

# The Dispatch

## The May Dispatch: Reimagining Roles in the Family Business

Children often get the message from their elders that they (the kids) should identify their most promising skill and pursue its development with energy and focus. Good at math? Maybe computers or an accountant. Good at biology? Maybe a doctor. But what happens when this desire for focus becomes a rather oppressive pigeonholing or stereotyping of people, a stereotyping that limits the ability to discover? This issue of the Dispatch explores that theme. Davon tells us to stop stereotyping. Lance explores how advisors may play important roles different from the one for which you hired them. And Bill gives a biblical story of one person who changed careers (successfully) midcourse. As always, let us know if you have any feedback!

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### Stop the Stereotypes!

[Davon Cook](#)

I'm thrilled to see the celebration of women in agriculture generally, and in production agriculture specifically. There is much discussion of the subject currently. [FarmHer](#) is trendy; there are conferences for women in ag; many articles have been written, including here.

There is also [academic research](#) more broadly that recognizes women's leadership and argues that it may be preferred in some situations because of certain attributes attributed to women. Those observations lead to conversations like, "Women may be better at..." In the farm world, women's "relationship skills" are often celebrated and utilized for navigating family relationship issues, leading HR, or spearheading landowner relations.

Frankly, those generalizations make me uncomfortable. I literally started squirming in my chair when our team discussed the topic for this issue. I don't think women—or men—should be pigeonholed or counted on for a specific strength. Let's utilize the talents and strengths they actually HAVE, not the ones we think they probably have that fit a typical role.

I know women in ag who are fantastic at relationships and do lead HR and landowner relations—and very well. I call them CRO—Chief Relationship Officer. I also know women in ag who are operations leaders and fantastic at running and fixing equipment. I know women in ag who are brilliant with accounting and finance. I know women in ag who are hard-nosed negotiators. I know women in ag who are not strong at building relationships. I know women in ag who are CEOs and have the skills to lead a team. And...I know men who are good at all those things too—even at managing relationships!

Don't get me wrong—I appreciate the encouragement given women to pursue production ag currently. My concern is our well-meaning ideas sometimes create a subtle message this "this" is where you fit based on generalizations, not reality.

## Your Advisors' Many Roles

[Lance Woodbury](#)

In the course of owning your family agriculture business, you may work with a CPA, an attorney, insurance agents, an investment advisor, marketing and risk management consultants, agronomists, veterinarians, nutritionists...and maybe even a family business consultant! While you hire these people to perform a specific function, they often end up playing even more important roles for you. Consider the following:

**Your advisor as instigator.** An advisor will often initiate some activity that improves your family or business. I know of one situation almost 40 years ago in which the business owner's CPA, without first asking the client, bought plane tickets and arranged a meeting halfway across the country in an effort to get the owner to diversify their holdings after a year of windfall profits. It worked.

**Your advisor as sounding board.** A good advisor often serves as a sounding board for your deepest concerns about, and goals for, your family and wealth. You trust them to listen, ask questions, reflect, and generally help you think through complex problems or opportunities. You may not have a formal board of directors, but your advisors often play a role beyond their expertise to help you figure things out.

**Your advisor as mediator.** Occasionally, your advisor works as an intermediary between your family members, or between the business and its vendors. They help resolve disputes and disagreements that are disrupting the effective functioning of the organization. Their knowledge of your business and family, their desire for an ongoing relationship, and their broad perspective in working with other business owners, can provide a bridge between people at odds.

**Your advisor as coach.** Good coaches provide support and help you reach your goals. Similarly, a good advisor often pushes you to work on what you need to accomplish as a family business owner. They help you define good business performance, recover from failures, and celebrate your wins.

As you consider your advisory relationships, think about the different ways advisors show up in your family and business today. Let them know where you need them, even if it is different from why you originally hired them!

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## A Biblical Midcourse Correction

[Bill Long](#)

I have written several short essays on the Biblical story of Joseph and his brothers (Genesis 37-50) because that story opens up deep levels of family relationships. What I hadn't previously noticed until reflecting on the theme of this Dispatch (Reimagining Roles) is that Joseph also goes through a vital role-change in his life while he is still a young man. In a word, he goes from being a smart-aleck dream interpreter to a careful administrator and distributor of grain in the middle of a famine.

We first meet Joseph in Genesis 37 as the boy genius younger brother in his family. His genius happens to be in dreaming and interpreting the dreams. But Joseph's skill got him into trouble with his brothers, because he suggested through the dreams that they would bow down to him. In anger they sell him to passing traders who in turn sell him to Egypt.

To be sure, Joseph finds occasion to use his dream interpretation skills in an Egyptian prison, where he has been confined on false charges. But when he gets out of prison, he is assigned the task of planning for food distribution in a future famine. Because he has foreseen the famine in a dream, the two skills, dream interpretation and famine management, are thereby related. So, in the middle of prosperity he devises an administrative system to store up enough wheat so there will be food security in a coming famine. We

understand how difficult this is if we think how eagerly Americans would “tighten their belts” in prosperity because someone says that bad days will be coming.

Joseph’s new skills saved Egypt and led to a reunion with his brothers. Joseph’s experience encourages all of us to consider if there is a skill we haven’t yet recognized in our lives—and how we can recognize and develop it.