plan for death and face aging.
10. **EXTEND THE OLIVE BRANCH.** Create a legacy of open communication and relationships. Offer forgiveness, pass on authority and learn to "let go."

These feelings can also arise for aging farmers who are unclear on what will happen during a changing of roles, such as retirement. External pressures such as volatile economics and fluctuating commodities pricing can all contribute to discomfort related to the unknown.

Depression

Depression and other mental health issues can be one of the most difficult topics for farm families to address. "When depression rears its head in a farm family, it shakes them," Froese said.

A special news report produced by WGRZ, a television station in Buffalo, New York, reported, "In small, rural communities, where everybody knows everybody, it's difficult to break the stigma of mental illness."

The report went on to state, "In rural counties, rates [of suicide] may be higher for many reasons, including the fact that people live in more isolated territory and may have to drive longer distances to receive mental health care."

Chances are, most farmers don't know their doctors well because it's part of the culture of agriculture to just not go. Doctors can diagnose depression quickly with a series of questions and connect individuals with the help they need.

"When folks get some help for depression, loss and poor self-esteem they can learn new ways to cope and use healthy boundaries to make life better," Froese said.

Strategies for success

The good news is there are effective strategies for addressing conflict. Not all of the tactics will be easy, but with hard work and commitment from all parties involved, the benefits will overshadow the effort.

Schedule regular meetings. Office and sales-based businesses embrace meetings, albeit sometimes too much with the frequency and duration outweighing the outcomes. However, when scheduled sensibly and with proper intentions, regular meetings provide an opportunity to discuss progress, challenges, successes and possible solutions.

"A Virginia Tech study showed that families that meet regularly are 21 percent more profitable," she said.

An agenda and notes can keep discussions on track. Creating opportunities for each family member to be included, such as assigning individuals areas of expertise or rotating who leads the meeting, can build morale. Meetings with different purposes may be necessary. For example, operational meetings may need to be held daily, weekly or monthly depending on the farm, whereas strategic meetings may only be necessary on a quarterly basis.

A meeting schedule will likely vary based on a farm's focus. Find one that works for your family.

Schedule off-farm outings. "Everyone needs renewal. Your body is not a machine," she said.

Whether it's a day trip to a state park, an amusement park, a museum or some other activity, time away from the business to simply enjoy one another's company and to take a break from the daily grind is essential.

Depending on the type of farm, extended vacations for out-of-town excursions may or may not be possible. In either case, make time to refresh and decompress.

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Ask for outside intervention. When relationships are strained, an outside perspective can help. Froese is often called the "farm family whisperer." "I consider coaching to be a process of discovery," she said.

For families who have postponed addressing conflict, the resulting situation can be tragic and counseling or mediation may be necessary. "Counseling is a process of recovery and when a lot of hurt and anger has built [up] it may be needed," she added.

Encourage children to work outside the business. Children raised in a family business need to experience life outside the business. They may learn other ways of executing specific chores, and when they return home they are often more mature.

"Children should work outside the business for at least one but ideally three to four years," said Keith Dickinson, business consultant and certified financial planner (CFP) for Farm Credit East, ACA.

The bottom line

Managing a family-owned business is hard work. The reward of working together toward a common goal and financial independence can be significant. On the flip side, spending all day together at work and then all evening together at home can be trying. Differences of opinions regarding business decisions compound the pressure. Add to that the significant time and cost commitments of operating a stable, and the stress can be enough to push families apart.

Regardless of whether a business thrives or ultimately fails, family will always be family. Cutting ties if there is tension or a problem has repercussions that can span generations. Staying true to the intention of the well-being of the business and a willingness to listen and be supportive of each other is important. Tackling tough issues isn't easy. But for the sake of family relationships and the viability of your business, it's as necessary as feeding the hogs, milking the cattle, planting the seed and harvesting the crop. **F**

Katie Navarra is a freelance contributor based in Clifton Park, New York, and writes about agriculture and the equine industry regularly.